WILKIE COLLINS'S LAST ROMANCE: THE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF EDITING HIS LETTERS

William Baker

The edition of the letters of Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) that I am co-editing with William M. Clarke, will shed light on the life and activities of one of the few remaining major Victorian creative personalities whose letters and papers remain uncollected and unpublished. Although Collins has been the subject of recent biographies, these works only quote brief extracts, usually less than a sentence, from the limited correspondence already available to biographers. One of the main reasons there has been no edition to this date is the reluctance of Collins's heirs to expose his unconventional lifestyle to public scrutiny. Collins had at least two common-law wives and the stigma of illegitimacy has haunted the resulting children and their descendants right up to the second half of the twentieth century. Now that permission has at last been given to examine and publish the correspondence, the edition will illuminate an extraordinarily rich and varied Victorian life. It will shed light on Victorian literature and publishing, music, art, and many other areas of intellectual, cultural and artistic endeavour. Information supplied by the letters will have ramifications for the historical study of psychology, medicine, drugs, the law, the status of women, and gender relationships.[1]

Many of Collins's letters are personal; others deal with business matters such as negotiations of contracts with publishers in Britain, America, Canada, the European Continent and the Antipodes. His business interests included concerns with copyright, the theatre, theatrical rights, the rights of authors, plans, printers, proofs, revisions to payments and other theatrical and publishing matters. A man of catholic interests and wide acquaintance, Collins corresponded with major literary figures of the day as well as with painters such as Holman Hunt, Millais and Landseer. He knew and corresponded with the actors Ellen Terry and Kate Field, and with other members of the urban and provincial theatrical communities in England, America and France. His business letters to publishers provide insight into contemporary issues relating to copyright, particularly as it applied between Britain and North America, the Continent, Australia and New Zealand. Of equal importance are Collins's letters to his mother. These not only demonstrate how emotionally close he was to his mother, they also provide insight into his own creative processes, and reveal how closely his novels, detective stories and plays often mirrored his real life experiences.

Amongst the collection are over forty letters Collins wrote to young Nannie Wynne and her mother, a correspondence that commenced in 1885 when Nannie was twelve and continued until Collins's death four years later. This particular set of letters provides some interesting revelations about Collins's private life, the nature of the

[1] As a trained lawyer, Collins was particularly intrigued by the legal abuse of incarcerating and dispossessing women on false charges of insanity.

letters themselves, and the period in which they were written. It gives glimpses of Collins's frankness and directness; his emotional and intellectual concerns; his "fantasy" life; the sheer complexity of the circumstances of his life and his relationships; the link between his health and his creativity; his dependence upon drugs; his dealings with women; his epistolary style. It also highlights some striking differences between the late 1880s and the late 1990s. For instance, would Collins be allowed to express today sentiments of love, romance and desire to a young girl and her mother, or would he be sued or imprisoned for goodness knows how much and, perhaps, driven to despair? The fact that the Nannie Wynne correspondence was held in private hands alerted us to the fact that many of Collins's letters were still in private and family hands, unlike, for instance, those of George Eliot or G.H. Lewes.

Many of the letters which have so far come to light from both private and institutional sources reveal Collins's constant preoccupations. Those to his mother are always revealing, particularly in relation to what they do not say. In spite of writing to her —and often at length—every week, sometimes almost every day until her death in 1867, Collins never dropped a hint of his complicated domestic arrangements. There is no mention of the two households he maintained; no mention of Caroline Graves who, according to Millais, Collins first encountered on a London night being chased by a "brute . . . with a poker in hand, threaten[ing] to dash her brains out" (278-79). Caroline, the inspiration for *The Woman in White*, and her daughter Elizabeth Harriet, were living with Collins by 1858. He was devoted to the young "Carrie," who became his much trusted secretary. It was fortunate he did not live to see the bleak and dismal ending to her marriage to Henry Bartley, a young solicitor to whom he had transferred his business after removing it from the capable hands of the reliable and trustworthy William Tindell—another correspondent of long standing. Bartley managed to squander away the funds and security Collins had so carefully and cautiously accumulated for his various dependents.

Nor did Collins's mother learn from her son's letters of Martha Rudd, one of eight children of a Norfolk shepherd, who met Collins when she was nineteen. By 1868 Martha was living with him (as Mrs Dawson) and later gave birth to two of his daughters and his son. However, Collins's mother certainly did know of others with whom he had corresponded for at least two decades, if not longer. These associations were numerous and included Charles Ward, an employee of Coutt's bank who acted as Collins's financial manager and whom Collins had known since his teens; Holman Hunt; Charles Dickens; and Edward Pigott, editor of the *Leader*, with whom Collins had studied law. Pigott became chief censor of plays and was a close friend of G.H. Lewes and other writers. Another correspondent worth remembering is Nina Lehmann, the daughter of Robert Chambers, author of the famous *Vestiges of Creation* and wife of Collins's friend Frederick Lehmann. Apart from their friendship with Collins, the Lehmanns numbered George Eliot, Lewes and Robert Browning among their close friends. It was to Nina as "Padronna" that Collins addressed many confessional letters, addressing her in the most affectionate, playful, and suggestive terms of endearment: "My dearest Padronna," "Two words, dearest Padronna," "Dearest Padronna," "Goodby

dear Padronna." He followed the illnesses and fortunes of her children as he followed those of his own.

There are other correspondents who emerge for a few years and then disappear; many of these belong to the last years of Collins's life. Amongst this group is the American actress Mary Anderson who inspired Mrs Humphrey Ward's first novel, *Miss Bretherton* (1884). Ward wrote the book after accompanying Henry James to the theatre to see Anderson perform in Oscar Wilde's *The Duchess of Padua* (1883). Another is the American actress Kate Field who captivated Collins, although his letters do not match those written to her by Anthony Trollope in terms of length, intensity or duration. Collins also wrote revealing letters to William Winter, the drama critic of the *New York Tribune*, whose *Old Friends: Being Literary Recollections of Other Days* (1909) is an eye-opener to students of the period. Other correspondents of this nature are Napoleon Sarony and Sebastian Benson Schlesinger. Sarony was a successful Canadian photographer based in New York who specialised in theatrical subjects; Collins, who was fascinated by photography and had his photograph taken at every possible opportunity, shared with him an interest in the possibilities of photography as an art form. Schlesinger, a German resident in Boston, a diplomat, insurance agent, and composer, was trusted by Collins on a personal and business level. Collins insured himself with Schlesinger and managed to persuade him to keep an eye on his godson Frank Ward, another correspondent.

The main concern of this article is to demonstrate the challenges presented in undertaking the edition of Collins's letters. I mentioned earlier the reluctance on the part of Collins family to acknowledge that they were his descendants. Within the last ten years this has changed, as has perhaps the status of Collins as a literary figure. Historically, Collins more than others has suffered through his association with Dickens. Although some of Collins's letters have been featured in the memoirs of his contemporaries or published in small selective collections, it is curious that no significant edition of has ever been produced. The same cannot be said of Dickens, George Eliot, Thackeray, Meredith, or Trollope, to mention just a few of his literary peers. In 1892 Georgina Hogarth edited the *Letters of Charles Dickens to Wilkie Collins*; a similar volume was also published in New York by Laurence Hutton. Collins had earlier assisted Hogarth to edit the third volume of *The Letters of Charles Dickens* (1880-1882). In the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first of the twentieth, various memoirs by actors and literary figures such as Kate Field and William Winter include lengthy and interesting letters by Collins. C.K. Hyder's article "Collins in America" (1940) contains long extracts from letters written by Collins during his stay in America during the winter of 1873-74.

A number of other publications containing Collins's letters are also worth mentioning. *Six Letters of Wilkie Collins . . . at Stanford University Library* appeared in a limited edition in 1957. This volume was intended to show off the diversity of Special Collection holdings and the volume contains reproductions of the six letters with transcripts. The letters, dating from the years 1875, 1878, 1884 and 1886, belong to the period of Collins's maturity which many critics would argue marks the passage of his

peak as a writer of fiction. They "form a sort of vignette of the personality, preoccupations and temperament of Collins. . . . Three are business letters and clearly show Collins's keen ability in handling his own affairs." A long letter to Winter deals with Collins's gout, his poetic taste— "I delight in Byron and Scott—and, more extraordinary still . . . I am a frequent reader even of Crabbe!"—and comments on the American tour Ada Cavendish undertook with two of his plays. A short letter indicates Collins's continuing health problems and unfailing politeness to correspondents. A letter to Ally Sloper (Charles Henry Ross) illustrates the comic, playful Falstaffian Wilkie who is never far from the surface in much of his writing.

A different face is revealed in T.D. Clareson's "Wilkie Collins to Charles Reade: Some Unpublished Letters" (1967). Many of these are very personal letters written to a fellow artist who, like Collins, enjoyed a non-conventional lifestyle: Reade lived with Mrs Laura Seymour, the actress, and also held a position in Oxford. The comprehensive catalogue of the *Parrish Collection of Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade* (1940) contains extracts from the letters of both writers. Reade, who sunk into literary obscurity through the almost total neglect of literary commentators, is only now beginning to emerge from the shadows. Kenneth Robinson's *Wilkie Collins: A Biography* (1952), still regarded as excellent, contains extracts from Collins's letters; chiefly from those to Nina and Frederick Lehmann, to Charles Ward, and to A.P. Watt, the literary agent who handled Collins's literary affairs in the last decade of his life. These extracts give a taste, a flavour of how interesting, and how revealing, Collins's letters can be.

Why, then, given these publication of the letters in part, has no larger collected edition been published? The problem of copyright clearance has been the overriding reason. Also significant is that, unlike the correspondence of many other Victorian personalities such as Dickens, George Eliot and Trollope, there had been no earlier work done substantial enough to provide a base on which to build the edition. There was, in fact, relatively little knowledge about the specifics of the Wilkie Collins's correspondence. In 1975 at the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, W.R. Coleman completed a dissertation which transcribed with notes 262 original letters or copies of letters. Coleman's introduction "discusses such matters as the relation of Collins's health to his art, the author's friends and associates, the novelist's aesthetic pronouncements, his difficulties with publishers, and the similarity of Collins's prose style in the novels and the letters" (1); of particular interest in Coleman's collection are the letters to the Ward and Lehmann families. Coleman's is a most helpful piece of scholarship, the only one to be produced in book form (albeit a dissertation) until today. In the late 1970s there was an attempt to prepare a full-scale edition of Collins's letters but problems experienced by the editors caused it to founder early in the 80s.

My own interest in Collins has its roots in my childhood and the Sunday evening BBC Home Service serial broadcasts in 1952; adaptations of *The Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* kept me eagerly awaiting the following Sunday's revelations. The tale which remained a special favourite was that of *No Name* with its narrative web of trickery, seduction, asylums, personal struggles, and rich comic characters. In the mid

1970s I discovered the manuscript of the novel. Among the many revelations, I found that Collins was frequently forced to cut richly evocative descriptive passages from the serial versions he published. I also noticed that differences existed between the printed texts of the serial version, the three decker novel, and the cheap one volume edition. The excitement and interest engendered by these discoveries reinforced what had been placed on a back burner for many years: my resolve to prepare an edition of Collins's letters. My progress, however, was still hindered by work, personal commitments, and the difficulties of securing copyright.

More recently a series of events sparked my interest again. In 1991 Catherine Peters published her seminal study of Collins, *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins*, in which she revealed the copyright owners and listed nineteen libraries holding his letters. From this source, my attention was drawn to the work of William M. Clarke, formerly financial editor of the *Times* (London), and former chairman of the Australia and New Zealand Merchant Bank. Drawing on family papers in his possession, Clarke had published a biography, *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* (1989); a slightly revised paperback version was published by Alan Sutton in 1996. Clarke's clever work of literary detection enumerates institutional holdings of Collins's letters, chiefly in America, and material in private hands in the United Kingdom. In 1991 I was consulted about a manuscript which appeared to be an unpublished novel by Wilkie Collins. The handwriting was verified and the provenance—directly from Collins—established as genuine. The manuscript turned out to be the novel *Ioláni* described in an Appendix to the 1993 revised edition of Peters's biography. Ira Nadel is now preparing it for publication. This discovery prompted the question that if the *Ioláni* manuscript had been in the same hands since the early years of this century, what else may have be lying dormant in private hands?

A unique answer came in the form of the Nannie Wynne Letters auctioned by Sotheby's in 1989. These letters belong to Collins's last years and were written between 12 June 1885 and 8 February 1888. They were composed either from his home in Gloucester Place, or from Wimpole Street, where he lived with Caroline—her daughter Carrie having by this time married. Martha Rudd (Dawson) and Collins's three children were just around the corner in Taunton Place.[2] The households regularly spent seaside holidays together at Ramsgage, from where Collins also wrote to the barely twelve-years-old Nannie Wynne calling her "Mrs Wilkie," signing himself "your husband," and writing to her mother as his "mother-in-law."

Who were Nannie and her mother, how did Collins meet them, and where were their letters discovered? The letters were sold for 6,500 pounds at Sotheby's annual London Christmas sale of "English Literature and History" on 14 December 1989. Since the sale price had been estimated at between 8000 and 10,000 pounds, the letters were rather a bargain for the purchaser, a private collector who was the owner of an extensive collection of Collins's works, comprising editions in original cloth and variant bindings,

[2] In the mid-1880s Caroline was in her 50s—she was born in 1830; Martha was born 1845; his daughter Marion in 1869; Constance in 1871; and son William Charles in 1874. Incidentally, Marion and Constance both died in the same year, 1955; William Charles in 1913.

"Colonial" editions, foreign language editions, association items, photographs, ephemera, theatrical posters and a large collection of letters. Recently, having the opportunity to purchase an adjacent property, the collector has had the adjoining wall knocked down to make room for his growing collection of Collins paraphernalia. Indeed, unlike the collected letters and memorabilia of some of the great Victorian writers such as Trollope, George Eliot, Lewes, Tennyson, Thackeray, Fitzgerald, Carlyle and Dickens, many of Collins's letters and associated items (writing desk, chairs, and some furniture) still remain in private hands. Some of these owners are in fact Collins's descendants. Unlike the hesitancy of earlier years, they are now most cooperative, willing to share their unrivalled knowledge of Collins, his work, activities, and friendships. They also freely share their possessions, including his letters. *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins* prompted Sir John Lawrence to contact William Clarke in order to find out whether the letters owned by his wife were the other half of the Nannie Wynne correspondence—that is, those letters that Clarke's mother wrote to Collins as a twelve to fourteen-year old. Clarke reports that Sir John "first heard of his [Clarke's] mother's involvement when she found him reading *The Woman in White*: 'Did you know Wilkie Collins was very fond of me?' she asked him" (34). Shortly after contacting Clarke, Sir John put the "Nannie" letters up for auction with Sotheby's.

At the time he was writing to Nannie and her mother, Collins was taking a daily dosage of laudanum—enough apparently to kill a non-addict. In one letter he praises Mrs Wynne's and Nannie's fortitude when an earthquake strikes the Riviera and he offers tips on gambling at the Casino. He advises them that his holiday was spent "with my excellent friends Opium and Quinine" and he warns his "young wife" (Nannie) that she may soon be a widow: "Mrs Wilkie Collins if this weather goes on you will change your present position in life—you will be a widow. I don't object to your marrying again, but when you order your mourning cap I have to request that you will shorten those long floating streamers. I am steeped in devilish drugs—arsenic among them"(27 November 1885).

Collins's letters to Nannie and Mrs Wynne have much in common with his other letters. They share many of the same topics: the sheer wear and tear of writing and working to deadlines; an open admission about his addiction to opium and quinine; an awareness of the national, and often the international, political situation; a practical awareness of the ramifications of dealing with publishers and the publishing trade—the business of pursuing writing as a profession; the desire to avoid social duties and calls and the construction of elaborate reasons (many no doubt genuine) to escape them; an obsession with his health and his doctor, with the weather, and with eating. These letters demonstrate his talent for friendship and relationships with women of all ages—with mother as well as daughter in this particular instance. They also reveal the way Collins drew upon his correspondents for fictional material; like a drug, the necessity of writing letters is evidenced in both his compulsion to write *actual* letters and in his extensive use of letters in his novels (*Armadale*, for instance, consists of an exchange of letters).

While carrying on his correspondence with Nannie and her mother, Collins was in the process of writing *The Evil Genius*. He tells Nannie that: "My poor dear story

cannot be published before the autumn, because the public eye is fixed on Home Rule—General Election—and Civil War—and won't look, for the present, at any Evil Genius but Mr. Gladstone" (19 May 1885). In a letter to Nannie's mother he complains about the winter weather and the necessity of churning out a weekly instalment of his story. He is prostrated, "the cruel change in the weather has knocked me down most effectively. I get up to write the 'weekly part' of The Evil Genius which must be written—and then tumble down again, a heap of helpless mortality that sleeps badly, eats badly, and behaves badly as a correspondent" (19 December 1885).

Thematic, plot, and situational parallels are evident between the letters and the novel, which centers upon a couple who divorce and then remarry. Two women, a governess and a wife, are in conflict over the same man: "The governess was abused and abandoned as a child by her brutal mother. There is a child, Kitty, who loves both, who is grief stricken at being parted from her governess and who is the catalyst for the plot. There is a tiresome old grandmother." Collins's biographer, Peters, asserts that his letters to Nannie cannot really be said to "suggest that [Collins] had suddenly become a paedophile" (411). Collins, after all, had always been fascinated by women of all ages.

Collins had two daughters of his own, Marion and Constance, and he remained devoted to his beloved Carrie. In the spring of 1888 after she had lost her newly born youngest daughter, Collins, always it seems honest with Carrie, tried to console her in a letter:

> With my way of thinking, I cannot honestly suggest copies of "religious consolation." And no man, let him feel for you as he may—(and I have felt for you with all my heart)—is capable of understanding what a woman must suffer who is tried as you have been tried. The fate of that poor little child—after making such a gallant fight for its life—is something that I must not trust myself to write about. (14 March 1888)

Nannie was hardly a Rose La Touche. As Peters observes, Collins "never put any burden of responsibility for his happiness and well-being on her" (412). He does act as a surrogate father, and as I have shown, many of his preoccupations emerge in his letters to her. Ironically he spent his life apparently avoiding official marriage, yet had two families we know of, and dubbed the young Nannie "Mrs Collins," the "dearest and best of wives."

The editor of the collected correspondence of Wilkie Collins indeed faces a number of problems and challenges. The sheer bulk of the material available is itself overwhelming. The effect is of a deluge as they keep turning up all over the place—than 2,000 letters at Princeton alone and many more in all sorts of institutional holdings. The fact that not all letters to a particular correspondent are necessarily in the same location adds to the difficulty of the task. For example, Collins's letters to Richard Bentley and his son George extend from the late 1840s to the 1880s and are scattered in at least three

public and private holdings. (Richard Bentley published Collins's first novel *Antonina: or the Fall of Rome* in 1850.)

Collins's handwriting and the condition of many letters presents another problem. His writing was influenced by the climate and although he fortunately did not suffer from ataxia as Meredith did, he was increasingly obsessed by his gout. In short, his writing can be very difficult to read and sometimes it is not in his own hand: he employed Carrie and others as secretaries. Added to this, many of the letters are in poor condition with paper and ink rapidly deteriorating. As Collins grew older and sicker, the longer his letters became; sometime their sheer length can make the editor's task a daunting one. The truth of the matter is that Collins loved writing letters. Even when he claimed to be sick, too ill to produce his weekly serial portion or to meet his other commitments, he still wrote very long letters often saying just that—that he was too ill to write! Annotation, too, poses problems of its own. How to identify, for instance, the many and various correspondent to whom Collins wrote: the actresses, the school and university friends, and all the many others. And how to sketch in for the readers of the edition just what Collins left out, remembering that in his letters to his mother he never mentions either of his common-law wives.

On the positive side, preparing an edition of Collins's letters is greatly facilitated by the cooperation received from his descendants, from private owners, and from many libraries and fellow scholars such as Peters and others. Collins was a friendly and generous spirit—a spirit which seems to have percolated down to the present. Another bonus is that on the whole Collins dated his letters—a blessing that facilitates the establishment of a chronological framework. Also fortunate is the fact that Collins was a fluent letter writer. His letters are not scarred with the extensive crossings out and erasures so evident from his other manuscripts.

In the "Dedication" to *Poor Miss Finch: A Domestic Story* (1872) Collins tells his readers: "Perhaps, one of these days, I may be able to make use of some of the many interesting stories of events that have really happened, which have been placed in my hands by persons who could speak as witnesses to the truth of the narratives. Thus far I have not ventured to disturb the repose of these manuscripts." In daring to "disturb the repose" of Collins's letters in our forthcoming edition, we are sure that many revelations are at hand for our readers. These will demonstrate, amongst other things, that Collins was being ironic when he observed in his "Dedication" to *Poor Miss Finch* that the "true incidents are so 'far-fetched'; and the conduct of the real people is so 'grossly improbable!'" (Art of Literary Biography 54).

All quotations from unpublished Wilkie Collins letters are printed with the permission Faith Clarke (née Dawson), the great granddaughter of Wilkie Collins and Martha Rudd (Dawson). Thanks are also due to her husband, William M. Clarke and to Andrew Gasson and Kenneth Womack.

Works Cited

Clarke, William M. *The Secret Life of Wilkie Collins*. London: Sutton, 1996.

Clareson, T.D. "Wilkie Collins to Charles Reade: Some Unpublished Letters." *Victorian Essays: A Symposium*. Ed. W.D. Anderson and T. Clareson. Ohio: Kent State UP, 1967.

Coleman, W. R. Unpublished dissertation. U of Texas at Austin, 1975.

Collins, Wilkie. *The Evil Genius*. London: Chatto, 1886.

---. *Poor Miss Finch*. London: Chatto, 1875.

Hyder, C.K. "Collins in America." *University of Kansas Humanistic Studies* 6 (1940): 50-58.

Millais, John G. *Life and Letters of Sir John Everett Millais*. London: Methuen, 1895.

Parrish Collection of Wilkie Collins and Charles Reade. London: Constable, 1940.

Peters, Catherine. *The King of Inventors: A Life of Wilkie Collins*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.

---. "Secondary Lives: Biography in Context." *The Art of Literary Biography*. Ed. John Batchelor. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.

Six Letters of Wilkie Collins . . . at Stanford University Library. Wood: Special Collections Stanford U Libraries, 1957.

Robinson, Kenneth. *Wilkie Collins: A Biography*. London: Lane, 1952.

Winter William. *Old Friends: Being Literary Recollections of Other Days*. New York: Moffat, 1909.