

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.

WILLIAM BAKER is Distinguished Chair Qiantang River Professor, Hangzhou Normal University China, and Distinguished Professor Emeritus at Northern Illinois University. A scholar of British literature, he is the author and editor of numerous articles and books, including *Wilkie Collins's Library: A Reconstruction* (2002), *A Wilkie Collins Chronology* (2007), *The Letters of Wilkie Collins* (with William M. Clarke, 1999), *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters* (with Andrew Gasson, Graham Law and Paul Lewis, 2005) and *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins* (with Paul Lewis, Andrew Gasson and Graham Law, 2019).

RICHARD NEMESVARI is Professor of English and former Dean of Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. He has published widely on Victorian fiction, including the works of Thomas Hardy, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the Brontës. He is General Editor of the Cambridge Edition of the Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy.

WILKIE COLLINS IN CONTEXT

EDITED BY

WILLIAM BAKER

Hangzhou Normal University and Northern Illinois University

RICHARD NEMESVARI

Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada



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Notes on Contributors

ALLAN W. ATLAS is Distinguished Professor of Music Emeritus at The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. His interests range from music of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries – his *Renaissance Music* (1998) is the standard textbook on the subject – to the operas of Puccini, various aspects of Victorian music, the tangos of Astor Piazzolla and, most relevant today, the music of Ralph Vaughan Williams. His publications on Wilkie Collins include ‘Wilkie Collins, Mr. Vanstone, and the Case of Beethoven’s “No Name” Symphony’, *Dickens Studies Annual* 33 (2003), and ‘Wilkie Collins on Music and Musicians’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 124 (1999). Still another Collins publication, *A Wilkie Collins Songbook*, offers editions of thirty ‘popular’ songs cited in one or another of Collins’s works; it will be published by A-R Editions in 2023. He has also served as Vice-President of the North American British Music Studies Association, of which he was recently made a lifetime honorary member.

MARIA K. BACHMAN was Professor of English at Middle Tennessee State University. She co-edited Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (2006) and *Blind Love* (2003), as well as *Reality’s Dark Light: The Sensational Wilkie Collins* (2003), *Fear, Loathing, and Victorian Xenophobia* (2013) and *The Socio-Literary Imaginary in 19th and 20th Century Britain: Victorian and Edwardian Inflections* (2019). She also served as co-editor of *Victorians Institute Journal*.

WILLIAM BAKER is Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, Northern Illinois University, Distinguished Chair Qiantang River Professor, Hangzhou Normal University, Hangzhou, PR China and Distinguished Professor, Emeritus, Northern Illinois University. He co-edits *The Year’s Work in English Studies*, *Style* and *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies*. Author or co-author of upwards of 175 articles in refereed journals and more than 25 books, his publications on Wilkie Collins include

editing with Andrew Gasson, Graham Law and Paul Lewis, the four-volume *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters* (2005), and *Additional Wilkie Collins Letters* for the IntelLex Full Text Humanities On-Line Databases (2019), <http://pm.nlx.com>.

EMILY BELL is Lecturer in Digital Humanities in the School of English at the University of Leeds. She has published on Charles Dickens, literary biography, periodicals and computational approaches to literature and history. Her most recent book is the edited collection *Dickens After Dickens* (2020), and she is writing a new biography of Dickens for Reaktion Books. Dr Bell is also editing Dickens's short fiction and *David Copperfield* for the Oxford Edition of Charles Dickens. She is co-editor of the *Curran Index* to nineteenth-century periodicals, co-editor of *Dickens Search* and Honorary Editor of *The Dickensian*.

ANNE-MARIE BELLER is Senior Lecturer in Victorian Literature at Loughborough University. She has published widely on the sensation novel and contributed chapters to *A Companion to Sensation Fiction* (ed. Pamela K. Gilbert, 2011) and *The Cambridge Companion to Sensation Fiction* (ed. Andrew Mangham, 2013). Recent research includes an article on the sensation short story for *Victoriographies* (2022), a chapter on disability and race in the work of Mary Elizabeth Braddon and Wilkie Collins for *Nineteenth-Century Literature in Transition: The 1860s* (forthcoming), and a translation and critical edition of a French serial by Braddon for *Le Figaro* (forthcoming).

LIZHEN CHEN is Professor of English Literature at the School of International Studies and research fellow at the Literary Criticism Institute of Hangzhou Normal University. His research interests focus on the circulation of literary discourses, comparative literature and ethical literary criticism. He is the author of *Ethical Perspectives in the Narratives of Regency Novels* (2020), *The Angel and the Dove* (2018) and *Victorianism in the Novels of Elizabeth Gaskell* (2015), as well as dozens of articles in journals including *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, *Style*, *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature* and *Foreign Literature Review*.

PATRICIA COVE is an English Instructor at Dalhousie University, Canada, and the author of *Italian Politics and Nineteenth-Century British Literature and Culture* (2019), which she completed as a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Postdoctoral Fellow. Her research appears in *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts*, *Victorian Literature and Culture*,

Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net, *Gothic Studies* and *European Romantic Review*. She is currently researching internationalism, citizenship and nineteenth-century poetry.

JESSICA COX is a Reader in English Literature at Brunel University London. She is the author of *Neo-Victorianism and Sensation Fiction* (2019) and *Victorian Sensation Fiction* (Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism, 2019), as well as numerous chapters and articles on Victorian popular literature, including several on Wilkie Collins. Her current research focuses on maternity in nineteenth-century Britain.

CATHERINE DELAFIELD is the author of *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel* (2009) and *Serialization and the Novel in Mid-Victorian Magazines* (2015). She has published articles on Collins's serialisations of *The Law and the Lady* and *Armadale*, as well as the serial writing of Elizabeth Gaskell and Dinah Craik, and on women's personal writings. Following on from the publication of *Women's Letters as Life Writing, 1840–1885* (2020), her biography of Jane Austen (2023) appears in Wiley Blackwell's 'Life of the Author' series.

TIM DOLIN is Professor Emeritus, Literary Studies at Curtin University, Australia. He is General Editor (with Christine Alexander) of the Cambridge Edition of the Novels and Poems of the Brontës, and a member of the editorial board of the Cambridge Edition of the Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy, for which he edited *The Return of the Native* (2021). He has written books on Hardy and George Eliot, as well as essays and chapters on other nineteenth-century novelists including Wilkie Collins, Charles Dickens, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Gaskell.

LUCY DOUGAN is a widely published and award-winning Australian poet, and an independent literary studies academic. She is co-author with Tim Dolin of 'Fatal Newness: *Basil*, Art, and the Origins of Sensation Fiction' (2004). Her poetry collections include *White Clay* (2007) and *The Guardians* (2015). She is also co-editor of the *Collected Poems of Fay Zwicky* (2017). Her research interests and publications include work on women's writing, and particularly on women's poetry. Her own poetry has been the recipient of the Mary Gilmore Award, the Alec Bolton Award and the Western Australian Premier's Award for poetry (2016).

MARK FROST is Principal Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Portsmouth and specialises in literature, culture and environment in the nineteenth century. His first monograph, *The Lost Companions and*

John Ruskin's Guild of St George: A Revisionary History (2014), will be followed by *Pastoral in Early Victorian Fiction: Environment and Modernity* (forthcoming). He is currently working on *Environments and Ecology in the Long Nineteenth Century*, a four-volume anthology (2022–4), and he has edited a new edition of Richard Jefferies's *After London* (2017). Trees are his favourite organisms.

ANDREW GASSON is the author of *Wilkie Collins: An Illustrated Guide* (1998), co-editor of *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins: The Collected Letters* (2005), of the Collins volume, with William Baker, of *Lives of Victorian Literary Figures* (2007) and, with Caroline Radcliffe, the first modern publication of Collins's dramas *The Lighthouse* and *The Red Vial* (both 2013). He has also contributed numerous other bibliographical and biographical essays on Collins. He is co-founder and Chairman of the Wilkie Collins Society and is currently working on a bibliography of Collins. He has been a collector of Collins books and related ephemera for over forty years.

JAMES AARON GREEN is an APART-GSK Postdoctoral Research Fellow at the University of Vienna, Austria, funded by the Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften (ÖAW). He specialises in the intersections of nineteenth-century popular fiction and science, and holds additional interests in game studies. His work in these areas has been published in *Gothic Studies*, *Victorian Network* and the *Journal of Victorian Culture*. His first monograph, *Sensation Fiction and Modernity*, is forthcoming with Palgrave Macmillan.

SUSAN R. HANES retired from the library profession after a diverse career in academic, public and special libraries. She is a writer, photographer and independent scholar and has published a range of material on Wilkie Collins, including *Wilkie Collins's American Tour, 1873–4* (2008) for the Pickering & Chatto 'History of the Book' series; 'The Persistent Phantom: Wilkie Collins and Dorothy L. Sayers', *Wilkie Collins Society Journal* (2000); and 'In Search of Wilkie Collins', *Book Magazine* (1999). Her book, *Hearts: Timeless, Universal, Transcendent* (2013, 2020) features her photographic images from around the world.

MELISA KLIMASZEWSKI is Professor of English and Director of Women's and Gender Studies at Drake University, Iowa, where in addition to Victorian studies she specialises in South African literature and critical race studies. She has authored brief biographies of Wilkie Collins and Charles Dickens for Hesperus Press and has edited nine of Dickens's collaborative works for publication. Her most recent book, *Collaborative*

Dickens (2019), examines all eighteen of Dickens's collaborative Christmas numbers in their entirety and argues for a conversational model of collaboration. She is currently researching representations of multiracial characters in Victorian literature.

GRAHAM LAW is Professor in Media History at Waseda University, Tokyo. His books include *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press* (2000) and (with Andrew Maunder) *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life* (2008). With William Baker, Paul Lewis and Andrew Gasson, he is an editor of the letters of Wilkie Collins. He is currently working on a monograph analysing the nineteenth-century British media system under the title *The Periodical Revolution* and, with Jenny Bourne Taylor, an edition of the journalistic writings of E. S. Dallas.

PAUL LEWIS is one of the editors of *The Collected Letters of Wilkie Collins* (InteLex, 2019) and *The Public Face of Wilkie Collins* (2005) and a contributor to *The Dickensian* and other journals. He is an award-winning financial journalist and uses his skills to keep the database of the more than 3,350 known letters of Wilkie Collins up to date and to analyse Collins's finances. He has been a student of Wilkie Collins and a collector of his work for twenty-five years and is secretary of the Wilkie Collins Society. He has degrees from Stirling University and honorary doctorates from the University of Essex and the University of Chester.

TARA MACDONALD is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of English at the University of Idaho. She is the author of *The New Man, Masculinity, and Marriage in the Victorian Novel* (2015) and co-editor of *Rediscovering Victorian Women Sensation Writers: Beyond Braddon* (2014). She is completing a book on Victorian sensation fiction and historical theories of affect and has published widely on Victorian and neo-Victorian fiction.

RICHARD NEMESVARI is Professor of English and former Dean of Arts at Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada. He has published on sensation fiction as a genre and on the works of Thomas Hardy, Wilkie Collins, Mary Elizabeth Braddon and the Brontës. His monograph *Thomas Hardy, Sensationalism, and the Melodramatic Mode* was published by Palgrave Macmillan (2011), and he is currently General Editor of the Cambridge Edition of the Novels and Stories of Thomas Hardy. His scholarly edition of Hardy's *Desperate Remedies* was published in that series in 2019, and a second edition of his text of *Jane Eyre* for Broadview Press was published in 2022.

LEONEE ORMOND is Professor Emerita of Victorian Studies at King's College London. A number of her publications are concerned with those who were both writers and artists, and with book illustration. Her first book was a biography of George du Maurier, the *Punch* cartoonist and novelist, and more recently she has written on another cartoonist, Edward Linley Sambourne.

CHRISTOPHER PITTARD is Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Portsmouth. He has published widely on Victorian popular culture in journals including *Victorian Periodicals Review*, *Studies in the Novel*, *Women: A Cultural Review*, *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, and *Clues: A Journal of Detection*. His books include *Purity and Contamination in Late Victorian Detective Fiction* (2011), *The Cambridge Companion to Sherlock Holmes* (co-edited with Janice M. Allan, 2019), a critical edition of *The Return of Sherlock Holmes* (Oxford University Press, 2023) and the forthcoming *Literary Illusions: Performance Magic and Victorian Literature*.

CAROLINE RADCLIFFE is a Reader in Drama and Performance at the University of Birmingham. She has published widely on nineteenth-century drama and popular performance. Her scholarly editions of Wilkie Collins's dramas, *The Lighthouse* and *The Red Vial* (both co-edited with Andrew Gasson), are the first printed editions of these early plays. She is also a performer and her multimedia performance installation, *The Machinery*, uses a nineteenth-century dance form to examine the human relationship between labour and creativity. *The Machinery* has toured widely, exhibited in heritage sites, festivals and galleries, and has also featured on British TV and radio.

MELISSA RAINES is a Senior Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Liverpool. Her monograph *George Eliot's Grammar of Being* (2011) is a study of Eliot's manuscripts, syntax and writing process. She has also published on Anthony Trollope and Thomas Hardy, as well as on representations of psychopathy in crime fiction in adaptation. She is currently working on projects involving murder in the Victorian novel and trauma in contemporary horror films.

BIWU SHANG is Professor of English at Shanghai Jiao Tong University and editor-in-chief of the De Gruyter journal *Frontiers of Narrative Studies*. His research interests include contemporary fiction, narratology and ethical literary criticism. He is the author of *In Pursuit of Narrative Dynamics* (2011), *Contemporary Western Narratology: Postclassical*

Notes on Contributors

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Perspectives (2013), *Unnatural Narrative across Borders: Transnational and Comparative Perspectives* (2019) and *Ian McEwan* (2022). His work has appeared in *Comparative Literature Studies*, *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction*, *Partial Answers*, *Neohelicon*, *Journal of Literary Semantics*, *Semiotica* and *Arcadia*, among other journals.

JEANETTE ROBERTS SHUMAKER is a Professor of English at San Diego State University, Imperial Valley, located five blocks from the Mexican border. She has published on Victorian novelists, modern Irish women writers and nineteenth- and twentieth-century Jewish writers from the UK. Currently she is writing a book on British and Irish novels set in Venice.

LAURENCE TALAIRACH is Professor of English Literature at the University of Toulouse-Jean Jaurès and associate researcher at the Centre Alexandre Koyré for the history of science and technology. Her research interests cover medicine, life sciences and English literature in the long nineteenth century. She is the author of five monographs, including *Gothic Remains: Corpses, Terror and Anatomical Culture, 1764–1897* (2019) and *Wilkie Collins, Medicine and the Gothic* (2009). She has also edited two novels by Mary Elizabeth Braddon: *Thou Art the Man* [1894] (2008) and *Dead Love Has Chains* [1907] (2014), as well as several collections of articles on the popularisation of science in the nineteenth century.

JENNY BOURNE TAYLOR is Professor Emerita of English at the University of Sussex. Her publications include *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (1988, 2018) and, as editor, *The Cambridge Companion to Wilkie Collins* (2006) and *The Oxford History of the Novel in English*, Vol. III: 1820–1880 (2012, with John Kucich). With Graham Law, she is currently editing a collection of E. S. Dallas's journalism and criticism in *The Times*.

HEATHER TILLEY held a lectureship in Victorian Literature at Queen Mary University of London and has been a British Academy Postdoctoral Fellow at Birkbeck, University of London. She has also worked in the gallery sector in various curatorial roles, including at the National Portrait Gallery. Her research explores the representation of embodied experience and disability in nineteenth-century literature and visual and material culture, and has focused extensively on the history of visual disability. Her book *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing* was published in 2017, and her work has appeared in journals including the *Journal of Victorian Culture*, *Disability Studies Quarterly* and the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*.

TAMARA S. WAGNER is Associate Professor at Nanyang Technological University, Singapore. Her books include *The Victorian Baby in Print: Infancy, Infant Care, and Nineteenth-Century Popular Culture* (2020), *Victorian Narratives of Failed Emigration: Settlers, Returnees, and Nineteenth-Century Literature in English* (2016), *Financial Speculation in Victorian Fiction* (2010) and *Longing: Narratives of Nostalgia in the British Novel, 1740–1890* (2004). She has also edited the collections *Domestic Fiction in Colonial Australia and New Zealand* (2014), *Victorian Settler Narratives* (2011) and *Antifeminism and the Victorian Novel: Rereading Nineteenth-Century Women Writers* (2009). Her research has appeared in several academic journals and collections of essays.

ALEXIS WEEDON is Professor of Publishing Studies at the University of Bedfordshire. She is author of *The Origins of Transmedia Storytelling in Early Twentieth Century Adaptation* (2021) and *Victorian Publishing: The Economics of Book Production for a Mass Market, 1836–1916* (2003), and co-author of *Elinor Glyn as Novelist, Moviemaker, Glamour Icon and Businesswoman* (2014). She has collaboratively edited books on a range of cultural and new media subjects, including *Fiction and ‘The Woman Question’ from 1850 to 1930* (2020), *Developing a Sense of Place* (2020), *Retelling Cinderella: Cultural and Creative Transformations* (2020) and *The History of the Book in the West, 1800–1914* (2010), as well as the journal *Convergence* (1993–2016).

DEBORAH WYNNE is Professor of Nineteenth-Century Literature at the University of Chester. Her publications include *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (2001), *Women and Personal Property in the Victorian Novel* (2010), *Charlotte Brontë: Legacies and Afterlives* (2017, co-edited with Amber Regis), and *Victorian Manufactured Things* (2022, co-edited with Louisa Yates).

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

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. William

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

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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*]

- 1840**
 Family moves to 85 Oxford Terrace,
 Bayswater
- 1841**
 January
 Leaves Cole's school; apprenticed to Antrobus
 & Co., tea merchants
 [Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, *Barnaby
 Rudge*]
- 1842**
 June–July
 Visits Scotland with his father
- 1843**
 July
 Family moves to 1 Davenport Street, Hyde
 Park Gardens
- August
 'Volpurno; or, The Student' published in *The
 Albion* (first signed publication)
 'The Last Stage Coachman' published in *The
 Illuminated Magazine*
 [Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*]
- 1844**
 Visits France with Charles Ward
- 1845**
 January
 Finishes *Ioláni; or, Tahiti as it Was*; rejected by
 Longman and Chapman & Hall
- September–October
 Visits Paris alone
- 1846**
 April
 Begins writing *Antonina; or, The Fall of Rome*
 18 May
 Enters Lincoln's Inn
 July
 Visits Belgium with Charles Ward
- 1847**
 17 February
 Death of William Collins; Collins begins
 writing his father's memoir
- August
 To France again with Charles Ward
 [Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*; Emily Brontë,
Wuthering Heights; Anne Brontë, *Agnes Grey*]

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*Chronology***1848**

Autumn

Family moves to 38 Blandford Square,
 Marylebone

November

Memoirs of the Life of William Collins
 published by Longman (Collins's first
 published book)
 [Dickens, *Dombey and Son*; Thackeray, *Vanity
 Fair*; Gaskell, *Mary Barton*; Kingsley, *Yeast*]

1849

19 June

Amateur production of Goldsmith's *The Good
 Natur'd Man* at Blandford Square

Summer

Exhibits *The Smuggler's Retreat* at Royal
 Academy
 [Charlotte Brontë, *Shirley*]

1850

26 February

Charity performance of *A Court Duel* at the
 Soho Theatre

28 February

Antonina published by Bentley (Collins's first
 published novel)

July–August

Walking tour of Cornwall with Henry
 Brandling

August

Family moves to 17 Hanover Terrace,
 Regent's Park
 [Dickens, *David Copperfield*; Thackeray,
Pendennis]

1851

30 January

Rambles Beyond Railways published by Bentley

March

'The Twin Sisters' published in *Bentley's
 Miscellany*

12 March

Meets Dickens for the first time at the house
 of John Forster

16 March

Acts with Dickens in Bulwer-Lytton's *Not so
 Bad as We Seem, or, Many Sides to a Character*

27 September

'A Plea for Sunday Reform' published in *The
 Leader*

21 November

Called to the Bar

23 December

Christmas book *Mr Wray's Cash-Box*
 published by Bentley

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1852

24 April

‘The Traveller’s Story of a Terribly Strange Bed’ published in *Household Words*

August

‘Nine O’Clock’ published in *Bentley’s Magazine*

September

Stays with Dickens in Dover

16 November

Basil: A Story of Modern Life published by Bentley

December

‘A Passage in the Life of Mr Perugino Potts’ published in *Bentley’s Miscellany***1853**

July–September

Stays with Dickens in Boulogne

October–December

Tours Switzerland and Italy with Dickens and Augustus Egg
[Dickens, *Bleak House*; Gaskell, *Ruth*]**1854**

6 June

Hide and Seek published by Bentley

December

‘The Lawyer’s Story of a Stolen Letter’ published in *The Seven Poor Travellers*, Christmas number of *Household Words*
[Dickens, *Hard Times*]**1855**

11–21 February

Illness during trip to Paris with Dickens

16 June

The Lighthouse performed at Dickens’s home, Tavistock House

July–September

Stays with Dickens at Folkestone

September

Sails with Edward Pigott to the Scilly Isles

November–December

‘The Monktons of Wincot Abbey’ published in *Fraser’s Magazine*

22 December

‘The Cruise of the *Tomtit*’ published in *Household Words*[Gaskell, *North and South*; Thackeray, *The Newcomes*; Trollope, *The Warden*]**1856**

February

Begins to sign himself ‘Wilkie Collins’
After Dark published by Smith, Elder (first collection of stories)

February–April

Visits Paris with Dickens

March

A Rogue’s Life serialised in *Household Words* (first serialised novel)

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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 <i>Household Words</i>
October	Joins permanent staff of <i>Household Words</i>
1857	
3 January	<i>The Dead Secret</i> begins in <i>Household Words</i>
6 January	<i>The Frozen Deep</i> performed at Tavistock House
24 January	<i>The Dead Secret</i> begins in <i>Harper’s Weekly</i> (first authorised American serialisation)
June	<i>The Dead Secret</i> published by Bradbury & Evans
10 August	<i>The Lighthouse</i> produced at Royal Olympic Theatre (first professional production)
21 August	<i>The Frozen Deep</i> produced in Manchester
7 September	Leaves with Dickens for a walking tour in Cumberland
3–31 October	<i>The Lazy Tour of Two Idle Apprentices</i> (with Dickens) published in <i>Household Words</i>
December	<i>The Perils of Certain English Prisoners</i> (with Dickens) published in Christmas number of <i>Household Words</i> [Dickens, <i>Little Dorrit</i> ; Hughes, <i>Tom Brown’s School Days</i>]
1858	
April	‘Who is the Thief?’ (‘The Biter Bit’) published in <i>The Atlantic Monthly</i>
June	Sailing trip to Wales
July–August	First visit to Broadstairs, Kent
25 August	‘The Unknown Public’ published in <i>Household Words</i>
September	Resigns from the Garrick Club in support of Edmund Yates
11 October	<i>The Red Vial</i> opens at the Olympic Theatre [Eliot, <i>Scenes of Clerical Life</i>]