



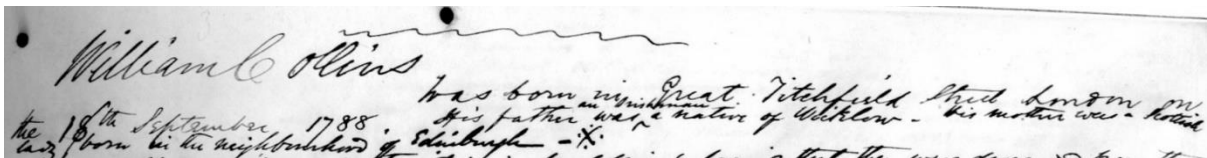
THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

WHEN WAS WILLIAM COLLINS R.A. BORN?

by
Paul Lewis



William Collins from a painting by John Linnell, engraved by Henry Robinson.



Wilkie Collins's manuscript of *Memoirs of William Collins, Esq. R.A.*

Wilkie Collins Society
May 2021

WHEN WAS WILLIAM COLLINS R.A. BORN?

For more than 170 years biographical notes of the artist William Collins RA have given his year of birth as 1788. The *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Wikipedia, auction catalogues, and books on art all agree on that year. But new evidence has emerged which indicates clearly that he was born a year earlier, in 1787.

Death records

Since William's death on 17 February 1847, writers, art students, and biographers have relied, understandably, on the first account of his life written the following year by his son, the Victorian novelist Wilkie Collins. *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq. R.A.* was published in two volumes in November 1848. In Chapter 1 Collins writes

William Collins was born in Great Titchfield-street, London, on the 18th September 1788.¹

Wilkie Collins had broken off writing what was to be his first published novel *Antonina* to write the biography of his father² who had died in 1847 at the family home 1 Devonport Street, Paddington.

on the morning of the 17th of February, nature suddenly gave way: and in the presence of his family he breathed his last at ten o'clock, quietly and painlessly; the peaceful influences of his religion seeming to preside over his death as gently as over his life.³

Later that day, Wilkie Collins went to the Register Office and reported his father's death. He gave his full name, William John Thomas Collins, his occupation as 'Esquire R.A.' the cause of death as 'Disease of Heart 3 years, Dropsy, Hernia, Asthma. Certified' and his age as 59 years.

Seventeenth of February 1847 at N ^o 1 Devonport Street.	William John Thomas Collins	Male	59 years	Esquire R. A.	Disease of Heart 3 years Dropsy Hernia Asthma. Certified	W Wilkie Collins present at the death at N ^o 1 Devonport Street	Seventeenth of February 1847	Charles Holloway Registrar
--	-----------------------------	------	----------	---------------	--	--	------------------------------	----------------------------

He was buried six days later. Wilkie Collins writes

His funeral was private. It was attended by his brother Academicians, Mr. Leslie and Mr. Uwins, by his friend and executor Mr. John Bullar, by his medical attendant, Mr. Richardson, and by his two sons.⁴

He is buried with his mother and brother, in the cemetery of the Church of St. Mary, Paddington. The grave is marked by a marble cross, erected to his memory by his widow and his sons.⁵

¹ *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.*, (London: 1848), vol. I, p.4. See illustration on cover.

² See Gasson *Wilkie Collins – an Illustrated Guide*, Oxford 1998, p. 102c.

³ *Memoirs*, vol. II, p. 306.

⁴ Charles Robert Leslie RA (1794-1859), Thomas Uwins RA (1782-1857), barrister John Bullar Jr (1807-67), who was an executor of William's will and a near neighbour in Oxford Terrace, probably William Richardson MRCSE who also lived in Oxford Terrace (London Medical Directory 1845, p. 133), Wilkie Collins (1824-1889), and Charles Allston Collins (1828-1873).

⁵ *Memoirs*, vol. II, p. 306. His widow was Harriet Collins née Geddes (1790-1868).

The deaths of William's brother Frank on 5 October 1833 and his mother Margaret on 29 December 1833 are recorded in *Memoirs*,⁶ and their burials on 10 October 1833 and 3 January 1834 are in the parish registers of St Mary, Paddington. The burial of William John Thomas Collins on 23 February 1847 is also recorded there with his age given as 59.

William John	Devonport	February	59	W. Howells
Thomas Collins	Street	23		W. Howells
No. 2399.	Paddington			

Much of the graveyard was dug up in 1966 when the Marylebone flyover was built and the remains of 450 people were reburied in Mill Hill Cemetery.⁷ The location of the Collins grave and the whereabouts of the marble cross are unknown.

On the death certificate and the parish register William's age is given as 59. That information can only have come from his immediate family. However, if he was born in September 1788 he would not have been aged 59 at his death in February 1847 but 58. If he was 59 then he was born in September 1787.

The obituaries

Three days after his death his obituary appeared in *The Athenæum*

We regret to announce the death of William Collins, R.A.; which took place at his house in Devonport-street, Hyde Park Gardens on the morning of Wednesday the 17th inst....Mr. Collins was in his 59th year; and the complaint of which he died was disease of the heart terminating in dropsy. ... [He] was born in the year 1788 and was 21 in the year 1809 when he sent his first works – “Boys at Breakfast” and “Boys with a Bird's Nest” – to the Royal Academy exhibition.⁸

The obituary gives his age as 21 when he submitted the paintings. The Exhibition ran from 1 May to 17 June so paintings would be submitted in April 1809. William could only have been 21 when he submitted them if he was born in September 1787 not, as the obituary states, in 1788. It is also the case that he was in fact in his 60th year not his 59th but that is a common periphrasis for being aged 59.

A week later another obituary appeared in *The Literary Gazette*, with a different date. It begins

William Collins, Esq., R.A. – Mr Collins was born in Great Titchfield Street on the 18th of September 1787. His father was a native of Wicklow, and author among many other publications of a poem on the slave-trade, and a biography of George Morland.⁹

⁶ *Memoirs*, vol. II, pp. 30ff, 36-39.

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/St_Mary_on_Paddington_Green_Church

⁸ *The Athenæum*, no. 1008, 20 February 1847, p. 200.

⁹ *The Literary Gazette*, No.1571, 27 February 1847, pp. 177-178.

A footnote on p. 177 says

Received from his son; who is thanked for the communication.—Ed. L.G.

This contemporary account, which fills a column in the periodical, was written by Wilkie Collins. In a recently discovered letter to Samuel Carter Hall (1800-1889) he writes

The enclosed page of the Literary Gazette of Feb 27th contains a notice of my father's life written by me, which is in substance and almost in form, identical with the M.S. I transmitted to you some time since.

Such additions to that short Memoir as I can readily furnish you with, I now enclose...it is all that I can immediately provide with the certainty that it is correct.

What I have told you, then, is derived from what I have heard from my father's own lips – from my mother's recollections – and from the communications of old friends. It may consequently be depended upon.¹⁰

Here, in Wilkie's own "correct" information which "may...be depended upon", written within a week of his father's death, the year of his father's birth is given as 1787.

Numerous obituaries of William Collins are found in local newspapers and follow two basic formats. A few give his birth year as 1788, but all give his age as either 59 or, like *The Athenæum*, 'in his 59th year'. None give it as 58. For example

London Evening Standard, 18 February 1847, p. 4f.

On the 17th inst., at Devonport-street, Hyde Park-gardens, William Collins, Esq., aged 59.

London Daily News, 19 February 1847, p. 3d.

Death of William Collins, R.A.-- this celebrated painter died at ten o'clock on Wednesday, the 17th inst. at the age of 59. ... William was born in 1788 and exhibited for the first time at the Royal Academy in the year 1809 at the age of 21.

Leeds Mercury, 20 February 1847, p. 8e.

[On Wednesday], aged 59, William Collins, R.A., the celebrated painter.

Freeman's Journal, 23 February 1847, p. 2f.

William Collins RA – we regret to announce the death of William Collins RA which took place at his house in Devonport-street, Hyde Park-gardens, London, on the morning of Wednesday the 17th instant. ... Mr. Collins was in his 59th year. The artist was the son of a picture dealer and cleaner – a native of Ireland.

So the obituaries around the time of his death support his being 59 but some give his year of birth as 1788.

Other biographical notes

Almost all current biographical notes from galleries and in art books give the dates of William Collins RA as 1788–1847. Two exceptions only have been found.

¹⁰ [3311] to S. C. Hall, 18 March 1847, *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins*, ed. Baker, Gasson, Law, and Lewis, Intelix (Virginia: 2018), ISBN 978-1-57085-269-5.

The Biographical Treasury by Samuel Maunder published in 1851 contains a paragraph about William Collins

Collins, William, an artist of distinguished merit. Was born in London, 1787.¹¹

That date was used in all his subsequent editions.

The 1959 book *English Art, 1800–1870* by Boase indexes the artist as

Collins, William, R.A. (1787-1847)¹²

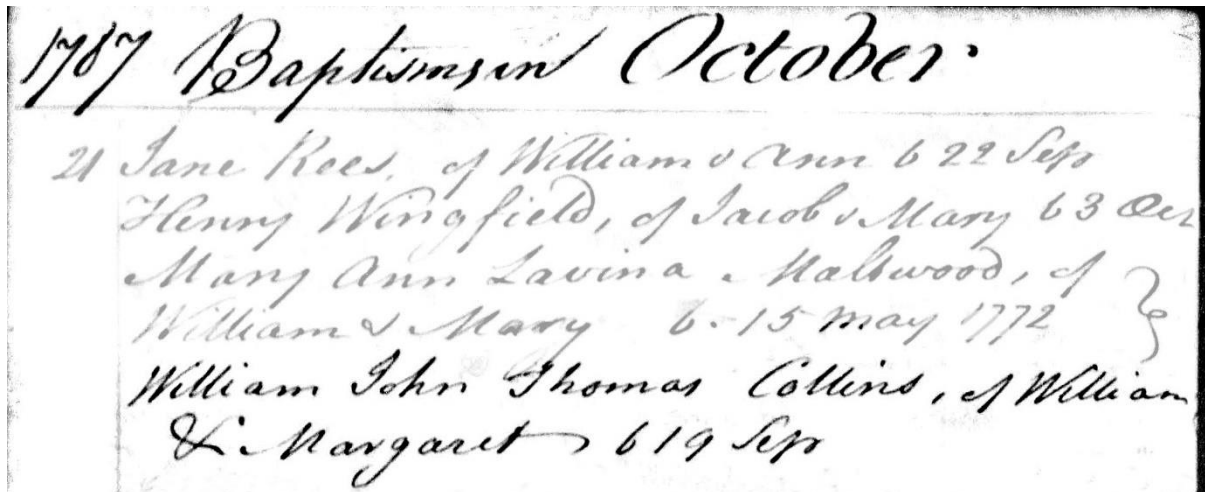
All other books examined give it as 1788. See for example

- William Cates, *Dictionary of General Biography* (London: 1885), p. 264.
- Sandra Penketh, *Concise Illustrated Catalogue of British Paintings in the Walker Art Gallery*, (Liverpool: 1995), p. 61.
- Christiana Payne, *Rustic Simplicity* (London: 1998), p. 57.
- William Vaughan, *British Painting – the Golden Age* (London: 1999), p. 160.
- Luke Herrmann *Nineteenth Century British Painting* (London: 2000), p. 158.

The same dates 1788–1847 are found universally in current online catalogues of major galleries such as the Tate in London, Yale Centre for British Art in New Haven, British Museum, and the Royal Academy itself.

Parish records

Great Titchfield Street where William was born was in the parish of St Marylebone. Its registers contain this record for 21 October 1787. William was the fourth baptised that Sunday.



William John Thomas Collins, of William
& Margaret b 19 Sep

¹¹ Samuel Maunder, *The Biographical Treasury*, fifth edition, London 1851 p. 198.

¹² *English Art, 1800–1870*, T S R Boase (Oxford: 1959), p.355.

We know William's father was also called William and his mother was called Margaret.¹³

All parish records were backed up by a second copy called Bishop's Transcripts, and that record for 21 October is identical, though abbreviated

Wil^m Jn^o Tho^s Collins, of Will^m & Marg^t b 19 sep

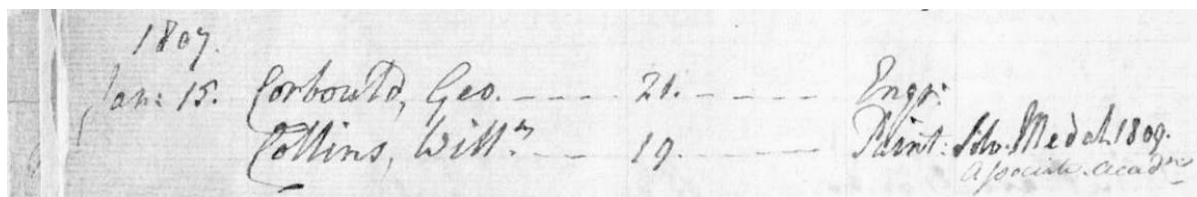
The baptism of their second son Frank, was also recorded in the St Marylebone registers on 8 August 1790 in similar terms as

Francis James Collins – of William & Margaret B 4 Feb

These entries leave no doubt that William John Thomas Collins, R.A. son of William and Margaret, was born in September 1787 not 1788.

Royal Academy

William Collins entered the school at the Royal Academy on 15 January 1807. The record for that date is available online in its Register of Admission for Students 1769-1830.¹⁴



This record shows that on 15 January 1807 William Collins gave his age as 19. That is correct if he was born in September 1787. The note records later that he was awarded the silver medal for painting in 1809 and that he was an Associate Academician, which was granted on 7 November 1814. He was promoted to RA on 10 February 1820.

Day of the month

There remains the puzzle of the one day difference between his birthday of 18 September and the date in the register of 19th.

There is no doubt about the day on which William celebrated his birthday. On 18 September 1815 he wrote from Cromer

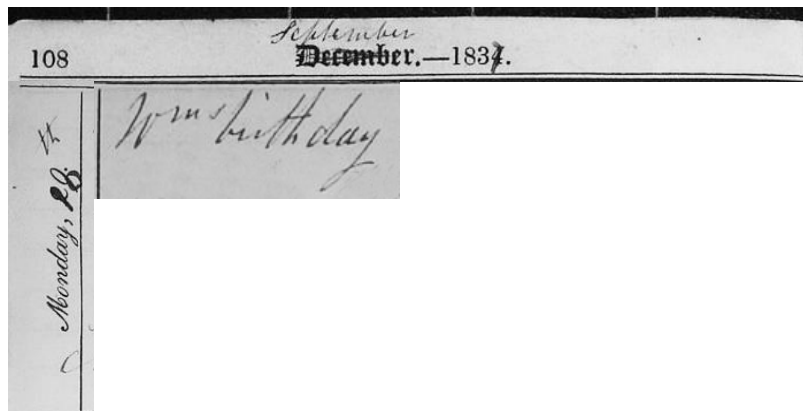
My dear Mother,— On this my birthday, I know not how I can be better employed than in writing to you.¹⁵

¹³ *Memoirs*, vol. I, pp. 4, 28-30, 45-46. Westminster Rate Book for New Cavendish Street 1821. St. Mary parish register, burials, 3 January 1834.

¹⁴ RAA/KEE/1/1/1/14 and <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/archive/page-16-c>

¹⁵ *Memoirs*, vol. I, p. 78.

In 1837 his wife Harriet records in her diary for Monday 18 September 1837 "Wm's birthday".¹⁶ Harriet re-used an old 1834 diary, writing the month, year, and date over the original, changing 15 December 1834 to 18 September 1837.



Harriet Collins Diary 1836-38 (extraneous material cut out).

Unfortunately she does not record his age, which was in fact 50. Perhaps that is why it is mentioned.

Her diary for 1836 does not cover his birthday as she did not begin it until 19 September. In her 1835 diary, in her own unpunctuated style, she writes on Friday 18 September

Walked to Notting Hill to call on Miss [Bancroft] left for London at home after.¹⁷

There was no mention of the day being William's birthday.

No other diaries of Harriet are known. Her autobiography runs up to the date of her marriage and is written with pseudonyms throughout. It does not record the age or birthdate of her anonymised suitor Mr William Denham.¹⁸

It seems that either William had been misinformed about his birthday by his own parents or the parish register, which clearly records 19 not 18 September, was incorrect by one day.

Conclusion

The parish registers provide conclusive proof that William John Thomas Collins RA was born in September 1787. The public death records with information from his close family, are unanimous that he died at 59 and the Royal Academy record gives support to that conclusion. His own words and those of his wife show that he celebrated his birthday every year on the 18th of September, just one day before the date in the parish register. Perhaps he was born around midnight.

One plausible explanation for Wilkie Collins getting his father's year of birth wrong in *Memoirs* is that he subtracted his father's age of 59 from the year he died – 1847 – to get 1788, ignoring the importance of the months in which he was born and died and forgetting the date he himself had put in his contemporary obituary written within days of William's death.

¹⁶ National Art Library, MSL/1914/1915.

¹⁷ National Art Library MSL/1912/125.

¹⁸ Paul Lewis (ed.) *Alderbury Girl*, forthcoming.

This edition of
When was William Collins RA born?
is limited to 300 copies.

© Paul Lewis 2021

