

My Persistent Phantom

A life with Wilkie Collins

Susan R. Hanes

I have a confession to make. I have a relationship with a certain gentleman that has endured for more than 40 years and yet continues to captivate me even today.

Does it lessen the intrigue that the target of my obsession would now be over 190 years old? That he was short, bespectacled, and had a long, shaggy beard and unusually small hands and feet?

I have been fascinated by Wilkie Collins ever since the summer before my sophomore year in high school, when I picked up his novel *The Moonstone* as part of a summer reading assignment. I am not sure whether it was the title of the book or the author's name that first enticed me to choose it from my English teacher's suggested list, but I remember that once I started reading, I couldn't put it down. The story of the disappearance of the Moonstone, a fabulous diamond, was full of excitement and mystery, with a little love, revenge, and drug use sprinkled in, but it was the way the plot unfolded that was uniquely absorbing. The characters themselves told the story in a series of narratives, enabling the reader to become intimately engaged with them.

Wilkie and I didn't meet again until many years later, when I was having breakfast with a friend who happened to mention that she was thinking of reading *The Woman in White*. I remembered *that* book as the other famous novel that Wilkie wrote, and I made a mental note of it. As it turned out, my friend never got around to reading the book, but I did, finding an old copy with an intriguing cover at a used bookstore a few days later. Again, I was hooked, starting with the beguiling opening line: "This is the story of what a Woman's



Wilkie Collins, in Rudolph Lehman's portrait from 1880.

patience can endure, and what a Man's resolution can achieve." I couldn't stop. As each chapter pulled me into the next one, I was caught in a web of rambling, dark houses with long, shadowy hallways; of swishing skirts and burning candles, of secret journals and hidden identities. And there was more: Wilkie's wit, his idiosyncratic, complex characters, and his intuitive pronouncements about humanity and its foibles. As I finished the book, I wondered about Wilkie Collins, this man with the unusual name who had, so many years after our first encounter, captivated me once again.

So I looked him up. I learned that Wilkie Collins had been one of the most popular and prolific British authors of the 19th century. I learned that he was the father of the detective

novel and the prime exponent of "sensation fiction," a mid-Victorian British literary genre focused on shocking subject matter like adultery and murder and set in familiar, domestic surroundings.

Wilkie was an associate of Charles Dickens, whom he first met when they performed in the comedy *Not So Bad as We Seem*, by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, in 1851. Although their earliest affiliation was through amateur theatricals, Dickens and Collins became close friends. They collaborated on Dickens's two literary periodicals, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. They traveled together, hiking in the Lake District of England and exploring the pleasures and excesses of Paris. They visited each other at home, particularly at Dickens's Gad's Hill Place, where they shared family holidays and critiqued each other's work. In fact, Wilkie's younger brother, Charles Collins, was married to Dickens's favorite daughter, Katey.

Wilkie wrote more than 30 novels, as well as numerous short stories, essays, and plays. His best-known novels, *The Moonstone* and *The Woman in White*, have never been out of print. He excelled in plot and character development, but above all he was a consummate storyteller. Many well-respected writers have been fans of Wilkie Collins, including Dorothy Sayers, Arthur Conan Doyle, and P.D. James. He has been described as "the most readable of all major English writers," and T.S. Eliot said of him, he had "the immense merit...of never being dull."

William Wilkie Collins was born on January 8, 1824, the eldest son of celebrated English landscape painter William Collins and Harriet Geddes Collins, herself a member of a noted family of artists. His godfather was the Scottish painter Sir David Wilkie, for whom he was named. Although he lived his entire life in the Marylebone area of London, Wilkie always enjoyed the seaside

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where he sought inspiration for his writing and relief from chronic physical ills in the sea air.

From the strict upbringing of his evangelical father and the rigid constraints of Victorian society, Wilkie developed a particularly rebellious spirit that was to remain with him throughout his life. As a young man, he did not share his father's dream that he become a lawyer. He wanted to write. Although he was warm and charming company (one woman wrote of him, "To sit next to Wilkie at dinner is to have a brilliant time of it"), he avoided society's demands and preferred an unconventional bohemian lifestyle.

He related an example of this inclination in Dickens's weekly literary magazine, *All the Year Round*, to which he was a regular contributor. He told of one hot summer night, when he rebelled against dressing for an evening party, instead putting on comfortable clothes and joining an admiring group of the working class peering in at the party through the windows. In Wilkie's words:

There they all were, all oozing away into silence and insensibility together, smothered in their heavy black coats and strangled in their stiff white cravats! There is a fourth place vacant, my place.... I see my own ghost sitting there: the appearance of that perspiring specter is too dreadful to be described. I shudder as I survey my own full-dressed apparition at the dinner table.... I turn away my face in terror, and look for comfort at my street companions, my worthy fellow-outcasts.

Wilkie never married, although he spent his adult life in long-term relationships with two women. The story of his mysterious meeting with Caroline Graves on a moonlit night reads like a parody of his own novels. She lived with him and posed as his "housekeeper," entertaining his guests and accompanying him on his writing expeditions. Some years later, Martha Rudd, a much younger woman, came into his life and eventually bore him three children. For the rest of his life, Wilkie supported two households, taking full responsibility for both.

His American friend, drama critic William Winter, wrote a wonderfully warm description of Wilkie. In his memoir, Winter recalls:

Wilkie was a great writer: as a storyteller, specifically, he stands alone—transcendent and incomparable: but his personality was even more interesting than his authorship. To be in his society was to be charmed, delighted, stimulated and refreshed. ... The hours that I passed in the company of Collins are remembered as among the happiest of my life. ... His humor was playful. His perception of character was intuitive and unerring. He manifested, at all times, a delicate consideration for other persons, and his sense of kindness was instantaneous and acute.



ABOVE Martha Rudd, mother of Collins's three children. BELOW Caroline Graves, who lived with Collins as his housekeeper.



I found the life of this enigmatic man, who lived on the outside of convention, as intriguing as any tale that came from his own pen. That he was born into a fine and loving family, yet never chose to marry the women he supported and cared for; that he remained a faithful friend and charming companion in spite of acute suffering and addiction to laudanum; that he wrote some of the best-loved fiction of his time, yet his books today are too often overlooked: all contributed to my fascination with



Reform Club, London.

Wilkie Collins.

In the fall of 1998, after months of planning, I made a pilgrimage with my husband, Houston, following Wilkie's footsteps within the London that he knew, and around the England that he loved. It was a magical journey for me.

As we explored the ghostly abbey near Whitby, where Wilkie hoped for a quiet place to write (and found instead a brass band that played under his hotel window every afternoon); or hunted along the foggy Yorkshire coast for Mulgrave Castle, the setting for *The Moonstone*; or climbed among the fells in the Lake District, where he hiked with Dickens (and sprained an ankle), I sensed Wilkie's presence. The climax of that trip was an evening with Wilkie's great-granddaughter Faith, to whom I had been introduced by letter through a professor friend of mine. The moment I met her, I felt as if time had been reordered, and that I was somehow meeting her great-grandfather as well.

Faith invited me to sit at Wilkie's desk. As I felt the soft writing leather and handled his well-used books, it was as if I were reaching across the decades toward my old friend.

Three months later, the tragedy of my life occurred, when I lost my husband in a senseless accident. In my sorrow, I wrote to Faith. Although we had only met once, that meeting was so full of meaning that I wanted to share my loss with her. She invited me to return to London. And so I did, again and again.

In the fall of 2000, I planned another Wilkie Collins journey, hiking through Corn-

wall with my son Chris. We retraced the tour that Wilkie made 150 years earlier with his artist friend Henry Brandling and recorded in his book, *Rambles Beyond Railways*. We climbed to the Cheesewring, which Wilkie described as the "wildest and most wondrous of all the wild and wondrous structures in the rock architecture of the scene." We were delighted to find mysterious St. Nectan's Kieve, which Wilkie bemoaned not being able to locate, although they heard the sound of the waterfall hidden in impenetrable forest growth. We hiked along the coastal path near Lizard to Kynance Cove, setting for the final dramatic scene of Wilkie's early novel *Basil*, which Wilkie described as the place at which the coast scenery arrives at its climax of grandeur.

Back in London, I introduced Chris to Faith, and he immediately sensed her connection to the past, as I had. My visits to London continued, each spring and again in the fall, and Faith, with her distinguished husband Bill, became an important part of my life.

After I remarried, I continued to return to London, often with my husband, George. We always arranged to see Faith and Bill. Each time, I had the same feeling that I was somehow connecting with friends on both sides of the looking glass.

In May 2004, we joined members of the Wilkie Collins and Thackeray societies for a formal dinner at London's venerable Reform Club. Faith and Bill and I had

been looking forward to the evening for months, when we would hear the Wilkie Collins Society Grand Patron, Baroness James of Holland Park, aka P.D. James, speak about Wilkie's influence on detective fiction. The evening was all we had hoped it would be. We arrived together to find the library filled with round dining tables with a long head table in the center. I was seated there, between Faith and Bill and across from Lady James. The portly and perspiring president of the Thackeray Society smacked the table with a wooden mallet for silence and asked the blessing in a slow, ponderous Latin. Dinner was elegant and beautifully presented. After dessert and coffee and chocolates, Lady James got up to speak. Afterward, she inscribed a copy of her book *The Murder Room* for me and I gave her a bound paper I had written about Wilkie and another detective

writer, Dorothy Sayers.

George and I returned to London in September of the same year, when we joined Faith and Bill for the opening night of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical version of Wilkie's *The Woman in White* at the Palace Theatre.

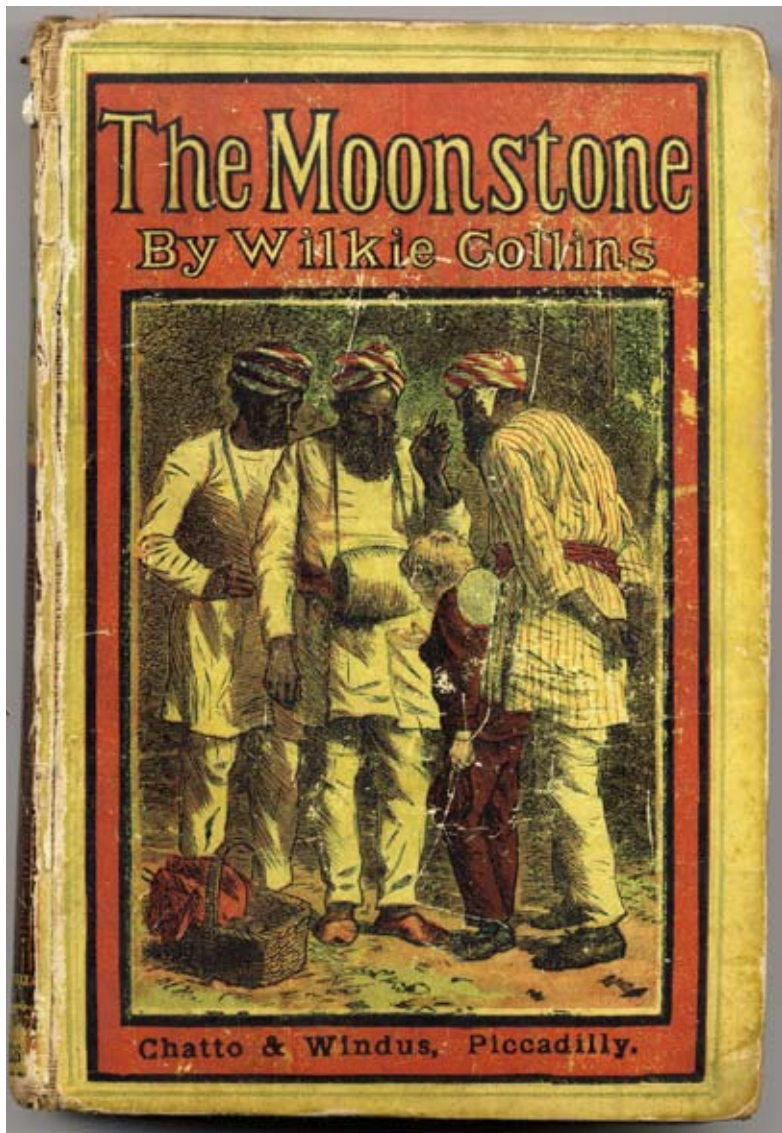
As the final curtain came down, Faith turned to me and said, "You know, the old man would have really loved all this." I thought so too.

Through the years, I read all of Wilkie's writings and most of what had been written about him. There was, however, one part of his life about which little was known. From September 1873 to March 1874, he toured the United States and Canada, hoping to replicate the success of Dickens, Thackeray, and others by reading his way across the continent. Dickens, who died in June 1870, had made two immensely profitable tours of North America in 1842 and 1867-68. In light of the extraordinary success of his own novels and plays in

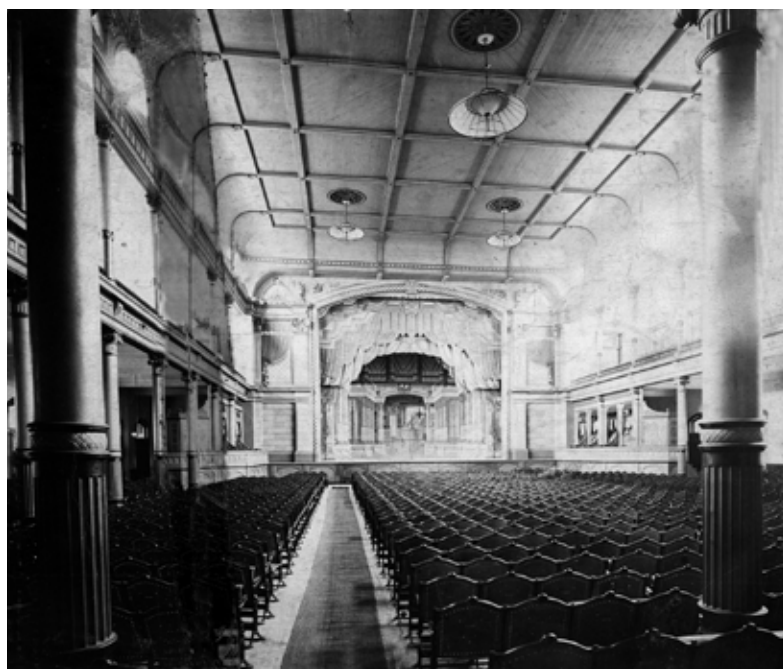
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Baroness James of Holland Park, aka P.D. James





The Buffalo Music Hall, where Wilkie spoke. Speaking to such a large hall with no sound amplification seems impossible by current expectation.



WILKIE COLLINS, from page 3

America, Wilkie believed that he, too, could make a good deal of money and enhance his reputation across the ocean; by this time he was acknowledged by many as the most popular living author writing in English.

I decided to try to recreate his itinerary and to discover how he felt about Americans and their response to him. My intention was to determine a sense of the America that Wilkie encountered, and in so doing contribute to an understanding of the challenges and successes of celebrities who came to America in the second half of the 19th century.

Little did I realize, however, that what started as a summer project would become a four-year passion, involving thousands of miles and thousands of hours and eventually culminating in my book *Wilkie Collins's American Tour*, published in 2008 in London.

My plan was to create a biographical narrative of Collins's tour by identifying possible "stops" on his trip and collecting contemporary periodical reviews that recorded his reception and the public response to his performances.

I soon realized that learning about the Dickens and Thackeray tours was made significantly easier by the work of assistants who meticulously recorded their activities. Dickens traveled with George Dolby, who carefully documented Dickens's time in America in *Dickens as I Knew Him* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1885), while Thackeray brought along Eyre Crowe, who, as an artist and personal assistant, detailed their trip in his book *With Thackeray in America* (London: Cassell and Company, 1893). Although Wilkie hired his godson Frank Ward to assist him for part of his own tour, no records from Ward have been found (and I have searched hard for them).

Published works about Wilkie's tour were confined to short articles or chapters based on known letters, in spite of the fact that he gained impressions from his visit that would influence his writing for the remainder of his life.

I began my project with an article entitled "Collins in America," written by Dr. Clyde Hyder of the University of Kansas in 1940. It was only two pages in length but nonetheless contained the most comprehensive research on the topic I could find. I also had the advantage of two recently published collections of Collins's letters. Using the dates and places provided by these sources, I made my first rough itinerary of Wilkie's American tour. The Hyder article cited reviews from newspapers in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago, so I knew that Collins had traveled to those places. The collections of letters also included items from Buffalo, Cleveland, and Sandusky, Ohio.

At that point, a little detective work was called for. Using contemporary railroad maps, I constructed possible routes that Wilkie might have taken. I determined where he could logically have traveled next, taking into consideration the train schedules for the period, the availability of suitable speaking venues, and the itinerary of Wilkie's friend and mentor, Charles Dickens. George and I packed up the car and headed east to follow my assumptions concerning Wilkie's travels. The sources I was seeking were not available online, nor for the most part were they indexed.

During a period of four years, we visited more than 85 insti-

tutions in over 45 cities. Our method was to drive to a possible location and visit the local historical society and the special collections of academic and public libraries.

We combed through boxes of letters and piles of journals, and scoured the small print of late 19th century newspapers. Cranking away on scratchy microfilm readers, we looked for any mention of our man during the logical period that he could have been in a particular location.

We discovered that it was easiest to look first for the announcement of a reading, for those were usually in larger print. The appearance of an announcement, however, did not necessarily mean that Wilkie had actually spoken at the time publicized. The proof could only be found by locating reviews appearing a day or so after the advertised readings.

As we connected the dots from one speaking engagement to another, I began to get a picture of his American experience. Once I settled on a particular date and place, I expanded my search to uncover letters, diary entries, or published articles that would shed more light on his appearance in a particular location: his reception, those he met, and other related activities. There were many “needle in a haystack” searches and lots of dead ends. The newspaper reports themselves were a jumble of contradictions. For example, a cross section of the newspapers I examined alternately described him as:

- ... a short, thick-necked man
- ... small in stature
- ... medium in height
- ... a rather tall man.

The papers variously stated that as a speaker:

- ... he read in a very clear and distinct manner
- ... [he had] a monotonous cockney accent
- ... he was distinctly audible
- ... his voice was too low for our great halls
- ... [he] succeeded better than was expected
- ... [he was] unquestionably a failure

But there were wonderful moments of serendipitous discovery that kept me going. For instance, at Brown University I found an exchange of letters between New York raconteur William Seaver and American statesman John Hay. Seaver writes, “My dear Hay, Come to me on the 22nd at the Union Club, at 12 and help thrust a swell breakfast down the throat of Wilkie Collins, That’s a good child.” Hay asks in reply, “Shall I bring a sausage stuffer or will you provide them?”

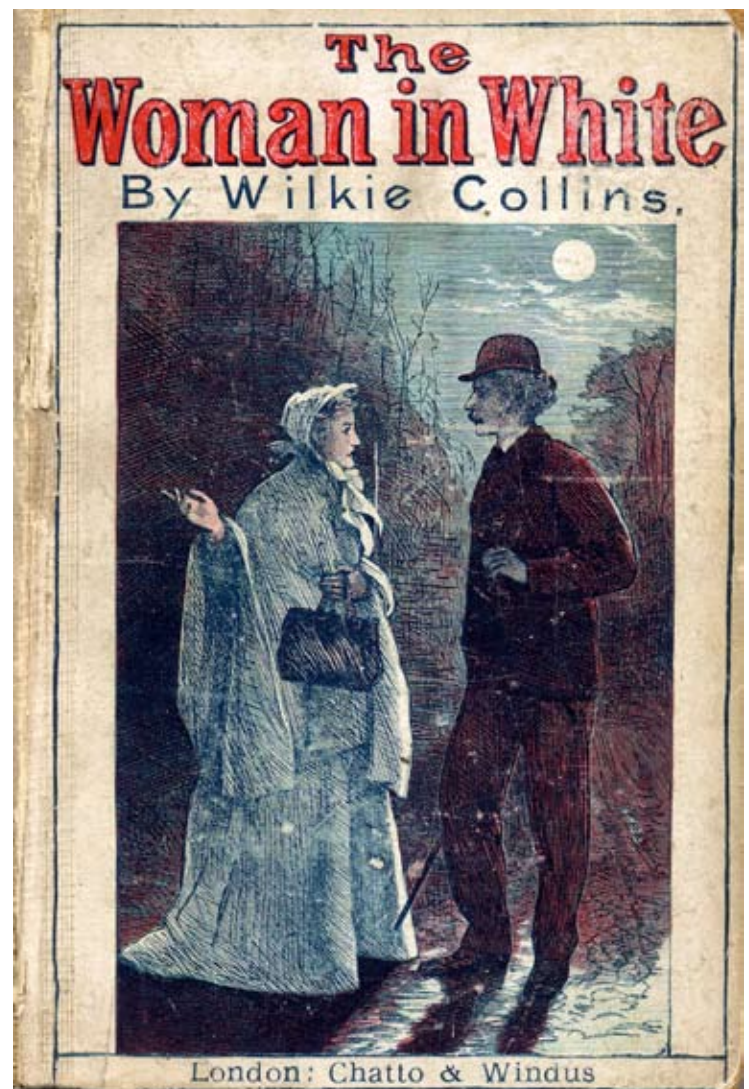
After learning that Wilkie had given a reading in Providence, Rhode Island, I found a letter in the archives at Swarthmore College, written by a young man named Chalkey Collins (no relation), who had attended the event with a small group from the local Quaker School. Chalkey writes later to his brother,

Some of the teachers and the seniors went down to hear Wilkie Collins lecture. He read from one of his novels ... which I suppose was very interesting to some but I did not think much of it: he read so low that I could not understand some of it. I don't think he did much honor to the name of Collins.

On another occasion, Wilkie was entertained at a grand affair at the venerable Century Club of New York. The guest list included some 60 or 70 writers, journalists, and artists including Thomas

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Painting of Collins at age 26 by John Everett Millais (1829-1896), a lifelong friend. Image courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery



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Nast, John Hay, and Bret Harte. The *New York World* reported that the festive good cheer and lively talk continued late into the evening. A sense of the merry atmosphere was evident by examination of a menu, now at the Morgan Library, that had been circulated for the purpose of collecting the autographs of this august group.

Wilkie started the menu around by signing his name, followed by the other guests. Eventually the menu came back to him and he signed it again, followed by several others who signed it again too.

I was eventually able to confirm 25 readings in 22 locations during the 154 days that Wilkie spent in North America. During his American tour, he used New York and Boston as bases from which he traveled to his readings. From these points of departure, he completed four major circuits, heading northwest to upstate New York, north to Canada, west to Chicago, and south to Washington, D.C.

On Thursday, September 25, 1873, Wilkie Collins stood on the deck of the *Algeria* as it steamed into New York harbor, thus beginning his American tour. He checked into the Westminster Hotel at Irving Place and was shown to his rooms, the same suite, with a private door and staircase, occupied by Charles Dickens six years earlier. According to reports, Wilkie was moved to tears to see his mentor's desk.

Two days after his arrival in New York, Wilkie was honored at a Saturday evening reception and dinner at the Lotos Club. In attendance were many of the city's most prominent men, including politicians, business leaders, writers, artists, and theatrical celebrities. The president of the Lotos introduced Collins, saying,

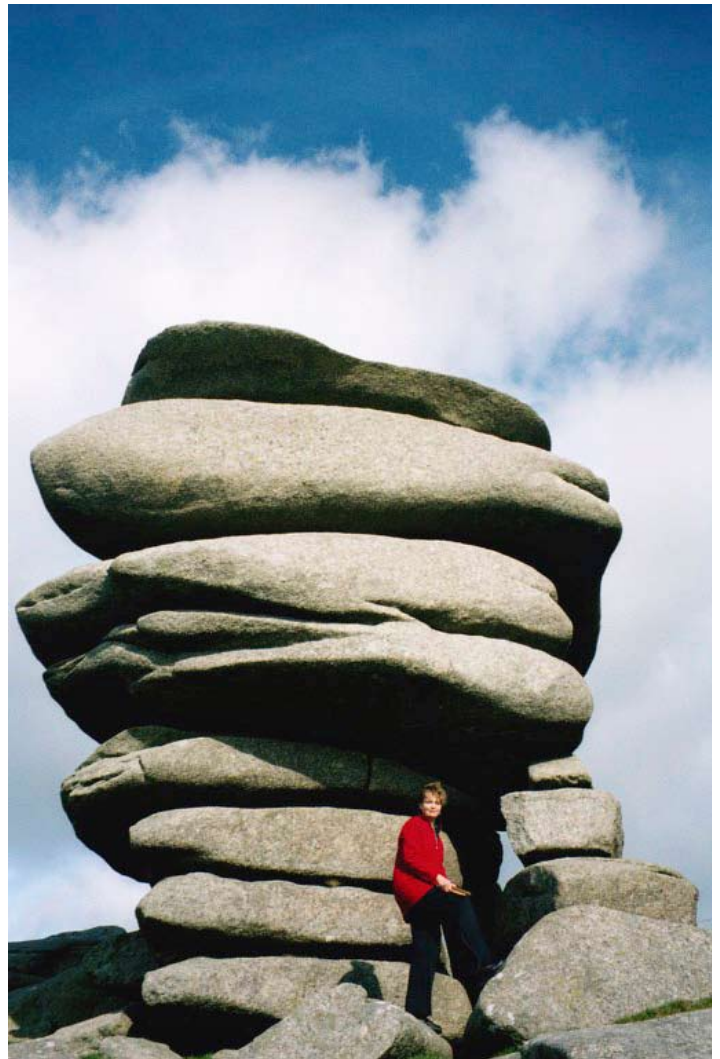
We have met tonight to greet a visitor from the other side, of whom nothing is unknown to us but his face. May he give us long and frequent opportunity for better acquaintance with him.

Wilkie came forward and was greeted with great enthusiasm. He spoke of his experiences with American hospitality and the kindness that he had received from the American people.

British actor Wybert Reeve, one of Wilkie's close friends, remembered the extent to which the author was hounded by reporters and interviewers during those early weeks in America. He related an incident that greatly amused Wilkie shortly after he arrived in New York. Reeve writes:

Before leaving England Collins found himself in want of a rough traveling suit of clothes, and driving though London he ... bought a cheap shoddy suit. The *New York Herald*, in a later description of Collins, gave an elaborate account of his person. He was wearing at the time the slop suit, and the description in the papers wound up with a statement that Mr. Collins was evidently a connoisseur of dress, having on one of those stylish West

Cheesewring in Cornwall as depicted by Henry Brandling; the author's visit to the site in October 2000.



End tailor's suits of a fashionable cut by which an Englishman of taste is known.

Wilkie's first American reading was in Albany, New York, on an October evening in 1873. According to the papers, he "tripped across the stage" to "hearty applause."

Before he began his reading, Wilkie remarked that the story, "The Dream Woman," had been revised and amplified for the purpose of his readings. He added,

In the hour and a half in which I shall have the honor of appearing before you this evening, you can judge for yourselves whether or not I have succeeded in making it entertaining.

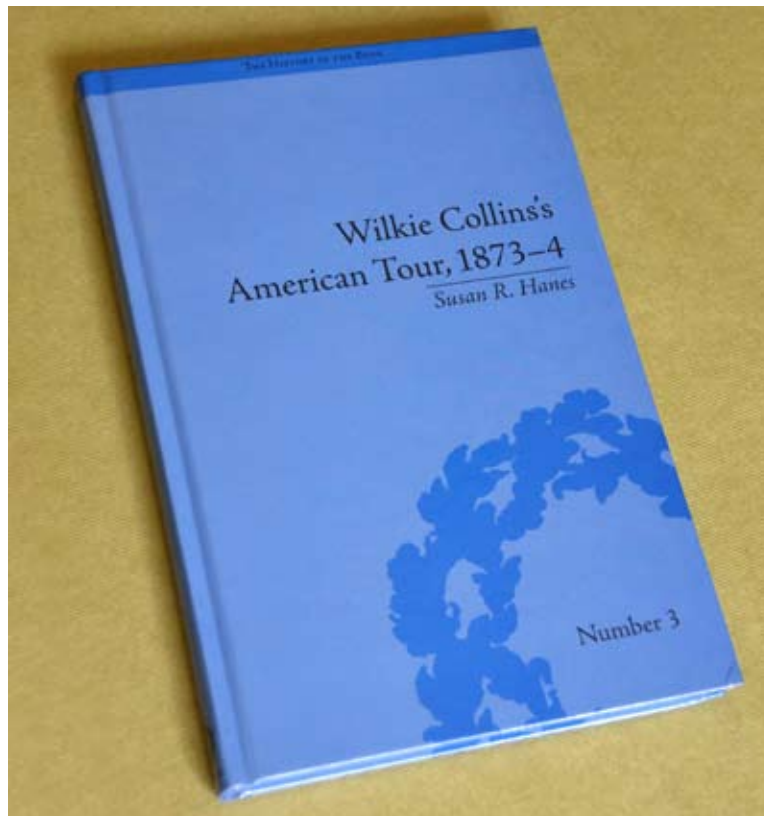
He then opened his manuscript and began his story. A newspaper review enthusiastically described the effect that the reading had on the audience, in spite of a "threatening fire" that broke out at a nearby machine shop. The article continued:

It would be impossible to bring together a better representation of the lovers of fine literature and more cultivated minds than greeted Mr. Collins. The mental quality of the audience and the power of the reader in holding the attention of his listeners was well shown by the perfect composure with which an alarm by the fire bells was taken—it seemed really to be considered only a minor impertinence and was not heeded.

The following day, the *Albany Argus* concluded, "If Mr. Collins meets with such appreciative listeners throughout the country as he has found in Albany, it will be no less a gratification to him than to us that he has come to America."

But that was not to be the case. A review of his presentation the following night in Troy concluded that as a reader, Collins was "no actor, and only the thrilling nature of the story redeemed his reading from dullness," because he was "far from being an elocutionist." There were similar reviews of his readings in Utica and Syracuse. The enthusiastic receptions that had preceded his earlier performances were replaced by more honest assessments. Although his skills as a novelist were never contested, on the stage he was no Dickens.

Responses to his readings were not Wilkie's only problem. Years later, he still recalled the



The author's book about Collins's American tour, published in 2008 by Pickering & Chatto.

discomforts of American rail travel and its effects on his constitution. He wrote:

I remember once, after two days' and a night's traveling, I was so utterly worn out that I asked the landlord of the hotel if he had any very dry champagne. He replied that he had. 'Then' I said, 'send a bottle up to my bedroom.' I drank the whole of it, and informed him that though it was only noon, I was going at once to bed, and that all visitors were to be told that I might possibly not get up for a week. I heard afterwards that after twenty-four hours some callers were allowed to come up and peep in at the door, which I had not locked; but all they saw was 'Mr. Collins still fast asleep.'

In December, he headed north to Canada where he read in Toronto and Montreal before appearing in Buffalo, New York. While in that city, he had the opportunity to write to an old friend about his views of the American people. Again he wrote:

No matter where I go, my reception in America is always the same. The prominent people in each place visit me, drive me out, dine me, and do all that they can to make me feel myself among friends. The enthusiasm and the kindness are really and truly beyond description. I should be the most ungrateful

man living if I had any other than the highest opinion of the American people. I find them to be the most enthusiastic, the most cordial, and the most sincere people I have ever met with in my life.

From Buffalo, Wilkie continued west along the southern shore of Lake Erie to Cleveland, arriving on January 8, his 50th birthday. He gave his reading from "The Dream Woman" at Case Hall. Built in 1867 and located until its 1916 demolition at 233 Superior Avenue on Public Square, the building boasted a magnificent lecture hall on the third floor that seated 2,000 in luxurious "patent opera chairs." Many popular lecturers of the day stopped there on their circuits, including Horace Greeley,

Henry Ward Beecher, and Mark Twain.

Wilkie gave readings in Sandusky, Toledo, Detroit, and finally, Chicago, where he arrived on the morning of January 16, 1874, after another grueling train journey.

He settled into the newly opened Sherman Hotel, located on the southwest corner of Randolph and Clark streets. Designed by prominent Chicago architect William Boyington, it was considered one of the finest hotels in the city, catering to public figures in the stock and agricultural trades. Wilkie had little time to recuperate from the trip, as his reading was scheduled for the evening of his arrival at the grand new Music Hall, located opposite the Sherman House on Clark Street.

One might think that the people of Chicago would be out in great numbers to see the man who was "widely known in the world of literature as a novelist of wonderful imagination." In fact, two of his plays, *Man and Wife* and *The New Magdalen* had had recent runs in the city. But for Wilkie's presentation of "The Dream Woman," the *Chicago Tribune* estimated that the hall's 1,700 seats were only about half filled, albeit with "an unusual number of local celebrities, the church being unusually well represented."

Among these was Robert Collyer, popular pastor of Unity Church and the first presi-

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dent of the Chicago Literary Club.

The *Tribune* mentioned that the hall was uncomfortably cold in spite of its new steam heating system, reporting “the calorific apparatus of the hall stupendously defective.” The *Chicago Evening Journal* suggested, “Perhaps the frigidity of the atmosphere had something to do with the rigidity of the audience.” The reviews were not complimentary. The *Journal’s* response, although unique in observation, was not unlike the others in tone:

But not withstanding the reader’s monotonous cockney accent ... and inability to change from his own tone to the imaginary ones of his characters, the reading was worth all it cost to anybody simply because it was done by one of the great masters of English fiction.

Apparently, the arduous journey to Chicago had caused Wilkie to reassess his travel plans. In Buffalo, early in January, he was still considering his western adventure, writing, “I am going ‘Out West’... and I *may* get as far as the Mormons.” At one point he had even considered continuing as far as the Pacific coast. He had cousins who lived in San Francisco, whom he had hoped to see. But after arriving in Chicago, Wilkie’s attitude seemed to change.

He wrote to his American publisher, Joseph Harper, “My plans are a little uncertain.” In a letter to Jane Bigelow, wife of American statesman John Bigelow, Wilkie complained,

I am not going further west, because I cannot endure the railway traveling. A night in a “sleeping car” destroys me for days afterwards.

Wilkie visited the Bigelows at their estate in Highland Falls, New York, having met the couple back in 1867 at a dinner party in London. In Jane, Wilkie sensed a sympathetic ear, and he shared with her his impressions of the brash new city that had emerged not only from a frontier settlement in less than 50 years, but from the ashes of the Great Fire two years earlier. Calling Chicago “this city of magnificent warehouses,” he continued to Jane,

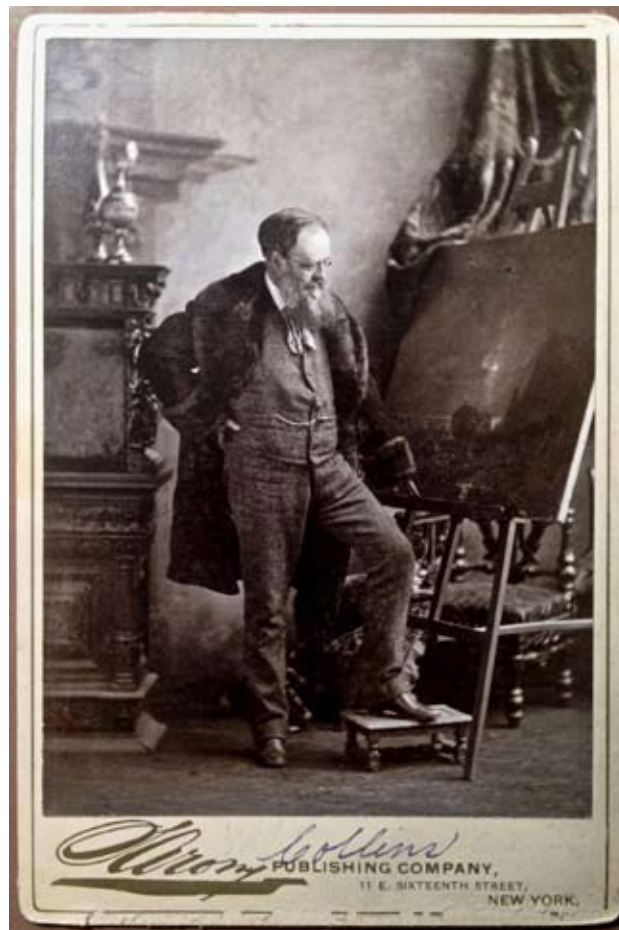
Don’t tell anybody—but the truth is I am not sorry to leave Chicago. The dull sameness of the great blocks of iron and brick overwhelms me. The whole city seems to be saying “See how rich I am after the fire, and what a tremendous business I do!” and everybody I meet



The author’s “shrine” to Collins.

uses the same form of greeting. “Two years ago, Mr. Collins, this place was a heap of ruins—are you not astonished when you see it now?” I am not a bit astonished. It is a mere question of raising money—the re-building follows as a matter of course.

Collins’s portrait by Napoleon Sarony, 1874.



This letter reflects a significant reversal of attitude. Shortly after the fire in 1871, Wilkie sent a check, valued at around \$700 today, to the Committee of the American Chicago Relief Fund, along with the following heartfelt message:

I beg to enclose a cheque, offered to your fund, as a trifling expression of my sympathy with the sufferers by the Fire of Chicago, and of my sincere admiration of the heroic spirit with which your countrymen have met the disaster that has befallen them.

Wilkie’s disaffection with Chicago was probably somewhat exacerbated by his travel and social schedule, as well as homesickness from his extended absence from England. (This conjecture might be supported by his third child, Charley, having been born almost nine months to the day after his return to London.)

Back in Boston, Wilkie was honored by “a select group of his most intimate friends” at a banquet at the St. James Hotel. Organized by Boston publisher William Gill, the remarkable assembly included Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, John Greenleaf Whittier, and Oliver Wendell Holmes, as well as Mark Twain and the Vice-President of the United States, Henry Wilson.

Oliver Wendell Holmes read a poem that he had written especially for the occasion. At the close of the evening, each guest was presented with a leather-covered bonbon box in the shape and size of the cabinet edition of Collins’s works, containing his photograph, his autograph, and as many of his important works as corresponded with the number of people at the reception.

Wilkie must still have been feeling euphoric the next morning when he wrote to a friend, “Such a banquet yesterday!” adding that the only detail the papers failed to mention was “a dove with a pen in her mouth—hanging from the chandelier.”

Was Wilkie’s American reading tour a success? Unfortunately, that question cannot be answered with an unqualified yes. Whether it met his expectations can never fully be known. His own descriptions of his public reception often contradicted the newspaper reviews. His written account that he “riveted” his Albany audience contrasted with a review questioning

his success as a speaker. A reviewer in New Bedford, Massachusetts, observed that Collins's powerless voice was lost to "the ill-mannered crowd" while later reporting that Wilkie was "delighted with his audience."

It is clear that his appearances drew crowds that came principally to see the great novelist rather than to listen to his readings. He was swarmed by countless admirers and met some of the most influential leaders in the United States. He was extravagantly entertained and gloriously fêted. He learned about the American character and earned the admiration and respect of everyone he met. He had the opportunity to witness the effect that his books had on a population that lionized him as the greatest living English novelist.

Perhaps Wilkie Collins best summarized his feelings for America in a letter written from the steamer *Parthia* as he sailed for home:

I leave you with a grateful heart—with recollections of American kindness and hospitality, which will be, as long as I live, among the happiest recollections to which I can look back.

My years following Wilkie Collins through his family, his writings, and his travels in England and America have given me a closer understanding of him as a man and as a literary figure. I have traveled with him on both sides of the ocean, and sensed his presence through the veil of time.

As I have gotten to know him, I have discovered that our enchanted relationship has enriched my life by giving me a sense of my own place in history; by knowing Wilkie, I see my world in perspective, and it is a richer, warmer place because of him.

§§

We are saddened to note the passing of

Paul Ruxin '97,

who died on April 15.

Remembrances will be published in future issues.

A celebration of his life will take place at the Newberry Library on

Sunday, June 12.

For more information, and to indicate your intention to attend,

contact Jo Anne Moore at the Newberry Library by calling

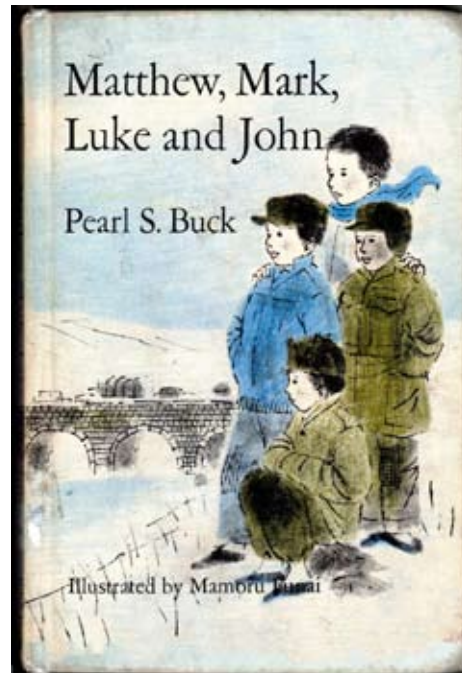
312-255-3556 or e-mailing moorej@newberry.org.

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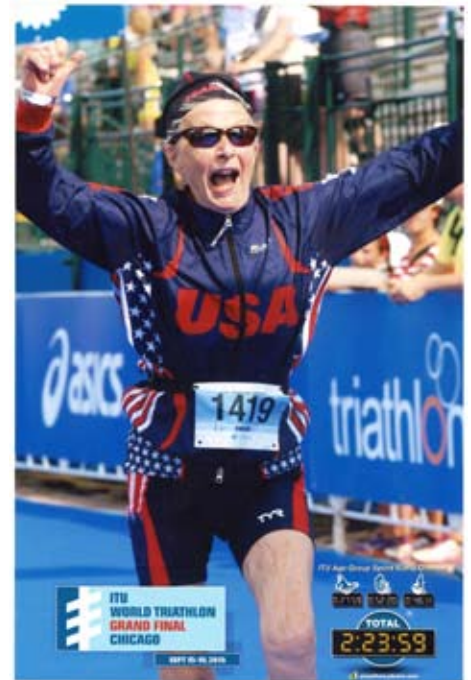
and John." She owns the manuscript original, the letter from *Good Housekeeping* asking her to change the ending, and the revised version of the story. *Good Housekeeping* felt that a story about four boys living in poverty under a bridge in Pusan, Korea, abandoned by their American servicemen fathers and their Korean mothers would be a book that adults would read also. Having an America soldier adopt all four might be accepted by children but not by adults. Buck's 300 page FBI dossier contains a full transcript of this children's story, probably because it reflected criticism of U.S. military policy.

At age 78 Sinson shook off cultural warnings against female athletes and did an indoor triathlon at her health club, beating a 35-year-old woman. "The floodgates were opened!" she said. For the next seven years she graduated to the outdoors and won 15 out of 16 triathlons, including the Senior Olympics twice and Team USA world championships in Edmonton and Chicago.

"I've gradually gotten better," she explained. "I learned the importance of having a competitive bicycle, shoes that lock into my pedals and how to partially deal with hypothermia



"Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John"; a finish-line photo of Dorothy from a 2015 Chicago triathlon.



via a wet suit." That rules out the English Channel and some other foreign venues but not a race coming up later this year in Cozumel.

Sinson has a closing message: "Erma Bombeck once said, 'When I get to see my

maker someday, I hope I'm going to say: 'I don't have any talents....I used everything you gave me.' I think that's what's intended in our lives."

§§

Book- and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

Compiled by Lisa Pevtzow

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-443-3600: **"Of What Use Are These Old Antiquated Things?: Antiquaries of England"** (features 17th- through 19th-century publications celebrating ancient relics, artifacts, architecture, and costume), Burnham Library, weekdays only, through July 18. **"Japan's Great Female Poets"** (artist interpretations of poems by Murasaki Shikibu and Ono no Komachi), Gallery 107, through June 19.

Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, 847-835-8202: **"Language of Flowers: Floral Art and Poetry"** (an assortment of little-sized books containing poetic floral lexicons), through August 7.

Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington Street, Chicago, 312-744-6630: **"Stand Up for Landmarks! Protests, Posters & Pictures"** (images, artifacts, and ephemera relating to saving Chicago landmarks), ongoing.

Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark Street, Chicago, 312-266-2077: **"Chicago Authored"** (works by writers that define the character of Chicago), ongoing.

DePaul Art Museum, 935 W. Fullerton, Chicago, 773-325-7506: **"Birds,"** (Tony Fitzpatrick draws and layers images, poetry, and found materials onto the page), through August 21.

Harold Washington Library Center, 400 S. State Street, Chicago, 312-747-4300: **"Called to the Challenge: The Legacy of Harold Washington"** (an overview of Washington's life and projects as mayor), Harold Washington Exhibit Hall, ninth floor, ongoing.

Newberry Library, 60 W. Walton Street, Chicago, 312-943-9090: **"The 30th Juried Exhibition of the Chicago Calligraphy Collective"** (annual juried exhibition of members' work includes artist's books and broadsides alongside three-dimensional works), through June 24.

Northwestern University Block Museum, 40 Arts Circle Drive, Evanston, 847-491-4000: **"Don't Throw Anything Out: Charlotte Moorman's Archive"** (papers of performance art pioneer and avant-garde impresario Charlotte Moorman), through July 17.

Pritzker Military Museum and Library, 104 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-374-9333: **"SEAL The Unspoken Sacrifice"** (features photographs from Stephanie Freid-Perenchio and Jennifer Walton's 2009 book and artifacts on loan from the Navy SEAL Museum), ongoing.

University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library Special Collections Research Center Exhibition Gallery, 1100 E. 57th Street, Chicago, 773-702-8705: **"Integrity of the Page: The Creative Process of Daniel Clowes"** (notes, outlines, narrative drafts, character sketches, draft layouts, and more from the noted cartoonist, graphic artist and scriptwriter), through June 17.

University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Rare Book & Manuscript Library, 346 Main Library, 1408 W. Gregory Drive, Urbana, 217-333-3777: **"Erasmus and the New Testament"** (the major works of the humanist-reformer's long career, including the two most important editions of his New Testament, from 1516 and 1519), through August 6.

Send your listings to Lisa Pevtzow at lisa.pevtzow@sbcglobal.net

Art Institute / Antiquaries

ILLUSTRATION FROM PIERRE D'HANCARVILLE'S COLLECTION OF ETRUSCAN, GREEK, AND ROMAN ANTIQUITIES FROM THE CABINET OF THE HONBLE. WM. HAMILTON (NAPLES: F. MORELLI, 1766).



DePaul Art Museum / Birds

TONY FITZPATRICK, PEREGRINE OF CHICAGO, 2014.
COLLECTION OF DR. MARGARET DICKERSON



University of Illinois / Erasmus

NEW TESTAMENT OF 1516



Caxtonians Collect: Dorothy Sinson

Interviewed by Robert McCamant

Our club has only one female member in her 80s who competes in triathlons. That would be the indefatigable Dorothy Sinson, who has been shepherding our luncheons (along with Bill Locke and later Doug Fitzgerald) since Ed Quattrocchi and Leonard Friedman gave it up. Who also has superintended many years of our annual fundraising auctions.... Not to mention looking after the video recording lunch and dinner meetings and dispensing DVDs to members and speakers.

"The Caxton luncheon has been especially rewarding. I really like meeting people and interacting with their stories. I am constantly reminded of the prestige of the Caxton Club. Prospective speakers may have scheduling or health issues but no one has just turned us down."

It all began in Oak Park, as we learned last month when I interviewed her husband, Junie. The two knew each other but did not become mutually interested till both went to Beloit College in Wisconsin. As a child Dorothy was mainly devoted to getting out of the house and running around the neighborhood. In four years of high school she rarely missed a day after school in the women's athletic department, where she did some sports but did not compete. Competition was considered dangerous for women, especially young women. Twice a year they were allowed "play days" with other schools but times and scores were never kept.

High school is when she began her lifelong love affair with biographies. "I needed help to develop as a person. I needed to read about real life experiences and I needed role models." Among the role models she fixated on was Pearl S. Buck, about whom more later.

In college she settled on teaching language arts to junior high school students for a career. She did it for seven years, until it was time to raise a family. "You couldn't be pregnant and stay a teacher," she explained. "It was out the door when you first began to show."

She more or less fell into her second career.

"My grandmother died at 98 and I inherited her old furniture, which I sold from my garage rather successfully." A light switched on in her head: this was a business that she could work at while being a mother! For 20 years she packed her children (and many times a friend and her children) into a van without back seats to head south and west in Illinois as far



as she could go before bedtime or the van had filled up with old furniture, whichever came first. "I sold by appointment to neighbors, friends, and local antique dealers, my specialty being old brass beds."

As huge flea markets became, popular, her sources began selling directly to the public, so she retired and went to real estate school, selling homes in Elmhurst for about 20 years.

"I knew it was time to retire when sitting in the prized position in my office [called the "up" desk], I found myself secretly praying that no one would walk in seeking real estate help."

Dorothy and Junie joined the Caxton Club in 2000. She accompanied him when he spoke to the Club about the Nobel Prize for Literature. President Kittle asked Junie, "What does your wife do?" He said, "She's a Pearl Buck scholar." Kittle then said, "Dorothy, you ought to join too." So she did. Bob Corner asked her to do an article on Pearl Buck which appeared

in the April 2001 *Caxtonian* under the title: "Pearl Buck: America's Most Influential 20th Century Woman". Dorothy will debate anyone: is it Pearl Buck or Eleanor Roosevelt? (whom she also reveres).

Dorothy has much of Buck's huge oeuvre, including 12 manuscripts, her favorite being a children's story: "Matthew, Mark, Luke

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Bookmarks...

Luncheon: Friday, June 10, Union League Club
999 – A History of Chicago in Ten Stories: Richard Fizdale on a Tale of Wealth, Greed, Power, Corruption, and Even Murder, and the Building It Gave Rise To

There it sits, perched on Lake Shore Drive as the road wraps around it, going from north to west, swinging along the Oak Street Beach. 999 is the address. Inside is the jaw-dropping, name-dropping story of one of Chicago's most intriguing residential structures. The cast includes Streeter, Fairbanks, McClurg, McCormick, Palmer, Donnelley, and more.

It's a tale of how one of Chicago's signature buildings and signature neighborhoods came to be, told by a speaker whose own history is as fascinating as the book he wrote, *999 A History of Chicago in Ten Stories*. Richard Fizdale grew up on Chicago's north side, became a hippie war protester and met Allen Ginsberg, Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, and Timothy Leary... shortly before being introduced to Leonard Bernstein backstage at Lincoln Center. Later he'd trail Norman Mailer during the March on the Pentagon. When his working life began he started as the lowest-paid copywriter at the legendary advertising firm Leo Burnett. When he retired, he'd been its chairman, CEO, and chief creative officer.

Make your reservation today...books will be available for purchase and autographing. *eserves our history, this luncheon program is for you.*

June luncheon: *Union League Club, 65 W. Jackson Boulevard. Luncheon buffet (main dining room on six) opens at 11:30 am; program (in a different room, to be announced) 12:30-1:30. Luncheon is \$32. Reservations or cancellations by noon Wednesday for Friday lunch. Call 312 255 3710 or e-mail caxtonclub@newberry.org.*

Dinner: Wednesday, June 15, Newberry Library
Theodore Crackel on "The Problem of Provenance: The Papers and Books of George Washington"

Most of the books and papers of George Washington were sold to the U.S. Congress in the 1830s and '40s. However, prior to the sale, Washington's family had been besieged by requests for "words from the great leader's hand." Their response to these requests and their continued possession of books and papers even after the sale makes establishing provenance a book scholar's challenge.

Theodore Crackel was a professor and editor-in-chief for the Papers of George Washington at the University of Virginia starting in 2004. Ten additional volumes were added to the Papers during Dr. Crackel's term. In 2005, the Papers of George Washington received the National Humanities Medal – the nation's highest humanities award.

In 2010 Crackel retired, and now serves as editor in chief emeritus. He is the author of numerous books and journals including *Mr. Jefferson's Army: Political and Social Reform of the Military Establishment 1801-1809* and *West Point: A Bicentennial History*. He has three books in progress: *Washington In His Own Time* (Iowa Press, late 2016); *Life of George Washington* (Routledge, mid 2017), and *Young George Washington* (2018).

June Dinner: *Newberry Library, 60 West Walton Chicago. The evening will follow this order: Social Gathering 5-6 pm, Program, 6 pm. Three course dinner to follow program. Dinner is \$60.*

RESERVATIONS are required to attend the program only or the program/dinner combination. Reservations must be made no later than NOON, Monday June 13. Those who fail to cancel but do not attend will be billed. To reserve call 312-255- 3710 or email caxtonclub@newberry.org.