WILKIE COLLINS IN CONTEXT

This collection of essays by international scholars celebrates the 200th anniversary of Wilkie Collins’s birth by exploring his unconventional life alongside his works, critical responses to his writings and their afterlife, and the literary and cultural contexts which shaped his fiction. Topics discussed include gender, science and medicine, music, law, race and empire, media adaptations, neo-Victorianism, disability and ethics. Along with an analysis of his novels, the essays included also recognise the importance of his short stories, journalism and contributions to Victorian theatre, most notably illuminating the strong connections between sensation fiction and melodrama, as well as exploring his influence on film and television. Engaging with yet also delving far beyond the famous novels, this volume promotes awareness of Collins’s remarkable and diverse writerly achievements and paints a vivid portrait of an author whose fluctuating reputation among contemporary critics stands in stark contrast to his immense and still-enduring popularity.

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Preface

This volume of essays marks the 200th anniversary of the birth of Wilkie Collins, an author whose literary legacy provides a conspicuous example of the advantages, and pitfalls, of extreme popular success. The phenomenal impact of his novels *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* on Victorian readers, and on the period’s wider culture, ensured his place in the history of nineteenth-century fiction. The continued focus on these two works, however, also resulted in a narrowing of attention that it has taken some time to rectify. This constriction of interest was exacerbated by the legitimate, but still limiting, establishment of Collins’s central place in the debate over sensation novels that burst onto the pages of prominent literary journals during the 1860s, generating vehement arguments about the proper subject matter, tone, audience and purpose of prose fiction. The resulting legitimisation of realism, in contrast to an ostensibly improper, commoditised, and therefore dismissible sensationalism, meant that Collins’s writing could be constructed by reviewers as admirable of its kind – a condescending assessment that recognised his impressive sales while relegating his books to second-class status. The different treatment accorded his good friend Charles Dickens is revealing because Dickens’s career as a novelist began early enough that by the 1860s he could largely escape being tarred with the sensationalist brush, although some reviewers did make the effort. Nonetheless, despite his often equally sensational narratives, the older author’s novels could retroactively be made to fit into what an even later author, Thomas Hardy, would designate (in an effort to downplay his own use of sensational elements) ‘novels of character and environment’. The exploration of psychological states and the detailed evocation of setting is placed against ‘mere’ complicated plots and melodramatic events, with the first type of fiction worthy of canonisation (Dickens, George Eliot, Hardy) and the second not (Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Ellen Wood, Charles Reade). The resulting relegation of Collins to the status of one-dimensional purveyor of a niche and ephemeral genre, although no longer as dominant as...
it once was, is unfair on multiple levels, as the contributors to this collection emphatically reveal.

The thirty-five essays gathered here reveal the multifaceted quality of Wilkie Collins’s genius that goes far beyond the focus on *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone*. Given scholarly interest in the treatment of women, ‘insanity’, legal abuses and colonialism in Victorian literature, these well-known works have experienced a revival in critical attention. Yet the broad range of Collins’s interests remains unrecognised. For example, his connection to painting is the subject of Leonee Ormond’s incisive discussion of artists in his work. It should not be forgotten that Wilkie Collins’s first published book was his *Memoirs of the Life of William Collins, Esq., R.A.: With Selections from His Journals and Correspondence*, published in 1848. This account of his father the painter, and his early struggles, illuminates Collins’s own early years in addition to his father’s friendships by drawing on journals, correspondence and notes. Although the young Collins glosses over his father’s excessive religiosity, this is, in the words of a later advocate of Collins’s work, Walter de la Mare, ‘a remarkable book . . . for its enduring loyalty and affection, its modesty, insight, judgment, dignity, and quiet and sedate style’. It should not be forgotten too that Wilkie’s brother Charles Allston Collins was a highly accomplished painter associated with the Pre-Raphaelite movement. His complicated emotional instability led to an early death, and several of the contributors to this volume point to the rich and complex psychological depiction of the artistic temperament in Wilkie Collins’s work. In terms of his own biography and correspondence, it is noticeable that Collins’s friendships were extensive in the mid-Victorian artistic community and included, amongst others, William Holman Hunt, the best man at his brother’s wedding; John Everett Millais, who drew the frontispieces for several of Collins’s novels; and William Powell Frith, with whom Collins took part in amateur theatricals, shared a mutual friendship with Dickens and travelled to Italy. Melisa Klimaszewski provides the context for these relationships through her succinct account of Collins’s life that opens this volume.

Collins’s, and for that matter Dickens’s, love of the theatre is also often elided in considering their lives and works. Contributions to this volume attempt to address this neglect. They draw attention to Collins’s love of acting and to his overlooked dramatic work and collaborations. As Caroline Radcliffe notes in her essay, ‘Wilkie Collins achieved considerable success as a dramatist in Britain and the United States, with plays such as *Man and Wife* and *The New Magdalen* enjoying long and successful runs.’ Contributors also discuss the dramatic adaptations of his fiction, the
Preface

Unchecked piracy with which he was continually plagued, and the issue of melodrama, now unfashionable, but in Collins’s day a dominant Victorian theatrical mode. As Jenny Bourne Taylor observes in her essay on ‘Class Status and Social Identity’, Collins’s ‘reworking of Gothic and melodramatic tropes in contemporary settings gave his work a subversive currency’.

Collins’s correspondence is yet another facet of his work which, until the present volume, has not received the attention it deserves, and which constitutes an important part of its author’s oeuvre. His letters reveal not only his family relationships, especially his closeness to his mother Harriet, his friendships and personal preoccupations, but also his connections to broader Victorian literary concerns, such as serialisation, newspaper syndication and copyrights. Collins reveals a continuous attention to detail in dealing with publishers and literary agents. Dependent for his living upon his writing and the income he received from it – a subject fully explored by Paul Lewis in his essay ‘Money’, which presents some hard facts and revelations – the correspondence shows that Collins was exceedingly worldly wise and shrewd in his dealings with publishers on both sides of the Atlantic, on the European continent and elsewhere. He was most anxious to protect his rights as an author, participating in attempts to form what today we would refer to as a writers’ union or guild in which he took an active part – attending dinners, giving speeches and writing articles advocating the rights and responsibilities of authorship. Social issues and injustices such as the incarceration of women in lunatic asylums, legal inequity, inheritance, sanitation, poverty and urban deprivation continually engaged his creative attention. A further subject which occurs in his correspondence and in his novels is that of physical and mental disabilities, as Heather Tilley points out in her essay.

Other areas explored in this volume include Collins’s presentation of and concern with social relations and didacticism, marriage laws, gender issues, inheritance laws and vivisection. Laurence Talairach extensively treats Collins’s interest in, and creative transformation of, ‘Science and Medicine’, while Mark Frost draws attention to Collins’s exploration of what is now referred to as Victorian ecology. Specific topics covered also encompass Allan W. Atlas’s analysis of the music in Collins’s writing, his musical awareness, as well as the close personal relationships that shaped his extensive musical engagement.

Collins’s relationship to Dickens is the concern of Emily Bell, while Jeanette Roberts Shumaker discusses his relationship to Mary Elizabeth Braddon and other women writers. Lizhen Chen examines the author Collins considered the greatest of all novelists, Sir Walter Scott.
Baker, in his discussion of the books owned by Collins, draws attention to the extensive collection of Scott’s works found in his library following his death. Anne-Marie Beller writes on the significance and importance of law to Collins and his work. Collins’s relevance today is revealed by Alexis Weedon’s contribution, ‘Modern Media Adaptations’; consideration of the issue of ‘Ethics’ is explored by Biwu Shang; as are critical responses to Collins amongst his Victorian contemporaries, during the twentieth century and more recently, by James Aaron Green, Richard Nemesvari, and Tim Dolin and Lucy Dougan. Patricia Cove addresses Collins’s engagement with politics and Melisa Klimaszewski discusses colonialism and race.

Wilkie Collins in Context is divided into four sections. Part I is devoted to essays on his ‘Life and Works’ with treatment of his biography, letters, publishers and editions, while the fiction is divided into the consideration of the early novels, the middle novels, the later novels, then the shorter fiction. This first section concludes with essays on Collins’s prolific journalism and his largely neglected drama. The first four essays of Part II, ‘Critical Response and Afterlife’, treat the broad canvas of reactions to his life and writings. The final two contributions to this section deal with media adaptations and Collins’s impact upon contemporary neo-Victorian fiction. Part III, ‘Contexts: Literary’, also has six contributions. These include considerations of the author’s library, the impact and importance of serialisation when considering Collins’s work, and Collins’s foundational association with sensation fiction. It also includes discussions of Collins’s relationships with Scott, Dickens and Braddon.

Part IV, the longest section, with fourteen essays, treats the diversity of ‘Contexts: Cultural and Social’, including a consideration of Collins’s style and language, his treatment of gender, his relationship with, on a personal level and in his work, artists, music, politics, law, science and medicine, the environment, class status and social identity, disability, ethics, race and empire, and geography and places. These topics are not meant to be exhaustive but intended rather to generate further discussion of Collins’s diversity and to suggest additional areas of exploration in Collins studies.

This volume was compiled during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic. Both of the general editors are grateful to the contributors for their immediate responses during a most difficult period: some indeed even had Covid themselves or had to cope with those close to them becoming ill, yet still managed to contribute and submit on time. We cannot but repeat how grateful we are to them, and we are sure that Wilkie Collins would have been so too. William Baker was especially fortunate in his co-editor, Richard Nemesvari, and his savvy: in addition to jointly editing this volume, we also
Preface

enjoyed when we could our mutual observations on the fortunes of English football teams – an area of course not covered in our subject’s work. Baker would also like to thank the following for their assistance and responses to questions: Emily Bell, Andrew Gasson, Maxwell Hoover, Graham Law, Paul Lewis, Patrick Scott and Ken Womack.

We are likewise grateful to Bethany Thomas, Commissioning Editor (Literature) at Cambridge University Press, who suggested this volume, and to her colleagues at the Press for their advice and assistance. In particular we would like to thank Rose Bell, whose exemplary work as copy editor for the book impressed us both. Richard Nemesvari wishes to thank the Office of the Provost and Vice-President: Academic at Wilfrid Laurier University for its funding support, and (as always) Jane Strickler, whose comments on his writing never fail to improve its clarity. He would also like to note that it was a pleasure editing this collection with William Baker, who generously shared his wide-ranging expertise on the life and work of Wilkie Collins.
Chronology

1824
8 January  
William Wilkie Collins is born at 11 New Cavendish Street, Marylebone

1826

Family moves to Pond Street, Hampstead Green

1828
25 January  
Brother, Charles Allston Collins is born

1829
Summer  
Family visits Boulogne
September  
Family moves to Hampstead Square

1830

Family moves to Porchester Terrace, Bayswater

1835
January  
Collins begins to attend Maida Hill Academy

1836
September  
Family visits France and Italy (until August 1838)  
[Dickens, The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club]

1838

Family moves to 20 Avenue Road, Regent’s Park  
Collins boards at Henry Cole’s school, Highbury  
[Dickens, Oliver Twist]  
xxii
Family moves to 85 Oxford Terrace, Bayswater

January
Leaves Cole’s school; apprenticed to Antrobus & Co., tea merchants
[Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop, Barnaby Rudge*

June–July
Visits Scotland with his father

Family moves to 1 Davenport Street, Hyde Park Gardens

July
‘Volpurno; or, The Student’ published in *The Albion* (first signed publication)

August
‘The Last Stage Coachman’ published in *The Illuminated Magazine*
[Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Visits France with Charles Ward

January
Finishes *Ioláni; or, Tahiti as it Was*; rejected by Longman and Chapman & Hall

September–October
Visits Paris alone

April
Begins writing *Antonina; or, The Fall of Rome*

18 May
Enters Lincoln’s Inn

July
Visits Belgium with Charles Ward

17 February
Death of William Collins; Collins begins writing his father’s memoir

August
To France again with Charles Ward
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Month</th>
<th>Event</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1848</td>
<td>Autumn</td>
<td>Family moves to 38 Blandford Square, Marylebone</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>[Dickens, <em>Dombey and Son</em>; Thackeray, <em>Vanity Fair</em>; Gaskell, <em>Mary Barton</em>; Kingsley, <em>Yeast</em>]</td>
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<td>1849</td>
<td>19 June</td>
<td>Amateur production of Goldsmith’s <em>The Good Natur’d Man</em> at Blandford Square</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>Exhibits <em>The Smuggler’s Retreat</em> at Royal Academy</td>
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<td>[Charlotte Brontë, <em>Shirley</em>]</td>
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<td>1850</td>
<td>26 February</td>
<td>Charity performance of <em>A Court Duel</em> at the Soho Theatre</td>
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<td></td>
<td>28 February</td>
<td><em>Antonina</em> published by Bentley (Collins’s first published novel)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>July–August</td>
<td>Walking tour of Cornwall with Henry Brandling</td>
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<td></td>
<td>August</td>
<td>Family moves to 17 Hanover Terrace, Regent’s Park</td>
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<td>[Dickens, <em>David Copperfield</em>; Thackeray, <em>Pendennis</em>]</td>
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<tr>
<td>1851</td>
<td>30 January</td>
<td><em>Rambles Beyond Railways</em> published by Bentley</td>
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<td></td>
<td>March</td>
<td>‘The Twin Sisters’ published in <em>Bentley’s Miscellany</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>12 March</td>
<td>Meets Dickens for the first time at the house of John Forster</td>
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<td>16 March</td>
<td>Acts with Dickens in Bulwer-Lytton’s <em>Not so Bad as We Seem, or, Many Sides to a Character</em></td>
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<td>27 September</td>
<td>‘A Plea for Sunday Reform’ published in <em>The Leader</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>21 November</td>
<td>Called to the Bar</td>
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<td>23 December</td>
<td>Christmas book <em>Mr Wray’s Cash-Box</em> published by Bentley</td>
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<td>Year</td>
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<td>1852</td>
<td>24 April ‘The Traveller’s Story of a Terribly Strange Bed’ published in <em>Household Words</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>August ‘Nine O’Clock’ published in <em>Bentley’s Magazine</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>September Stays with Dickens in Dover</td>
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<td>16 November <em>Basil: A Story of Modern Life</em> published by Bentley</td>
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<td>December ‘A Passage in the Life of Mr Peruginio Potts’ published in <em>Bentley’s Miscellany</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>1853</td>
<td>July–September Stays with Dickens in Boulogne</td>
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<td></td>
<td>October–December Tours Switzerland and Italy with Dickens and Augustus Egg</td>
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<td></td>
<td>[Dickens, <em>Bleak House</em>; Gaskell, <em>Ruth</em>]</td>
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<td>6 June <em>Hide and Seek</em> published by Bentley</td>
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<td></td>
<td>December ‘The Lawyer’s Story of a Stolen Letter’ published in <em>The Seven Poor Travellers</em>, Christmas number of <em>Household Words</em></td>
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<td></td>
<td>[Dickens, <em>Hard Times</em>]</td>
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<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>11–21 February Illness during trip to Paris with Dickens</td>
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<td></td>
<td>16 June <em>The Lighthouse</em> performed at Dickens’s home, Tavistock House</td>
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<td></td>
<td>July–September Stays with Dickens at Folkestone</td>
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<td>September Sails with Edward Pigott to the Scilly Isles</td>
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<td>November–December ‘The Monktons of Wincot Abbey’ published in <em>Fraser’s Magazine</em></td>
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<td>22 December ‘The Cruise of the Tomtit’ published in <em>Household Words</em></td>
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<td>1856</td>
<td>February Begins to sign himself ‘Wilkie Collins’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>February–April Visits Paris with Dickens</td>
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<td></td>
<td>March <em>A Rogue’s Life</em> serialised in <em>Household Words</em> (first serialised novel)</td>
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April
Takes lodgings at 22 Howland Street, off Tottenham Court Road

June–July
Sails along the South Coast and to Cherbourg with Pigott

June
Family moves to 2 Harley Place, Marylebone Road

August–September
Visits Boulogne with Dickens
13 September
‘To Think or Be Thought For’ published in *Household Words*

October
Joins permanent staff of *Household Words*

1857
3 January
*The Dead Secret* begins in *Household Words*

6 January
*The Frozen Deep* performed at Tavistock House

24 January
*The Dead Secret* begins in *Harper’s Weekly* (first authorised American serialisation)

June
*The Dead Secret* published by Bradbury & Evans

10 August
*The Lighthouse* produced at Royal Olympic Theatre (first professional production)

21 August
*The Frozen Deep* produced in Manchester

7 September
Leaves with Dickens for a walking tour in Cumberland

3–31 October
*The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices* (with Dickens) published in *Household Words*

December
*The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* (with Dickens) published in Christmas number of *Household Words*

[Dickens, *Little Dorrit*; Hughes, *Tom Brown’s School Days*]

1858
April
‘Who is the Thief?’ (‘The Biter Bit’) published in *The Atlantic Monthly*

June
Sailing trip to Wales

July–August
First visit to Broadstairs, Kent

25 August
‘The Unknown Public’ published in *Household Words*

September
Resigns from the Garrick Club in support of Edmund Yates

11 October
*The Red Vial* opens at the Olympic Theatre

[Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life*]