



THE WILKIE COLLINS SOCIETY

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NEWSLETTER

WINTER 2023

CENTENARY AND BICENTENARY

In 1924, 100 years ago, as far as we can tell Wilkie's Centenary went by with very little celebration. *The Daily Telegraph* of 8 January – the exact anniversary – allowed almost a full column with the title 'Wilkie Collins: A Master of Plot.' "It is 100 years to-day since Collins was born ... Yet his best work holds its own. We still see people in trains reading "The Moonstone" and "The Woman in White," as their grandparents did in the distant days of the "yellow back." These two novels, at least, must have passed through many cycles of cheap editions, and they still find their way into new series of popular classics." The article by H. C. Bailey, himself an author of detective fiction, then discourses about Collins and Dickens and who influenced whom but ends with "But the three or four books of his prime, we may believe, stand secure. They are a monument more enduring than brass to the sheer power of story-telling when it is served, as it was in Wilkie Collins, by that subaltern form of genius which is an infinite capacity for taking pains."

The Times of the same date devoted just a half column to a brief biography concentrating mainly on *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. It concluded "...we doubt not that the best of his novels will still have eager readers of all ages when, sixty-five years hence, time brings the centenary of his death."

Remarkably prescient since 1989 probably coincided with a renewed interest in Collins studies.

There were also two articles in *John O'London's* weekly, a literary magazine founded by George Newnes in 1919. 'The Centenary of Wilkie Collins' was published on 12 January 1924. The author, Rowland Grey, seemed to have done his research although managing two critical mistakes in the first seven lines. The final short paragraph posed the question "Is Wilkie Collins Read? Mr Louis N. Parker [a British dramatist, translator and composer], at any rate, insists that he is 'bound to come into his own again,' and the multitude of translations looks like lasting remembrance."

The second, wholly enthusiastic essay 'A Master of Mystery' by the eminent barrister Sir Chartres Biron was published on 23 February 1924. Dwelling mainly on *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*, he writes "In the Victorian era, almost the golden age of the English Novel, Wilkie Collins was pre-eminent, and the year of his centenary finds him not forgotten. After all, in their heart of hearts, all readers like a good story, and no one gives them better than the author of "The Woman in White."

These few articles seem to belie the opinion that Wilkie Collins's popularity declined after his death in 1889. In addition, his main publishers, Chatto & Windus, until 1925 continued to issue in several formats the twenty-nine titles for which they held the copyright. In America, there was a collected edition of his works in 30 volumes issued in 1900 by P. F. Collier.

BICENTENARY EVENTS

Events for Wilkie's Bicentenary have already begun and will continue into the Summer of 2024. They will include talks, conferences and published articles although some of the details have yet to be finalised. Here they are in approximately chronological order.

Wilke Collins in Context. As mentioned in the last Newsletter, this has just been published by Cambridge University Press. Members are reminded that they can obtain copies at £72 which represents a 20% discount off the published price.

Mutual Friends, The Adventures of Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins is the title of the Exhibition at the Charles Dickens Museum. This has been running from **15 November and will continue until 25 February 2024**. It is open Wednesdays to Sundays from 10.00am to 5.00pm. Further details can be found on the Museum's website.

The British Library has also planned to hold a small exhibition with the possibility of a suitable event to tie in with the bicentenary. However, the date has not yet been confirmed.

The Ramsgate Society. On 28 November, Paul Lewis gave a talk to a sell-out audience of the Ramsgate Society entitled 'A Tale of Two Towns: The Seaside Life of Wilkie Collins.' This included a good deal of new information about Wilkie's several visits and time in Ramsgate. The copiously illustrated presentation can be downloaded from the Ramsgate Society website <https://bit.ly/Paul-Lewis-Two-Towns>

The Telamon is the excellent magazine of **the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery**. Issue 95, published in November, contained 'Wilkie Collins Bicentenary' an illustrated article by Andrew Gasson, reflecting on one of Kensal Green's more famous residents. It concentrated on contemporary descriptions of Wilkie's funeral but also set the scene with brief biographical notes and details of *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*.

A Guided Walk through Kensal Green Cemetery. *The Telamon* article was a prelude to an event on **20 January 2024** being organised by the Friends of Kensal Green Cemetery (FOKGC). The guided walk will commence at 10.30 am and will be conducted by one of the cemetery's experts. In addition to Wilkie Collins, many famous Victorian writers, including Thackeray, Trollope along with their friends and colleagues, lived at the time when Kensal Green became Britain's most prestigious cemetery and came to rest there.

The walk will end with a buffet lunch to be followed by enthusiastic WCS member Jak Stringer who will give her one-woman performance, 'Rambles around Wilkie Collins.' The cost of the entire event will be £25 (£20 concessions) or £8 to FOKGC. Bookings should be made on the website at www.kensalgreen.co.uk.

Wilkie Collins's Guide to Modern Life. Well known broadcaster and Collins enthusiast, Matthew Sweet, is presenting a programme on 'Wilkie Collins's Guide to Modern Life'. It will be aired on BBC Radio 4 on **2 January** at 11.30 am.

California Writer's Club (CWC) zoom talk on **6 January 2024** at 9pm GMT. WCS Secretary Paul Lewis will give a talk to the San Fernando Valley Branch of the WCS, titled. *Wilkie Collins – A Complicated Life*. The meeting, organised by WCS member Heather Bradshaw, will be available to WCS members online. Joining instructions will be sent by email to members.

Radio 4 Book Club, hosted by the BBC's well known bibliophile Jim Naughtie, will broadcast a presentation on *The Moonstone*. It is scheduled to be aired on **7 January** and repeated on **11 January**. Paul Lewis, our secretary, will take part in the programme.

The Dickens Fellowship, London Branch, will host a joint talk by **Andrew Gasson and Paul Lewis** on Tuesday **30 January 2024**. The illustrated presentations will concentrate on the life of Collins and his many collaborations with Dickens. The meeting will take place at 6.30pm at the Fellowship's new venue, The Charterhouse, Charterhouse Square, London EC1M 6AN. Nearest tubes, Barbican, Farringdon, Moorgate or Old Street; buses, 4, 5 or 153.

The Marylebone Journal. Andrew Lycett, author of the most recent Wilkie biography *Wilkie Collins: A Life of Sensation* is contributing a feature to the **February 2024** issue of the *Marylebone Journal*. Wilkie of course lived in Marylebone for almost his entire life and if any members visits the area, they will find a small portrait of Wilkie amongst those of other local celebrities in the entrance to the local Waitrose in Marylebone High Street.

Wilkie in Whitby: a Bicentennial Celebration will be a joint convention of the WCS, the Dracula Society and A Ghostly Company. It will be held over the weekend of **Saturday and Sunday 8 and 9 June** and consist of a day of talks on the Saturday at the Whitby Museum, followed by a Dinner at the Royal Hotel (where Wilkie stayed in 1862). We are also hoping to arrange a guided tour of Whitby on the Sunday morning. On the Friday evening, individual societies will arrange their own informal get-togethers.

The cost of the Saturday talks, Dinner and Sunday guided tour will be £60. Bookings are being taken by Julia Kruk of the Dracula Society and need to be made by 31 January 2024. Remittances to be made to Dracula Society account (J Kruk), sort code 77-91-28, account number 87169668; or by cheque to J. Kruk (the Dracula **Society**, 213 Wulfstan Street, East Acton, London W12 0AB), or PayPal to juliakruk7@gmail.com.

The Dracula Society, who are of course well acquainted with Whitby, stress that June is a busy time and attendees will need to arrange their own accommodation as soon as possible. The Royal Hotel is not particularly recommended and those with cars might prefer to book accommodation in Robin Hood's Bay, Scarborough or York and drive in for the convention.

The University of Buckingham is arranging a conference on **20-21 June**. The meeting is being organised by Peter Orford, Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, to celebrate the bicentenary with the theme of Collins and Dickens. More details and how to submit a paper at www.collins-and-dickens.com.

Falmouth Conference. Our former Journal editor Joanne Parsons, is planning to arrange a conference in Falmouth over the weekend of 2-4 July. Although there is no specific Collins theme, he will no doubt feature among the papers presented there. Further details when available.

Dickens Society Conference, Birmingham. This will be held from **15-18 July** and will include Collins in the session on 'Family and Friends'.

University of Birmingham. There will be a small Collins-Dickens Special Collections exhibition from **1 July 2024 - 31 January 2025**.

Rambles Around Marylebone. The WCS will arrange a walk around central London's Marylebone area in which Wilkie lived for almost his entire life. It will be based on William Clarke's original 'Rambles' with updates from Paul Lewis and Andrew Gasson. It will take place during the summer but the date has yet to be finalised.

MUTUAL FRIENDS AT THE CHARLES DICKENS MUSEUM

The first of the events to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Wilkie's birth on 8 January 1824 was opened on 15 November at the Dickens Museum in London. Called *Mutual Friends – The Adventures of Charles Dickens & Wilkie Collins* it is a major exhibition about the friendship of Wilkie and Dickens from the day they met on 12 March 1851 to Dickens's death in June 1870. The opening preview night was attended by about 60 guests including our Patron, Faith Clarke, who proposed a toast to Wilkie, her great grandfather. The Exhibition features loans from private collections with rare and seldom seen items including paintings, letters, and other artefacts from their two decades of close friendship. It runs until 25 February 2024. Book at dickensmuseum.com.

THE LIGHTHOUSE

One important item, currently in careful storage for conservation reasons, which the museum was therefore unable to display is Clarkson Stanfield's front cloth to *The Lighthouse*. The play was written by Collins and performed at Tavistock House and Campden house in June 1855. Wilkie played the part of Martin Gurnock and Dickens his guilt-ridden father Aaron Gurnock. The illustration in colour was used for the dust wrapper to the WCS first English publication of *The Lighthouse* in 2013, edited by Andrew Gasson and Caroline Radcliffe. Copies are still available from either the WCS for its limited hardback edition or direct from the publisher, www.FrancisBoutle.co.uk, for the paperback edition.



COLLINS ON FORSTER'S BIOGRAPHY

An often-quoted – and misquoted – quip of Wilkie's was that Forster's biography of Dickens was more like 'The Life of John Forster with notices of Charles Dickens'. Some biographers have claimed he was bitter at not being mentioned in the book as much as he would have liked. In fact, that cannot be the reason.

John Forster was a friend of Dickens and indeed of Collins. Volume I of his biography covered 1812-1842. Although dated 1872 it was published in time for Christmas on 4 December 1871 (*Publisher's Circular*, 8 December 1871, p.847 and pp.818-819). Wilkie was almost certainly sent a complimentary copy of it by Forster. We know from Wilkie's letters that Forster sent him a copy of volume II in November the next year (WC to John Forster, 16 November 1872) about three weeks before that volume was published on 7 December (*Publisher's Circular* 9 December 1872 pp. 801, 804). So we can assume Wilkie had his copy of Volume I some time in November 1871.

In the week of publication Wilkie was a guest at a dinner party at the house of the journalist and writer Shirley Brooks (1816–1874). He was a *Punch* contributor from 1851 and became its editor in 1870 after Wilkie's friend Mark Lemon died. The dinner was on 7 December 1871 for 16 people including the artist William Frith and his wife Isabelle, Douglas Jerrold, and George H. Lewes.

It appears Wilkie was invited to this dinner party because he had provided Brooks with a theatre box to see his drama *The Woman in White* then playing at the Olympic theatre. It had opened on 9 October to packed houses and was still two thirds full, though Wilkie told another friend he could provide a box 'any day except Saturday'. On 23 November Brooks wrote in his diary

Wrote Wilkie Collins for a box, *Woman in White*, which he sent, with a good note

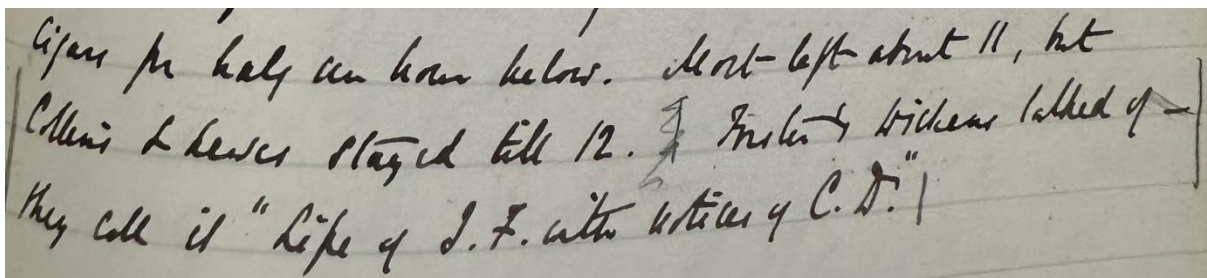
The box – which would have cost between one guinea and two and a half if Brooks had paid – was for the next day, Friday 24 November. Brooks and his wife Emily took the box but Brooks was disappointed by various things – not least that the view from the box was blocked by lights. He also thought the story was better in the novel. He found it 'reasonably well acted' and 'Vining [who played Fosco] much better' than he expected. But he did not like the 'provincial

accents among the company, which ought not to be in a London theatre.’ He and Emily got home at 11.30 and sat up talking about it until nearly one.

A week later he “Asked Wilkie Collins for the 7th. (Yes).” So that was why Wilkie Collins was at the dinner party in the week volume I of Forster’s biography of Dickens was published and by which time he would undoubtedly have read it. The first volume covered 1812–1842, long before Dickens had met Wilkie and of course did not mention him.

About 11pm most of the guests left but not Wilkie and George Henry Lewes. Brooks wrote in his diary:

Collins & Lewes stayed till 12. Forster’s Dickens talked of – they call it “Life of J.F. with notices of C.D.”



Cigars for half an hour before. Most left about 11, but Collins & Lewes stayed till 12. Forster & Dickens talked of – they call it “Life of J.F. with notices of C.D.”

The 1871 volume of Brooks’s Diary is one of three held at the London Library. Our thanks to archivist Nathalie Belkin for permission to examine it.

WHERE WILKIE MET DICKENS

Wilkie Collins first met Charles Dickens at a read through of a new comedy by Bulwer Lytton called *Not So Bad as We Seem*. Dickens had invited him to take the part of Smart, the valet to Lord Wilmot, played by Dickens himself.

The read through was on Wednesday 12 March 1851 at the house of John Forster, 58 Lincoln’s Inn Fields.



John Forster's House 58, Lincoln's Inn Fields

WILMOT: Smart, my chocolate. Any Duels today? I forget—

SMART: No, my Lord. No duels. Only three drums, four routs, five dinners, and six suppers.

Those are first words spoken to each other on stage by Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens. They would certainly not be the last.

The play ran for more than 20 performances in London and the Provinces raising more than £4000.

WILKIE AND RAMSGATE

Recent research by Paul Lewis into Wilkie's letters and bank accounts has established that he made fifteen trips to Ramsgate in the last two decades of his life from 1870 to 1888. He passed a total of 373 days there and spent at least £1185 – around £120,000 in today's money. He took these trips hoping that the sea air and the sailing would reduce the symptoms of his many ailments which generally he believed they achieved.

Three of his first trips were to the Granville Hotel, designed by Edward Pugin, son of the more famous Augustus. After that his favourite home from home was at 14 Nelson Crescent run by Catherine Shrive who became a family friend especially to Caroline's daughter Elizabeth Harriet Graves who Wilkie effectively adopted.

Wilkie used Ramsgate as the setting for key scenes in three novels: *Poor Miss Finch* (1872), *The Law and the Lady* (1875) and *The Fallen Leaves* (1879). He also worked on three other novels while staying there: *Heart & Science*, *'I say No!'*, and *The Haunted Hotel*. He said the central ideas for *The Evil Genius* came to him while he was getting a "thorough salting... mostly on the German Ocean" sailing off Ramsgate.

His last trip there was in 1888 when he stayed at 27 Wellington Crescent with what he called his 'morganatic family', Martha Rudd and their three children, all under their adopted name Dawson. On his return the good effects of the Ramsgate air disappeared after just a day leaving him with neuralgia and an abscess. Wilkie died a year later.

WILKIE'S BOATS



Fishing boat arrived. W. W. Collins 1838.

A pencil drawing noted as by Wilkie turned up for auction in an album of drawings which came from his mother's side of the family. Her name was Geddes

and it contains drawings by two of her sisters. Mary Christina Geddes (1802-1896) was not a known artist though her drawings in the album show her talent. The other sister, who was known as Margaret Carpenter (1793-1872) after her marriage in 1817, was the most successful female artist of the Victorian period. The drawings all date from the 1830s and most are by her husband William Carpenter, who became a keeper of prints and drawings at the British Museum.

It cannot be certain that Wilkie made this drawing *Fishing Boat Arrived* but in 1838 – when he was 14 – he did call himself William Wilkie or W. W. Collins as it is noted. He was a competent enough artist to have a painting – *The Smuggler's Refuge* – accepted for the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1849.

The album was lot 74 in a sale on 6 September 2023 at Toovey's in West Sussex and sold for £3105 including premium.

WILLIAM COLLINS'S DATE OF BIRTH

Members will recall that we published a pamphlet in May 2021 showing that Wilkie's father William Collins RA was born in September 1787 not 1788 as usually stated – not least by Wilkie in his biography of William! The Royal Academy and the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* have both made the change and acknowledge the WCS publication. See for example <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/name/william-collins-ra>. Many others – especially auction houses – have yet to follow.

LOST LETTERS TO THE LEHMANNS FOUND

Three letters by Wilkie to members of the Lehmann family have turned up at auction. Previously all three were known only from typed transcripts in the USA. Now the manuscripts and associated envelopes are in the public domain.

With the three letters came an export licence dated 4 September 1975 granted by the UK Board of Trade when they were sent from England to the USA. There they remained with the buyer, Professor Peter Sheldon (1935-2021), unrecorded and unseen for nearly 50 years. The letters are already in the WCS database from the transcripts but have now been checked from the manuscripts and corrected where necessary.

The letters were (1) to Nina Lehmann, 13 November 1862 – a close friend of Wilkie from before her marriage; (2) to her husband Fred Lehmann, [11] December 1886; and (3) to their son Rudolph Lehmann, 1 January 1880. Fred's brother Rudolf (sic) painted Wilkie's portrait in 1888 and which can be found in the National Portrait Gallery where a search will also find images of all three recipients.

WILKIE AND PETS

Wilkie's name turns up in some odd places. A recent article in the online science magazine [phys.org](https://phys.org/news/2023-10-pet-food-vet.html) is about the growth of a love of pets in Victorian times. It mentions "Count Fosco's pet mice in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White*" (phys.org/news/2023-10-pet-food-vet.html).

Wilkie was devoted to his dog Tommy and was bereft when he died in 1885.

How closely that poor little dog had associated himself with every act of my life at home, I only know now. I can go nowhere and do nothing – without missing Tommy. (To Frank Beard, 31 August 1885).

Nearly twenty years earlier he had written

The only sensible person in this house is the dog! I never heard that Mr Mitchell had been so kind as to call with your note – until it was too late to thank him. I was then informed that the dog had, most properly, done his best to welcome the visitor of whose presence I was unaware. (To Fanny Mitchell, 5 May 1867).

And he wrote from America to his friend Frederick Lehmann

Before I had been a week in the country I noted three national peculiarities which had never been mentioned to me by visitors to the "States." I. No American hums or whistles a tune – either at home or in the street. II. Not one American in 500 has a dog. III. Not one American in a 1000 carries a walking stick. I, who hum perpetually – who love dogs – who cannot live without a walking stick – am greatly distressed at finding my dear Americans deficient in the three social virtues just enumerated. (To Frederick Lehmann, 2 January 1874).

Wilkie is credited with creating the first canine detective, also called Tommie but with the different spelling, in *My Lady's Money*.

THE MOONSTONE UNSOLD

Wilkie's detective novel *The Moonstone* is one of his most famous and collectors of early or interesting editions of his books have to compete with collectors of detective fiction. T. S. Eliot called *The Moonstone* "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels". Collins boasted that no reader had ever guessed the identity of the diamond thief, though there were contemporaries who claimed they had.

A very fine copy of the first edition of *The Moonstone* was for sale at auction on 8 December in New York. Sotheby's billed it as from 'an Important American Collection'. It is inscribed "To Elizth Ward from her aff. Husband NW, Derby, 18 July 1868" and was clearly purchased within days of its publication which was around 15 July 1868. An advert in *The Times* by the publisher Tinsley Brothers on 15 July 1868 (p. 13b) describes the book as 'Ready this day'.

Before the sale Sotheby's put an estimate of \$50,000 to \$70,000 (£40,000 to £56,000). The starting bid was \$38,000 (£30,000) but not one hand went up and the lot was unsold. A buyer would have had to pay another 27% in premiums and a further 2.5% on the lot if they paid by card. Images of the book can be found at <https://www.sothebys.com/en/buy/auction/2023/fine-books-and-manuscripts>, lot 1013.

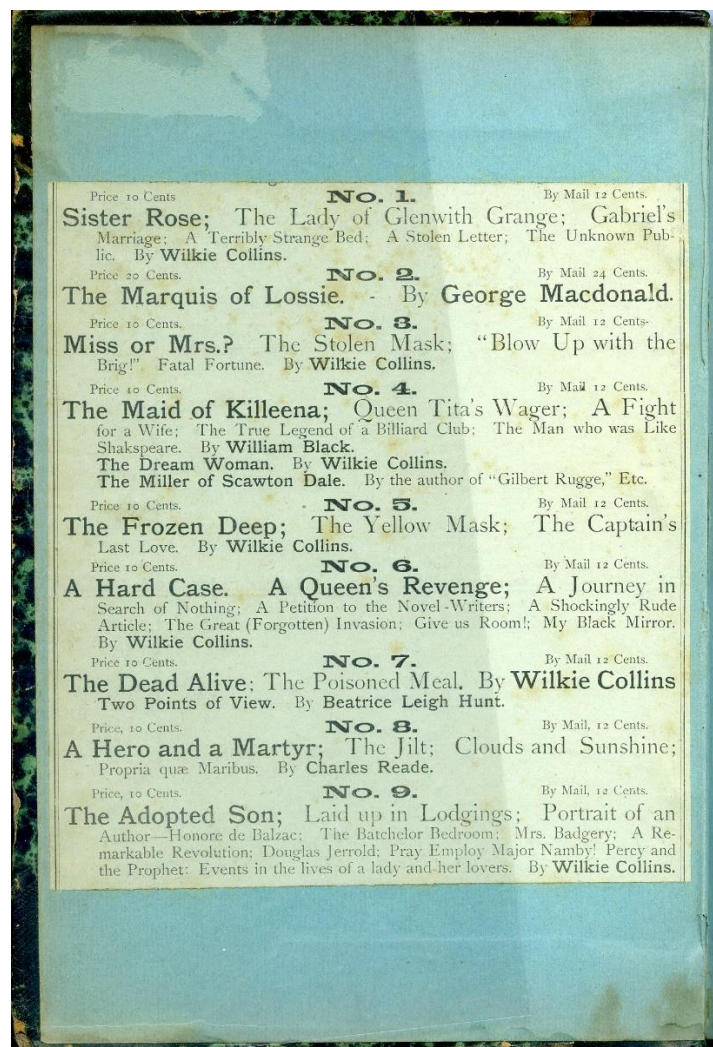
PRESENTATION COPY OF ARMADALE

The Dominic Winter sale on 27 September featured 'The library of the Late Christopher Foyle of Beeleigh Abbey'. Lot 314 was a signed copy of *Armadale* inscribed to "Monsieur Regnier of la Comédie Française from his friend and admirer Wilkie Collins, September 1866". The two volume first edition sold for £9,000 plus premium, well in excess of its rather low estimate.

François-Joseph Regnier (1807-1885) was a leading French actor and playwright of the Comédie-Française. He first met Collins during his trip to Paris in 1855. They collaborated for the French dramatic versions of *Armadale*, *The Woman in White* and *The New Magdalen*. Regnier subsequently became the dedicatee of *The Law and the Lady* in 1875.

FERGUS' POPULAR LIBRARY

A recent auction by Swann Galleries of New York included a bound volume of *Fergus's Popular Library*, an obscure pirate publisher from Chicago. In the second half of the nineteenth century it was accepted practice in America (as well as Europe) for publishers to reprint large editions of foreign authors without permission or payment. Between the 1860s and 1880s, numerous firms produced unauthorised editions at 10c instead of the usual \$1.50, and 20c instead of \$4.00. Publishers included the Seaside, Lovell's, Leisure Hour, Fireside and Dime Libraries in New York; Donnelly's Lakeside Library in Chicago; and Peterson in Philadelphia. It was estimated that some 500 novels a year were required to satisfy the various series.



Fergus published these first nine numbers in 1881 where they reproduced several Collins titles, not only his longer stories such as *Miss or Mrs?* and *The Frozen Deep* but also several of his better known short stories including 'The Dream

Woman' and 'A Terribly Strange Bed'. Most unusually, it also published several pieces from *My Miscellanies*, such as 'The Unknown Public' and 'Laid up in Lodgings'. The US pirates nearly always concentrated on fiction and these non-fiction articles might well be their only publication in the USA.

'SLOW READ' *THE DEAD SECRET*

Jak Stringer who is due to give her Wilkie show at the forthcoming Kensal Green tour in January tells us about two local groups that offer creative stimulus and good company for wintry afternoons. These are '[Sunday Speakeasy](#)' and '[Slow Read](#)'. Both run events every month in Penzance.

The Slow Read Group does exactly what it says on the tin - it's a book club on the instalment plan. Most Victorian novels were first published in monthly episodes, and if you've ever wondered how the original readers experienced them, now's your chance to find out. The first meeting took place on Saturday 28 October and continues on a regular basis at the Queen's Hotel.

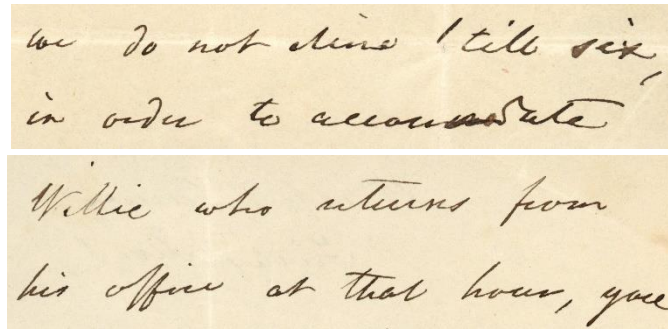
If you want to know more about either of these groups, please follow the Facebook links above - or if you're not on FB, contact Jak Stringer on 07814614764

WILKIE'S OFFICE HOURS

Letters often give us information that is not available anywhere else. An interesting insight comes in a newly discovered letter from Wilkie's father William Collins to his friend, the Norwich artist James Stark (1794–1859). On Friday 7 May 1851 William writes to invite Stark for dinner adding

we do not dine 'till six, in order to accommodate Willie who returns from his office at that hour...

On his 17th birthday earlier that year Wilkie began to work at the tea merchant run by Edward Antrobus whose office was in the Strand. The journey of just over two and a half miles would have taken an hour to walk and Wilkie probably did not afford a cab at that time. So we can reckon that his office hours ended at 5pm or 5.30 if he did cab it.



do not dine till six
in order to accommodate
Willie who returns from
his office at that hour, you

The name ‘Willie’ or ‘Willy’ was used by family members rather than ‘Wilkie’ which by then was his own preferred name.

MURDER IN THE MIST

Cora Harrison has produced the fifth in her series of Gaslight Mysteries which cast Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens as detectives. Her latest, *Murder in the Mist*, is written in the first person by Wilkie – though it has to be said Harrison is no Wilkie Collins when it comes to prose! Set at Dickens’s Kent house, Gadshill Place, at Christmas in the late 1850s, the fun is cut short when one of the guests, an Irishman called Timmy O’Connor, is found dead in the snow with a terrible head injury. Collins and Dickens have different ideas about who killed him. *Publishers Weekly* wrote “The ingenious solution to the mystery makes this the series’ best entry yet. Victorian whodunit fans are in for a treat.”

Please do not read this book for factual information about Wilkie as Harrison gets almost everything about him, his family, and his character wrong. She is slightly better at jigsawing her story into details of Dickens’s life but she is from the school of thought that Collins was a rather gauche and jejune imitation of the genius that is Dickens. Nevertheless, her four previous books about the detective duo – *Season of Darkness*, *Winter of Despair*, *Summer of Secrets*, and *Spring of Hope* – have been fun if exasperating. ISBN 978-1-4483-1134-7 in hardback and also on Kindle.

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