

PART I

Life and Works

CHAPTER I

*Life**Melisa Klimaszewski*

Wilkie Collins lived what appears to have been a full, exciting and satisfying life. He enjoyed good food and drink, travelled, nurtured close family relationships, sustained decades-long friendships and distinguished himself as a novelist and playwright. Limited by health problems, including gout attacks that were sometimes disabling, Collins attempted to balance physical rest with professional obligations and a ceaseless desire to live a stimulating, unconventional life.

Biographical work is more critically interpretive than archeologically factual. As Rosemarie Bodenheimer puts it, ‘everything we know is on a written page’, which means that reconstructing a sense of a person’s life is always an act of textual interpretation.¹ We can never know what it was like to sit in a pub with Collins or laugh at a joke he told, but we can know that he enjoyed dining out and had a sparkling wit. Fortunately, many of the letters Collins wrote have survived, as have the papers of many of his correspondents. Studying these documents, his publications and other historical records, we can begin to understand some of the details that shaped Collins’s life.

Harriet Collins gave birth to William Wilkie Collins on 8 January 1824 in London. Called ‘Willie’ in childhood then simply Wilkie from young manhood onward, Collins was an intellectually stimulated youth. His father, William Collins, was a painter and member of the Royal Academy of Arts, and the close-knit, churchgoing, Tory family welcomed another son, Charles Allston Collins, four years later. Wilkie and Charley remained close throughout their adult lives; Charley was the more physically attractive – tall with eye-catching red hair – but was always weaker and more sickly than his older brother. Wilkie Collins grew a long beard, wore small spectacles, chose colourful clothing, and often relied on a walking stick. The most prominent feature of his physique was a forehead bulge that had been present since birth and that he never attempted to hide. Many acquaintances commented on the shape of his head, but those

accounts quickly shift to descriptions of his vivacious personality. Short in stature, with hands and feet small enough to require the purchasing of ladies'-sized or even children's gloves and footwear, Collins was not an imposing person physically, but his zest for parties and debauchery could infuse a room with energy.

A formative experience for Collins was a two-year residence in Italy that commenced when he was twelve years old. William Collins's painting kept him at work in studios around Rome while his sons studied with tutors and learned about Italian culture while receiving language lessons. Living in Rome and spending significant time in France on the journey impressed European tastes upon Collins's young character that enabled him to question some English ways of doing things. His appreciation of good wine and fine foods was also influenced by this period of youthful travel, which led to a lifelong willingness to leave England for pleasure trips or to visit continental convalescent destinations.

In his twenties, Collins partied without shame or apology, boasting of drunken nights out in letters to his mother and 'dissipating fearfully' with Charles Ward in Paris so satisfactorily that they repeated the holiday antics in Europe every summer for five years.² He loved to shop in Paris, dine extravagantly, attend performances and cavort with women, activities his parents were loath to fund. Collins worked at Antrobus & Co. tea merchants but did not take the position seriously, rejected a career as a clergyman, and spent his time at Lincoln's Inn focused on fiction writing and pleasant dinners rather than actual study of law.

Collins's earliest published work, a short story from the summer of 1843, draws upon his travel experiences, as 'Volpurno' tells the story of a haunted Venetian groom going mad on his wedding day. His first proper book was a well-reviewed biography of his father published in 1848, a year after William Collins's death, which was followed by *Antonina* (1850), another work set in Italy. Collins also published *Rambles Beyond Railways* (1851), a travel narrative based on a hiking tour of Cornwall that featured the tinted lithographs of fellow traveller Henry Brandling. *Basil* (1852), *Hide and Seek* (1854) and *The Dead Secret* (1857), all novels, show Collins at the forefront of the emergence of sensation fiction as he also continued to write non-fiction journalism. Wilkie and Charley continued to share a home with Harriet, and the house was a place full of amateur theatricals, lively dinners and artistic production. In multiple genres, Collins developed his storytelling skills throughout the 1850s as his career ascended. Some of his early work was translated into Dutch, French, German and Russian, and his personal relationships thrived as he nurtured old

friendships while beginning a crucial new one with Charles Dickens, whose literary celebrity was well established.

Shared theatrical interests led Augustus Egg to suggest that Charles Dickens ask Collins to join Dickens's amateur production of Bulwer-Lytton's *Not so Bad as We Seem* in 1851. The men quickly became close friends and would remain so until Dickens's death in 1870. The two collaborated with each other more closely and frequently than they ever collaborated with other writers, and Collins even joined W. H. Wills in standing in for Dickens as editor of *All the Year Round* when Dickens went to the United States in 1867. Collins's other close friends included Nina (née Chambers) and Frederick Lehmann; Charles and Jane Ward; Frances Dickinson, whose divorces educated Collins on the marriage laws that many of his novels interrogate; and Edward Pigott. With Charles Dickens, however, Collins could share personal and professional passions simultaneously. Dickens secured Collins as a contracted staff writer for *Household Words*, and Collins secured his name in print in the journal's pages as the author of *The Dead Secret* – an impressive arrangement, given that no other pieces carried by-lines. The men travelled to Europe, co-wrote plays and stories, socialised respectably at the Garrick Club and enjoyed less respectable nights on the town. Dickens would invite Collins to join him in 'amiable dissipation and unbounded license' as casually as he would ask Collins to work on a Christmas collaboration (understanding, ironically, that Collins detested the holiday).³ In the autumn of 1857, they travelled to Cumberland to follow Ellen Ternan, a young actress with whom Dickens was enamoured and for whom he would later separate from his wife, then published a fictionalised account of their trip as 'The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices' in *Household Words*. A quirky travel narrative in which the men lampoon themselves in the alter-egos of Thomas Idle (Collins) and Francis Goodchild (Dickens), 'The Lazy Tour' showcases the humour and jousting wits that underpinned the friendship.

In contrast to his father's religious conservatism, which Charley had internalised, Wilkie's social life is just one realm in which he exhibited behaviour showing that his beliefs were far from traditional. In a series of letters to George Henry Lewes published in *The Leader* in 1852, Collins attempted to generate respect for mesmerism and clairvoyance. The hypocrisies and unthinking bureaucracy of organised religions disgusted Collins, but he respected humble, unostentatious demonstrations of faith even if he did not share a particular belief system. The most fundamental way in which he rejected dominant practice was in his domestic and sexual arrangements.

In the mid-1850s, Collins met and began a romantic relationship with Caroline Graves, a widowed shopkeeper, and by 1858, they were living together. Collins effectively adopted Caroline's young daughter Carrie but never expressed any interest in marrying Caroline or anyone else, despite his mother's disapproval. Sometimes, the couple would refer to Caroline as Mrs Collins or as his housekeeper, but they were honest with friends about their unmarried life. The critiques of marriage laws that surface in Collins's fiction and drive many of his plots align with his personal opposition to the absurdity of patriarchy in practice. 'Bold Words by a Bachelor', a non-fiction piece, rails against marriage, and Collins was comfortable with polyamory.⁴ In the mid-1860s, he met Martha Rudd, twenty-one years his junior, and began a long-term relationship with her. They had three children and, to live as peacefully as possible, took the names Mr and Mrs Dawson while Collins also continued to maintain a separate household with Caroline and Carrie. When Caroline left for two years and married Joseph Clow, Collins did not object and was present at the wedding, but that marriage failed quickly, and Caroline returned to Collins. There is no evidence that Caroline and Martha socialised, but it appears that the families coexisted calmly, and for the last two decades of his life, his children with Martha and grandchildren from Carrie surrounded him.

Collins was certainly not the only major Victorian literary figure to live outside of traditional marriage. George Eliot (Mary Ann Evans) and Charles Dickens both lived with partners to whom they were not wed. Dickens chose to attempt to keep his relationship with Ellen Ternan secret, causing pain to many others as he abruptly separated from his wife and treated her unkindly, whereas Eliot/Evans and George Henry Lewes were quite open about their choice to live together in partnership while his wife resided in an asylum. Collins struck something of a middle path, never apologising for his choices, treating both Caroline and Martha with respect and assuming married names to minimise any social shame the children might feel. He supported both households financially and took care to ensure that all of the children were provided for after his death. Above all, Collins remained true to his beliefs about love, intimacy, family and life partnership.

The most successful period of Collins's career was the decade of the 1860s. *The Woman in White*, published weekly in *All the Year Round* from November 1859 to August 1860, was a massive hit. Featuring a masterfully narrated, suspenseful plot, the text broke new novelistic ground that not only propelled Collins into celebrity but also secured him financially. The book, inspiring dances and themed merchandise, was so popular that

it reached an eighth edition in volume form by November 1860. Collins enjoyed fame and took no rest, publishing *No Name* (1862–3) and *Armada* (1864–6) in quick succession. The reading public purchased copies eagerly, and although critical reviews were not as enthusiastic as those for *The Woman in White*, the publication of *The Moonstone* (1868) once again resulted in near-universal praise and excitement. Recognised as the first detective novel in English, *The Moonstone* is narrated through documents, and it established many of the most recognisable traits – including bumbling local investigators, a quirky professional detective, amateur detective figures and false initial leads – of the genre.

In alignment with Collins's unconventional lifestyle and non-traditional beliefs, throughout his oeuvre one finds sympathy for typically maligned or ignored people and situations. Individuals with physical disabilities, multi-racial characters and strong women characters appear in a wide range of roles. His plots also consistently recognise the legitimacy of non-biological family bonds. Although some of these depictions indulge problematic stereotypes, they are also often sympathetic in tone, and the psychological depth of such multi-layered characters establishes full humanity. These characters are not uniformly righteous or villainous; rather, they are as complex and unpredictable as the more conventional characters. Collins's playwriting tended towards melodrama, sometimes exhibiting less complex characterisation, and his success in that field was inconsistent. *The Frozen Deep* (1856), a collaboration with Dickens, was done so well that, following Queen Victoria's attendance at a private benefit performance on 4 July 1857, Dickens received notice that 'her Majesty particularly wishes that Her high approval should be conveyed to Mr. Wilkie Collins'.⁵ The first professional stage production of Collins's work was *The Lighthouse* in August 1857, and he never lost his passion for playwriting, sometimes publishing a dramatised version of a story before the serial run of the same novel was finished in order to protect copyright. Some productions, like *The Red Vial* of 1858, were such flops that Collins took pains to destroy all copies of the script, but others, like his adaptation of *The Woman in White* (1871) and *Man and Wife* (1873) were unqualified triumphs.

Through all this success and a life full of social, bodily and sensual pleasures, Collins also suffered tremendously. He was plagued by severe gout, a condition his father had also managed. The first acute episode seems to have occurred in early 1853, at just twenty-nine years of age, and it took Collins several months to recover strength in his lower body. Leg and foot pain would trouble him intermittently for the rest of his life, as would extreme ocular inflammation that sometimes required bandaging of

his eyes. Some of these symptoms are more characteristic of venereal disease than gout or rheumatism, and it is likely that multiple conditions led to Collins's periods of illness. He used laudanum (opium dissolved in alcohol) to manage pain since at least the early 1860s, and he understood addiction as a consequence. Having tried other methods of pain relief, such as potassium and quinine, Collins turned to laudanum – widely available and marketed in small doses for infants – as the only option that actually provided comfort. His addiction was severe, and as his tolerance rose, the high doses he took would have killed most people. When nightmares, hallucinations and ongoing pain made the situation intolerable, Collins and Caroline visited sulphur spas in Germany, but those treatments provided only temporary relief. At times, in addition to limited mobility, he was unable to read or write and would rely on Carrie to act as amanuensis. In 1867, he was so ill that he could not attend his beloved mother's funeral. Astoundingly, he was able to compose a masterwork like *The Moonstone* and enjoy its success in the midst of such challenges.

The final period of Collins's life included a trip to the United States and Canada in 1873–4. The public readings in America received mixed reviews, with many commentators noting that his performative talents were far inferior to his writerly ones. He continued to battle sometimes poor health, and difficulties with tour managers resulted in an unpredictable reading schedule. In his correspondence, Collins ignored bad reviews, noticing instead the kindness and sincerity of American people as he revelled at impressive dinners with hosts and came home with experiences that informed some of his future works.⁶ The novels and plays that followed were of uneven quality, including passages that seem to validate more restrictive views of femininity and disability at odds with the nuances of Collins's earlier works. Still, *The Law and the Lady* (1874–5) features a pregnant British woman in a detective role fearlessly taking herself into one of the nineteenth-century Spanish civil wars – a depiction that outraged conservative respondents. *The Black Robe* (1880–1) is a fast-paced, humorous novel full of homoeroticism that uses documents strategically for narration and includes a critique of Catholicism, all demonstrating that Collins had not lost all of the talents that characterised his work in the 1860s. Collins also distinguished himself in 1884 as a founding member of the Society of Authors, an advocacy group that argued for more effective copyright laws and that remains active today.

At the end of his life, Collins could not host the lavish dinner parties he and Caroline so enjoyed because his health was so often poor. His letters

describe near-constant pain or discomfort, but he still tried to take short walks, visit friends when possible, and take comfort in the presence of his children and grandchildren. Just after his sixty-fifth birthday, Collins was in a terrible cab crash and was thrown from the vehicle but, shockingly, was not seriously injured. Later that year, a serious stroke left him severely impaired, but he rallied briefly and was able to write some letters of farewell before he died on 23 September 1889. Collins was aware of death's approach and realised that he would die before finishing *Blind Love*, so he left detailed plans and arranged for Walter Besant to complete the final seven weekly parts. Collins's last will and testament named and provided for Caroline, Carrie, Martha and all of his known biological children. Unfortunately, Carrie's husband Henry Bartley had been mis-managing Collins's affairs, which left much less of an estate for the family to inherit than one would expect. Collins's gravestone stands in London's Kensal Green Cemetery with the inscription he wrote. Caroline is buried with him, but her name does not appear on the white stone marker that reads simply (under a white cross): 'In Memory of Wilkie Collins, Author of *The Woman in White* and Other Works of Fiction'.

The legacy of Wilkie Collins, as forecasted on that gravestone, stems from his path-breaking work. His name is no longer recognised instantly the world over, nor do adaptations of his works flood cinema screens. Yet Collins's influence remains ubiquitous. The serialised storytelling, suspenseful cliffhangers and crime plots of today's fiction in all forms, whether in print or visually streaming, continue to use techniques and styles that Collins innovated or prefigured. Netflix detectives may not share Sergeant Cuff's penchant for roses, but the presence of their individual quirks remains indebted to a tradition that began in the imaginations of Collins and his contemporaries. The life Collins led was path-breaking in literary circles as well as social ones. He insisted upon experiencing his romantic and sexual love unconventionally, consistently abiding by his principles and caring for others. Although Collins was hardly the only person rejecting patriarchal marriage traditions in the mid-nineteenth century, to openly and publicly eschew monogamy as a famous author was no small risk. Collins took that risk with a smile, loved his families and continued to dream up fiction that entertains 150 years after its publication. Understanding such a life not only helps establish the biographical context for Collins's literary works but also enhances our understanding of the Victorians more generally.

Notes

- ¹ R. Bodenheimer, *Knowing Dickens* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), p. 16.
- ² Wilkie Collins to Harriet Collins, 4 September 1844, in W. Baker and W. M. Clarke (eds.), *The Letters of Wilkie Collins*, Vol. 1: 1838–1865 (London: Macmillan, 1999), p. 22.
- ³ Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins, 12 July 1854, in G. Storey, K. Tillotson and A. Easson (eds.), *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (Pilgrim Edition), Vol. VII: 1853–1855 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), p. 366. Hereafter cited as Pilgrim.
- ⁴ W. Collins, 'Bold Words by a Bachelor', *Household Words* 14 (13 December 1856), pp. 505–7.
- ⁵ Col. Charles Beaumont Phipps to Charles Dickens, 5 July 1857. Pilgrim, Vol. VIII, p. 366.
- ⁶ See S. R. Hanes, *Wilkie Collins's American Tour, 1873–4*, *The History of the Book*, No. 3 (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008).

CHAPTER 2

Letters

William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law and Paul Lewis

There are essentially three versions of Wilkie Collins's collected correspondence. The recent InteLex digital edition of the *Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins* (2019) incorporates and updates two earlier series by the same editors, listed in alphabetical order (William Baker, Andrew Gasson, Graham Law and Paul Lewis), although the bulk of the work for the digital edition was conducted by the last two named: the upwards of 3,000 letters included in the four volumes of *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters* (Pickering & Chatto, 2005); and the nearly 400 letters gradually added between 2005 and 2020 in the thirteen numbers of *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins: Addenda and Corrigenda* issued by the Wilkie Collins Society, initially in the pages of the *Wilkie Collins Society Journal*. The process of updating includes making a large number of corrections and revisions to both the letter transcripts and the accompanying editorial material, including in not a few cases changes involving the recipient and/or the dating. This is particularly so with the selection of nearly 600 letters initially published some twenty years ago in *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* (2 vols.; Macmillan, 1999), edited by William Baker and William M. Clarke. With few exceptions, these appeared in *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* only in summary form, but in the electronic edition all appear complete within the sequence, while both the transcriptions and annotations have now been thoroughly revised. However, the electronic edition in the 'Past Masters' InteLex digital series of editions of the correspondence of major British writers is unfortunately not widely available; indeed, only educational establishments are permitted to buy the 'campus wide license' to access it and only a very few have been sold, and those only to American university libraries including Columbia and Princeton.

In Baker and Clarke's two-volume Macmillan edition (1999) there was a conscious decision to give less priority to 'business letters' or 'notes to his publishers' than to correspondence revealing 'details of his personal or