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“American Stories”  
Attributed to Wilkie Collins**

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### Abstract

The increasing availability of digital editions of historical newspapers has recently brought to light claims regarding the provenance of two tales first appearing in the American press in June and October 1889, respectively. These narratives, both with American settings, are there attributed to the British novelist, Wilkie Collins, who died on September 23, 1889. The claims regarding the first tale, “The Only Girl at Overview,” are limited to a single newspaper and can be quickly dismissed. In the case of the second tale, “One August Night in ’61,” since there is no clear-cut documentary evidence to settle the case, reaching a judgment concerning provenance involves sifting a good deal of circumstantial detail, extending well beyond literary contents. The various strands relate to the American novelist who reportedly “wrote up” up the sketch, the journals publishing and the agency distributing it, the contemporary record of payments into and out of the author’s bank account, as well as the linguistic qualities of a letter allegedly written by him, and his physical and mental condition at the time in question. In the end, though, with the insurmountable difficulty concerning the timing of the alleged letter in relation to the author’s medical condition, the balance of evidence suggests that Wilkie Collins probably had no hand in the composition not only of “The Only Girl at Overview” but also of “One August Night in ’61.” Though this incident tells us little about the literary practices of the aging Wilkie Collins, it reveals a good deal about the material and ideological conditions prevailing in the American popular press towards the end of the nineteenth century.

According to current bibliographical knowledge, still unfinished at the author’s death, but completed from his detailed notes by Walter Besant, *Blind Love* was the final story of the Victorian novelist, Wilkie Collins. But was

it? The increasing availability of digital editions of historical newspapers has recently brought to light claims in the American press concerning a rival for that honour.<sup>1</sup> On Sunday, September 29, 1889, within a week of the author's demise and only a couple of days after his funeral, an article of half a column or so headed "Wilkie Collins's Last Plot" appeared in the *Buffalo Express*. This was the daily newspaper that Mark Twain had helped to found in 1869 to serve the township on the banks of Lake Erie in New York State. The article revealed the plot in question to be a "romance of Missouri during the War of the Rebellion" under the title "One August Night in '61." The outline of what was planned as a "long novel" had been devised and submitted to the publisher before the author suffered his "first stroke of paralysis" in late June. With Collins too ill to complete the task for which he had already been paid, this original sketch had thus been "written out" by "an American novelist" in condensed form to appear in "the current succession of Sunday novelettes" in "The Express and one or two other papers."<sup>2</sup> Though noting that Collins's business arrangements were generally conducted through his agent A. P. Watt, the report included a lengthy extract from a letter written by the author himself concerning "the uninviting question of money:"

Dear Sir: – I beg to thank you for your letter. ... To allude to the uninviting question of money, I feel that I cannot persist in returning the remittance after the expression of your resolution under no circumstances to accept it. At the same time, I cannot consent, on my side, to accept this remittance when the circumstances under which I consented to receive it no longer exist. My present idea is to satisfy my own scruples – and not, I hope, to show any want of respect for the motives which animate you in this matter – by devoting the money to the necessities of some charitable institution in London which needs and really deserves help. You will, I trust, see no objection. It is almost needless for me to say that I appreciate the courteous and friendly tone in which you have written to me, and that I am glad to do justice to the integrity of your intentions. I can only ask you and your colleagues to accept my excuses.

Believe me, very truly yours, WILKIE COLLINS.<sup>3</sup>

A report under the same heading, and of a similar nature, though shorter

on detail and without the quoted letter, appeared on the following Wednesday in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, with both papers assuring their readers that the promised story would grace the columns of their special jumbo Sunday issues the following weekend. Totalling around 9,000 words, the story itself duly appeared at the same time not only in those two journals but also in the New York City daily, the *Star*. There were, however, some interesting variations: only the *Dispatch* copy included illustrations, the *Express* used the title “An August Night in ‘61,” and in the *Star* the story was tagged as No. VII in the series of “Novels by Prominent Authors.”<sup>4</sup>

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This simultaneous publication, with substantially the same text though not printed from stereotype plates, suggests strongly that the copy was supplied in galley-proof form by some central syndicating agency.<sup>5</sup> As Johanningsmeier has shown, the practice of newspaper syndication in the United States changed radically during the later 1880s.<sup>6</sup> Before, the business was dominated by firms like A. N. Kellogg of Wisconsin, who supplied country papers with mass-produced copy of a mainly non-literary nature in the fixed forms of pre-printed sheets or stereotype plates. In the early 1880s, however, an entry was made into the American market by Tillotson’s Fiction Bureau, the enterprising British agency based in Bolton, Lancashire, which had attracted a number of distinguished client novelists during the previous decade. Among these was Wilkie Collins, who in July 1878 agreed to part with the British serial rights to his latest novel *Jezebel’s Daughter* for £500.<sup>7</sup> With Tillotson’s incursion into the American market, the focus there also began to shift towards the supplying of original literary work by well-known authors to major city newspapers in the form of galley-proofs.<sup>8</sup> These permitted the receiving journals to customize according to their own wishes, including details of both format and content, often giving widely broadcast matter the air of exclusivity. Major American firms in this movement, all starting up in the mid-1880s, were independent agencies like Bacher’s Newspaper Syndicate and McClure’s Associated Literary Press, both located in New York, as well those based on big city papers like Charles Taylor’s *Boston Globe* or Charles A. Dana’s New York *Sun*. The issue of the novelette attributed to Collins in the autumn of 1889 is thus apparently an exemplum of this new style of press publication.

There seem to be only two possibilities regarding the provenance of "One August Night in '61." Either Collins did indeed have some hand in the syndicated narrative, so that it has a fair claim to be his "last plot," or the whole affair is a fabrication to take advantage of his demise, with the signature on neither story nor letter having any authority.

On the face of it, the former hypothesis seems less likely but cannot be entirely excluded from a purely literary standpoint. Thematically, the American story attributed to the English author weaves together the public conflict of the "great rebellion" and the private passion of a love triangle, a pattern familiar in a number of Collins's novels from *Antonina* (1850) to *Blind Love* (1889). At the time of the vexed parliamentary debate on Gladstone's first Home Rule Bill in the spring of 1886, Collins was worried about the possibility of a civil war in Ireland,<sup>9</sup> and these concerns are reflected in the opening scenes of *Blind Love*, where the central character Lord Harry Norland is a Fenian sympathizer. The emotional sympathies of the reader of "One August Night in '61" are undoubtedly drawn more towards the Confederate cause, to which the young hero Oliver Willett is committed, echoing Collins's own sentiments during the conflict itself.<sup>10</sup> Collins made a lengthy reading tour of the United States in 1873-74, and thereafter not only kept up a lively correspondence with quite a number of American friends, but also incorporated transatlantic themes in several stories, most consistently in the case of *The Fallen Leaves* (1879), where the main narrative opens on board a steamship from New York to Liverpool.<sup>11</sup> In the mid-1880s Collins became acquainted with the young American actress Mary Anderson during her seasons at the Royal Lyceum Theatre, Wellington Street, and from early 1885 was preparing to write a play for her, sending a "sketch of the first act" in mid-April.<sup>12</sup> Though he then settled on a theme from American history, his correspondence makes it clear that the intended subject was an eighteenth-century one "not connected with wars."<sup>13</sup> Thus, while all these points have a general relevance, there is nothing specifically to suggest that Collins was contemplating writing an American Civil War story in the last years of his life.

From the general perspective of publishing history, both sides of the case again seem arguable. Honest scoops concerning English men of letters were by no means unknown in the American press at this time: that same year the (New York) *World* had contracted to pay A. P. Watt £300 for advance sheets

of the instalments of Collins's *Blind Love*.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, on the same Sunday that "Wilkie Collins's Last Plot" appeared in the *Buffalo Express*, instead of the scheduled fourteenth part of the serial, the *World* offered its readers not only a synopsis of the story so far, but also a series of revelations about the author's private life, including surprisingly precise information on his three "morganatic" children and their mother.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the author's correspondence suggests that, probably with the encouragement of his agent, it was not then unusual for him to respond favourably to requests for material from popular publishers in the US, good cases in point being his work for both Perry Mason & Co. in Boston, the proprietors of the weekly *Youth's Companion*, and the Bok Syndicate Press in New York, an independent syndicating agency starting up in the mid-1880s.

On the other hand, the febrile nature of the American popular fiction market in the closing decades of the nineteenth century meant that editors of cheap story papers and dime novel magazines were quick not only to reprint the writings of aliens without permission, but also to pass off hack work as that of well-known authors. There was no recognition of international copyright in American law before the Chace Act of 1891, and the concept of the moral right of the author (*droit moral*) was not formally recognized until the US finally signed the Berne Convention nearly a century later, though British authors in particular had protested long and loud against such damage to their literary property and reputation.<sup>16</sup> As I have shown elsewhere, the case of the popular British romantic author Charlotte M. Brontë provides a contemporary illustration that is larger than life, featuring the forging of letters and manuscripts to give a patina of authenticity to literary deception.<sup>17</sup>

Since there is no clear-cut documentary evidence to clinch the case either way, reaching a judgment concerning the provenance of "One August Night in '61" involves sifting a good deal of circumstantial evidence. The various strands relate to the American novelist who "wrote up" up the sketch, the journals publishing and the agency distributing it, the contemporary record of payments into and out of the author's bank account, as well as the linguistic qualities of the letter allegedly written by him, and his physical and mental condition during the period in question.

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Before getting down to those details though, we have to confront a complicating factor: "One August Night in '61" is in fact the second short story syndicated in the American press in 1889 to be claimed as the work of Wilkie Collins. A month before the author suffered his stroke in late June, the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, one of the three papers to carry "One August Night in '61" in the October, announced the imminent appearance in its special Sunday edition of a new "series of novelettes by noted authors," with Collins second among the half dozen specifically listed. When the story was published ten days later under the title "The Only Girl at Overlook," it was described as "A Western Story written by Franklin File, From a plot by Wilkie Collins," though a couple of days earlier it had been billed as "Wilkie Collins' Great American Novel, the first and only one ever written by him." It was a detective story with romantic interest set on the wild frontier and amounted once more to some 9,000 words.<sup>18</sup> A simultaneous appearance has been located in another paper, the *New York Herald*, though in this case the story was simply signed "Franklin File," with no mention of Wilkie Collins at all. The story was widely reprinted both in American provincial and Australian colonial newspapers, both later the same year and in subsequent ones, with the author's name given variously as Franklin File, Franklyn Fyles, and Franklin Fyles, but with no mention of Collins in any such appearance so far located. Moreover, the story also appeared in a single volume published in mid-1891 by Cassell in New York (also reprinted later the same year in London from the American plates), entitled *Eleven Possible Cases*, a collection of mystery stories by popular American authors, opening with "The Only Girl at Overlook" by Franklin Fyles.

This was, of course, the standard spelling of the name. Franklin Fyles (1847-1911), then serving as drama critic to the (New York) *Sun*, was already the author of a number of short stories. He was soon to achieve fame as a playwright with *The Girl I Left Behind Me*, written in collaboration with David Belasco for the 1893 opening of the Empire Theatre on Broadway.<sup>19</sup> "The Only Girl at Overlook" itself was adapted by him as a comic melodrama under the title "Overlook," which opened in autumn 1890 at Proctor's Opera House, Hartford, Connecticut, starring Anna Boyd and John Marshall. In this case, in addition to its unlikely setting and genre, the afterlife of the story provides little reason to trust the claims of the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* regarding

the English author's hand in the story. It should also be pointed out that it is quite possible that Franklin Fyles, to whom the sole authorship of "The Only Girl at Overlook" can thus be assigned with reasonable confidence, might have had nothing to do with what is likely to have been the arbitrary attachment of Collins's name to the story for its publicity value.

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This is important because it also seems more than likely that Fyles was the "American novelist" who had "written out" the copy of "One August Night in '61." Here, though, it should be noted that, without exception, all appearances of the story as a newspaper *feuilleton* associate it with the name of Wilkie Collins and none mention that of Franklin Fyles or the like. Moreover, there seems to have been no reprinting of the story in book form. The sole evidence for Fyles's association with the narrative derives from the appearance as late as 1897 of his new romantic melodrama of the Civil War, "Cumberland '61." This opened on October 18 at Haverly's Fourteenth Street Theatre on Broadway, produced by Augustus Pitou with Florence Rockwell as the heroine and a comic cameo appearance from the youthful Lionel Barrymore. It ran for many months, and was frequently revived. The initial production was widely reviewed in the New York press,<sup>20</sup> and programs, playbills, and posters relating to this and other stagings have survived.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the play was entered at the Office of the Librarian of Congress for copyright purposes in November 1897,<sup>22</sup> and complete typescripts are now held at a number of libraries.<sup>23</sup> None of these materials refers to a contribution by Wilkie Collins. However, careful reading suggests that, though the story has been thoroughly revised and complicated by the addition of several sub-plots, all the characters renamed, and the main setting shifted from Missouri to Kentucky,<sup>24</sup> the play nevertheless represents a loose adaptation of "One August Night in '61."

The germs of situation and theme remain the same: in both, against the background of the Civil War, the young heroine is torn between duty towards an older husband and passion for a younger lover, the former a stern, unbending colonel in the one army who has a capital charge of spying brought against the latter, a junior officer on the other side. Interestingly, the two men both swap loyalties between narrative and dramatic versions, with the young hero in



Confederate grey on paper but Unionist blue on the stage, presumably to stir the national sentiments of the audience and allow a full program of rousing music. In addition to that in the two titles, echoes also reverberate at crucial moments in the dialogue: when the heroine is asked by the young soldier why they must remain apart, "Is it that you are a Unionist and I am an officer in the Confederate army?" (col. 2) in the narrative account is replaced in the dramatic version by "Because I am to go into the Union Army and he is with the Confederates?" (fol. 13); when she confesses why she cannot follow him, "I am a wife" (col. 4) by "I am Colonel Murdoch's wife!!" (fol. 42); when the young soldier is captured by the colonel, "This is an officer in the rebel army. He is a spy." (col. 4) by "Don't honor him with your bullet. I will hang him as a spy!" (fol. 43); and when the older man is accused of acting on private rather than public motives, "Would you be a murderer?" (col. 5) by "It saved you from the crime of murder" (fol. 83).<sup>25</sup> In both, of course, the young man escapes with his life and love wins some form of victory in the end.

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While the earlier dubious claims for "The Only Girl at Overlook," plus the involvement of the same New York journalist and the same Pennsylvania journal in both affairs, encourages a good deal of skepticism concerning the provenance of "One August Night in '61," the evidence presented so far cannot be said conclusively to exclude any involvement by Collins in the second story. Indeed, the differences between the afterlives of the two tales might be taken to suggest that their provenances also may not have coincided. As suggested in the table, both these stories belonged to separate series of "novelettes" appearing in simultaneous sequence in a number of Sunday papers.<sup>26</sup> However, although the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* happened to carry both, it is not necessarily the case that the two series were supplied by the same agency. The prior announcement in the *Dispatch* of the forthcoming appearance of the first series of "Choice Original Stories" (May 30, 1889, p. 4) suggests that it had a more prominent role in that syndicate than the *New York Herald* which carried no such announcement and clearly opted out of a number of the offered stories.<sup>27</sup> The (New York) *Star* was likely the leading member of the second series – a role involving the setting up of the stories in type early and the distribution of galley-proofs to other

participating papers – since it carried a similar preparatory announcement of a forthcoming “series of sixteen novelettes by famous authors” (Aug 24, 1889, p. 1) and the complete set duly appeared in numbered sequence. This was not the case with the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* which also failed to carry a couple of the later stories. The prominent role of the *Star* in the distribution of “One August Night in ’61” is confirmed in other papers, including the (Iowa) *Burlington Hawk-Eye* which, though it did not carry the story itself, reported the title and stated that “before his death Wilkie Collins had been engaged by the New York Star to write a story founded on the American rebellion” (Oct 4, 1889, p. 2).<sup>28</sup> Moreover, the widely published “Prospectus of the New York Star for 1890,” in promoting the special Sunday edition, prominently featured a list of “distinguished contributors” which largely coincided with the authors of the sixteen tales in the series in question, notably including Wilkie Collins.<sup>29</sup>

Most interestingly, from its beginnings the Bok Syndicate Press, an independent agency without a printing press which depended on others to set up its literary material in type, had had a close link with the *Star* newspaper. From around 1886 the two Bok brothers not only began to distribute the *Star*’s “Bab’s Babble” gossip column far and wide, but also supplied the New York paper with popular weekly letters by Henry Ward Beecher and Ella Wheeler Wilcox, plus their own compilations of “Literary Leaves.”<sup>30</sup> The continued intimacy of the link at precisely the period in question is confirmed by a detailed article from October 1889 in the *Publisher’s Weekly*, which included a lengthy quotation from the New York *Star* describing the agency as “a bureau from which emanate many of the best and most striking literary articles by famous authors found in the modern newspaper,” and listing Wilkie Collins among its client authors.<sup>31</sup> Collins had begun to correspond with the Bok brothers as early as February 1883, and seems to have written to Edward fairly frequently from March 1887.<sup>32</sup> The only documented work supplied to the Bok agency by Collins is the short autobiographical piece “How I Write My Books,” which brought the author \$50 and was scheduled to appear in American newspapers from late 1887.<sup>33</sup> The latest of the extant letters to Bok, dating from early 1889, make no mention of a new commission, but it does not seem impossible that he might have agreed to provide another piece towards the end of his life.<sup>34</sup>

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Which brings us back to the Collins letter quoted in the *Buffalo Express* article. This we must now assume was among the publicity materials supplied to interested newspapers, probably by the *Star* and/or the Bok agency. Confirmation is provided by the incorporation of the same article, entire including the letter, in an obituary essay on the author in the final issue of Frank Leslie's *Popular Monthly* for 1889. There, the only substantive differences were the absence of all references to the *Express* in the body of the article, and, in the quoted letter, the omission of the salutation and the replacement of "the remittance" with "the \$200."<sup>35</sup> Such a payment, in the case of the work of a well-known British author sold to the American press, would be reasonably generous for a novelette but very low for a long novel.<sup>36</sup> Since the double-entry ledgers recording debits, credits and balances in the author's account at Coutts Bank on the Strand are still held in the firm's archives in London,<sup>37</sup> this sum provides a bench mark in a search for records of the transactions mentioned in the cited letter. While there is no incontrovertible evidence of such payments, which would presumably take the form of a credit of something over £40 from an American source no later than June 1889 and an identical debit to a charitable body in London from July 1889 onwards, other circumstantial details do emerge that may be of relevance here.

First of all, though, it should be recognized that the Coutts ledgers do not provide complete records of all transactions: there is not uncommonly a lack of detail concerning both payees and recipients, sometimes due to the aggregation of payments both in and out. There are also a number of general patterns that emerge in the records throughout the 1880s that should be pointed out. Literary income from English sources tends to produce credits in round numbers.<sup>38</sup> Remuneration received in the form of post-dated notes of credit from London publishers like Chatto & Windus tend to produce proportional debits of 1-3% on or around the same date, representing the payment of the discount (interest) in order to receive the funds immediately; literary payments on publications negotiated by A.P. Watt similarly generate proportional debits of precisely 10% on or around the same date, representing the agent's fee. Literary payments from overseas typically produce credits involving odd numbers of shillings and pence due to foreign exchange dealings;

details are often sparse, but one of the most comprehensive entries shows the payment received from the Bok Syndicate Press for “How I Write My Books” on November 1, 1887, which appears as “Draft on Importers & Traders Natl Bk of New York pr \$50.” This generates a credit of £10 4s 2d, equivalent to a rounded exchange rate of 4.898 dollars to the pound. In the debits column, charitable donations generally appear thin on the ground during the 1880s, notable cases being an annual donation of £5 to the “St Mary’s Poor Fund” at the new year until 1884, an annual payment in late June of £20 to the “Fund for Mrs Slade” from 1885, and a one-off payment of £5 to the “Dogs Home” in December 1885, a few months after the death of the author’s pet Scotch terrier, Tommy.

The relevant ledgers suggest that Collins’s main literary income in 1889 came from payments for the British serial rights of *Blind Love*, plus discounted bills from Chatto and Windus for sale of residual rights to his back-listed books. There are two credits on April 9 and April 12 for £2 16s 5d and £40 16s respectively, both noted as “Recd” (Received) without further details, and with no corresponding 10% debit indicating Watt’s agency. These could indicate literary payments from overseas negotiated directly by the author. Since no other literary payment of this scale at this time has been identified, the latter might stand for a bill of exchange on a New York bank for \$200, equivalent to a rounded exchange rate of 4.902 dollars to the pound.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, no outgoing payment for £40 16s appears on the debit side in the subsequent period. Indeed, the only debits above £40 from then until the author’s demise are a series of four totaling over £350 to H. P. Bartley, Collins’s solicitor and the co-executor of his estate. It remains possible that one of these payments, or perhaps the £150 paid by the executors in settlement of the author’s outstanding debts on December 12, 1889, might have included a sum of £40 16s paid to a charitable body, but there is no evidence that this is so. It is also possible to speculate that such a charitable donation might have been overlooked in the confusion of the author’s last days.

The duplication in Leslie’s *Popular Monthly* also allows us to deal a little more confidently with the wording of the letter itself. Since the claim is that the plot but not the text of “One August Night in ’61” was created by Collins, there would be little point in performing a comparative stylistic analysis of the published story. But it might be instructive to carry out something similar with

the text of the letter, though it represents far too short a sample of discourse for results based on vocabulary usage to be reliable. What can be done is a simple collocational analysis of phrases occurring in the quoted letter against the database of the author's more than three thousand collected letters, paying particular attention to linguistic patterns emerging in Collins's later years. The database used consists of the text of all letters listed in the *Public Face of Wilkie Collins* (2005), plus those so far appearing in the annual "Addenda and Corrigenda" issued by the Wilkie Collins Society in London. The standard salutation at the head ("Dear Sir") can be discounted; if the letter were indeed from Wilkie Collins to Edward Bok it would in all likelihood have begun "My dear Mr Bok," but such a personal detail would surely have been suppressed by editors anxious to maintain the illusion of exclusive access to the famous author. The valediction ("Believe me, very truly yours") is entirely characteristic of Collins for this genre of letter at this period of time, and indeed is found in two of the five extant letters to Edward Bok. The following collocations in the letter are found with some frequency in the database: "I beg to thank you" (51 instances), "I feel that I" (6), "persist in ... ing" (6), "on my side" (23), "circumstances under which" (6), (parenthetically) "I trust" (8), "see no objection" (15), "I can only ask" (12), and "accept my excuses" (44); the following on only one or two occasions: "motives which animate," "my present idea," and "almost needless;" and these not at all: "uninviting question," "want of respect for," and "courteous and friendly." This represents quite a high strike rate. Further, as an editor with over ten years' experience working on the correspondence of Wilkie Collins, I can find no obvious "false notes" in the letter as published.<sup>40</sup> If the letter quoted in the *Buffalo Express* was not in fact penned by Collins, it seems likely that it was composed by someone familiar with his style of business correspondence.

If the wording of the letter raises few suspicions, the same cannot be said for its timing. According to the account in "Wilkie Collins's Last Plot," this letter was the second in a transatlantic exchange with the American publishers/distributors taking place *after* the author's stroke at the end of June. This in itself presents major problems of credibility. As revealed by the letters in the database, Collins himself seems to have been incapable of dealing with correspondence during the whole of July and the early weeks of August 1889, though he sent a few simple messages of reassurance to close friends via his

adopted daughter from as early as July 7. He dictated a letter to A.P. Watt on August 26, and wrote in his own hand to Frederick Lehmann on September 3. These, like the few other extant letters by or on behalf of the author between his stroke and his demise (only around a dozen in all) are all highly personal and dwell emotionally on his precarious state of health. The valediction “Good bye, old friend” to Sebastian Schlesinger on September 7 sets the characteristic tone of these last sad pieces of correspondence.<sup>41</sup> It is frankly difficult to imagine that the author could have engaged at this time in the niceties of business negotiation reflected in the letter cited in the American newspaper.<sup>42</sup>

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Thus, no infallible witness emerges to settle the issue without question, and the available circumstantial evidence makes for a complex case that is rather close to call. In the end, though, with the insurmountable difficulty concerning the timing of the alleged letter in relation to the author’s medical condition, the balance of evidence suggests that Wilkie Collins probably had no hand in the composition not only of “The Only Girl at Overview” but also of “One August Night in ’61.” The only thing that remains is briefly to assess the wider impact of the publication of this material in the American press. As we have seen, towards the end of 1889 Frank Leslie’s influential and long-running *Popular Monthly*, published from 1876 and renamed the *American Magazine* from 1904, at the end of a lengthy article generally well-informed and reliable in its details of the author’s life and career, gave a good deal of publicity to the appearance of “One August Night in ’61,” offering a warranty of its authenticity. This article in turn formed the basis of the entry on Wilkie Collins in Mildred Lewis Rutherford’s weighty work of reference, *English Authors*, published in Athens, Georgia in early 1890. There, *One August Night in ’61* was included as an unfinished novel in the definitive list of the author’s works. But that seems to be more or less the end of the trail of dubious information, and there is very little sign of the trail crossing national borders. The only appearance so far traced of either of the two tales outside the United States with the name Wilkie Collins attached is a *feuilleton* of “One August Night in ’61” in a daily paper in British Guiana, the former British colony on the north coast of South America.<sup>43</sup> The relatively local nature of the claims concerning late “American

Stories" by Wilkie Collins thus represents a further weakness in the attribution.

To sum up, though this interesting incident perhaps tells us little specifically about the literary practices of the aging Wilkie Collins, in general it reveals a good deal about the material and ideological conditions prevailing in the American popular press towards the end of the nineteenth century.

#### TIMELINE: WILKIE COLLINS'S TWO "AMERICAN STORIES"

**May 30, 1889 (Thursday):** Announcement headed "Choice Original Stories" in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 4, of the weekly publication of a "series of complete novelettes," beginning on Sunday, June 2, with Joaquin Miller's "For Forty Eight Days," and subsequently to include stories by "Wilkie Collins, Franklin File, Emma V. Sheridan, Louise Stockton, and Nym Crinkle"

**June 7, 1889 (Friday):** Announcement in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 4, of the publication the following Sunday of "The Only Girl at Overlook," described as "Wilkie Collins' Great American Novel, the first and only one ever written by him"

**June 8, 1889 (Saturday):** Announcement in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 4, of the publication on the following day of "The Only Girl in Overlook," described as "A Western Story written by Franklin File, From a plot by Wilkie Collins"

**June 9, 1889 (Sunday):** Publication in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, pp. 17-18, in three chapters with four illustrations, of "The Only Girl at Overlook," described as "Written for the Dispatch by Franklin File, From a plot by Wilkie Collins;" simultaneous publication in the *New York Herald*, p. 10, under the same title and with substantially the same text but without illustration, and signed at the end "Franklin File," with no mention of Wilkie Collins\*

**June 30, 1889 (Sunday):** Wilkie Collins suffers a stroke at 82 Wimpole Street, with his last serial novel *Blind Love* completed only up the eighteenth of twenty-six instalments, and thereafter writes nothing more of a literary nature; American publication in the (New York) *World* of the first serial instalment of *Blind Love*

**July 6, 1889 (Saturday):** Publication of the first serial instalment of *Blind Love* in the *Illustrated London News*

**August 24, 1889 (Saturday):** Announcement in "Buy the Sunday Star" (New York) *Star*, p. 1, of the publication of a "series of sixteen novelettes by famous authors to be published from week to week in the Sunday Star ONLY," beginning the following Sunday with "The End of the World" by Nym Crinkle, drama critic of the (New York) *World*

**September 21, 1889 (Friday):** Wilkie Collins pencils what were probably his last written words, a short note to his physician, Frank Beard, beginning "I am dying old friend" (Baker et al., *Public Face*, IV p. 382)

**September 23, 1889 (Monday):** Wilkie Collins dies around 10am at 82 Wimpole



Street

**September 24, 1889 (Tuesday):** Report in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 8, under the heading “Wilkie Collins Dead,” with a London dateline from the previous day; the accompanying sketch of his career makes no mention of a last story

**September 27, 1889 (Friday):** Funeral of Wilkie Collins at Kensal Green

**September 29, 1889 (Sunday):** Lengthy report headed “Wilkie Collins’ Last Plot” in the (New York) *Buffalo Express*, p. 12, with a letter from Wilkie Collins, concerning the publication the following Sunday of “One August Night in ’61,” described as a “romance of Missouri during the War of the Rebellion” which had been “written out from Wilkie Collins’ original sketch by an American novelist;” also report on “Wilkie Collins’s Last Days” in the (New York) *World*, p. 17, with details of his funeral, will, and “morganatic” family

**October 2, 1889 (Wednesday):** Shorter report headed “Wilkie Collins’ Last Plot” in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 4, with no letter cited, concerning publication the following Sunday of “One August Night in ’61,” again described as a “romance of Missouri during the War of the Rebellion” which had been “written out from Wilkie Collins’ original sketch by an American novelist”

**October 4, 1889 (Friday):** Report in the (Iowa) *Burlington Hawk-Eye*, p. 2, as follows: “Some time before his death Wilkie Collins had been engaged by the New York Star to write a story founded on the American rebellion. The title was to be ‘One August Night in ’61.’ He had commenced it, but it is unfinished now.”

**October 5, 1889 (Saturday):** Announcement in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 4, of the publication the next day of “Wilkie Collins’ Last Story, ‘One August Night in ’61,’ prepared for The Dispatch a few days before the great author’s death”

**October 6, 1889 (Sunday):** Publication in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 20, with four illustrations, of “One August Night in ’61,” described as “Wilkie Collins’ last story plot, Written from his original sketch;” simultaneous publication with substantially the same text both in the (New York) *Star*, p. 12, unillustrated apart from an initial graphic capital, under the heading “Novels by Prominent Authors. No. VII. One August Night in ’61,” described as “The Last Story Plot of Wilkie Collins” and “Written from his original sketch for the Star,” and in the *Buffalo Express*, pp. 1-3, unillustrated and under the title “An August Night in ’61,” and described as “An American Story, Completed from the Original Sketch which at the Time of His Death, Wilkie Collins was Writing for the ‘Buffalo Sunday Express’ ”\*\*

**October 13, 1889 (Sunday):** Reprinting in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch*, p. 18, of Hall Caine’s “Personal Recollections of Wilkie Collins” from the London evening *Globe* (4 October 1889), with the by-line “Written for the Dispatch”

**December 1889:** Publication in Frank Leslie’s *Popular Monthly* of “Wilkie Collins,” a survey of his career concluding with a detailed discussion of “One August Night in ’61,” duplicating “Wilkie Collins’s Last Plot” in the *Buffalo Express*

**Early 1890:** Publication of Mildred Lewis Rutherford’s *English Authors*, whose entry



on Wilkie Collins lists *One August Night in '61* among his published works, describing it as an "unfinished" novel

**September 22, 1890 (Monday):** Opening at Proctor's Opera House, Hartford, Connecticut, of "Overlook," a new comic melodrama by Franklyn Fyles, adapted from "The Only Girl at Overlook"

**October 18, 1897 (Monday):** Opening at Haverly's Fourteenth Street Theatre on Broadway of "Cumberland '61," a new Civil War melodrama by Franklin Fyles, loosely adapted from "One August Night in '61"

\*A later reprinting as a *feuilleton* of "The Only Girl at Overview, By Franklyn Fyles" has been found in the (New York) *Buffalo Sunday News*, Sunday, Oct 17, 1890. A version with syndicated illustrations as "Only Girl at Overlook, By Franklin Fyles" has so far been located in the following journals: (New York) *Salem Review-Press*, Fri, Nov 14 & 21, 1890; (Utah) *Salt Lake Herald*, Sun, Nov 23 & Dec 14, 1890; (Indiana) *Sullivan Democrat*, Tue, Dec 16, 1890; (New York) *Oswego Daily Times*, Sat, Jan 5, 1891; (Iowa) *Alton Democrat*, Sat, Mar 7-21, 1891; (Texas) *San Antonio Daily Light*, Mon, Mar 30, 1891; (New York) *Auburn Bulletin*, Mon-Tue, Oct 9-10, 1891. Doubtless further reprints remain to be located. The story also appeared in a volume published in mid-1891 by Cassell in New York (also later reprinted in London from the American plates), entitled *Eleven Possible Cases*, a collection of mystery stories, opening with "The Only Girl at Overlook" by Franklin Fyles, and also including tales by Frank R. Stockton, Joaquin Miller, and Nym Crinkle, among others. Well before the appearance of this volume, the story was also widely reprinted in newspapers in the Australian colonies: (1) as "Only Girl at Overlook, By Franklin Fyles," in four parts with no source given, in (Victoria) *Oakleigh Leader*, Sat, Aug 29 - Sep 19, 1889, among other papers; and (2) as "The Only Girl at Overlook, By Franklin File," in two parts and sourced from the *New York Herald*, in (Victoria) *Portland Guardian*, Fri, Sept 13-20, 1889, among other papers.

\*\*Later reprintings of "One August Night in '61" as a *feuilleton* have so far been located in the following American papers: (Georgetown, British Guiana) *Daily Chronicle*, Sun, Nov 24, 1889, "Wilkie Collins' Last Story Plot, Written from his Original Sketch;" (New York) *Buffalo Sunday News*, Sun, Mar 9-16, 1890, by Wilkie Collins; (New York) *Salem Review-Press*, Fri, Jun 27, 1890, "Willkie Collins' Last Story Plot, Written from his Original Sketch." Doubtless further newspaper reprints remain to be located; no volume publication has been traced.

TABLE. TWO STORY SEQUENCES IN US SUNDAY PAPERS IN 1889

(1) <i>Sunday, June 2 to August 18 (12 weeks)</i>		
<b><i>Pittsburgh Dispatch</i></b>		
Jun 2	Joaquin Miller	For Forty-Eight Days
<b>Jun 9</b>	<b>Wilkie Collins / Franklin File</b>	<b>'The Only Girl at Overview</b>
Jun 16	Louise Stockton	My Heart's Delight
Jun 23	Nym Crinkle	A Flirtation in Fire
Jun 30	Emma V. Sheridan	Katie Tempest, Soubrette
Jul 7	Maurice Thompson	In Love's Hands
Jul 14	Edgar Fawcett	A Dead Man's Vengeance
Jul 21	Jules Verne & An American Author	Off the Track
Jul 28	Julian Hawthorne	Lieutenant Louisa
Aug 4	Edward S. Van Zile	A Magnetic Man
Aug 11	Franklin File	Guests at Camp Nineteen
Aug 18	C. M. S. McLellan	In the Life of an Actress
<b><i>New York Herald</i></b>		
Rev. Edward Everett Hale, A Safe Deposit As, <b>Franklin File, Only Girl at Overview</b>		
<<		Henry Harland, Henry Norbert's Story
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		Mary C. Montgomery, The Trained Nurse
<<		<i>No story published</i>
<b><i>Pittsburgh Dispatch</i></b> (stories unnumbered)		
As, The End of All		
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		<<
<<		Unsigned, The Silver Locket
<<		Bret Harte, The Chatelaine of Burnt Ridge*
<<		<<
<b><i>Pittsburgh Dispatch</i></b>		
I. The End of the World		
II. A Tragedy of High Explosives		
III. An Emperor's Decree		
IV. Andras Normaine's Duel		
V. The Woman with Three Roses		
VI. The Rock on Elmwood Hill		
<b>VII. One August Night in '61</b>		
VIII. Sophia Paulovna Eczardy		
IX. Two of Lucia Felandio		
X. A Breach of Faith		
XI. Vengeance by Vera Rosebery		
XII. The Case of Moa Barrios		
XIII. "There be Jews and Jews"		
XIV. Cousins at Madawaska		
XV. A Tangle of Hearts		
XVI. Errant in the Rockies		
<b><i>Sunday, August 25 to December 8 (16 weeks)</i></b>		
<b><i>(New York) Star</i></b>		
Aug 25	Nym Crinkle	
Sep 1	Brainard Gardner Smith	
Sep 8	Edward S. Van Zile	
Sep 15	Sara Bernhardt	
Sep 22	E. D. Beach	
Sep 29	William J. Florence	
<b>Oct 6</b>	<b>Wilkie Collins</b>	
Oct 13	Henry Harland (Sidney Luska)	
Oct 20	Dante Frealli	
Oct 27	Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen	
Nov 3	A. Oakley Hall	
Nov 10	Phillip Braggalan	
Nov 17	Henry Harland (Sidney Luska)	
Nov 24	T. DeWitt Talmage & Marian White	
Dec 1	Edward S. Van Zile	
Dec 8	Justin H. McCarthy & Albert Belpit	

<< As in the journal to the left

\*Supplied by S. S. McClure's American Literary Syndicate (see Nissen, pp. 77-78)

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful for the assistance of the following individuals and institutions in this research project: Maurice Klapwald, of the New York Public Library, who was extremely efficient in tracking down information from the microfilm run of the New York *Star*; Prof. Anne Humpherys, of the Graduate Center, City University of New York, who kindly helped me to get my hands on a surrogate copy of the typescript of "Cumberland '61;" Paul Lewis, of the Wilkie Collins Society, London, who meticulously checked the records for the author's account at Coutts Bank for any sign of payments relating to "One August Night in '61;" and Pierre Tissot van Patot and Andrew Gasson, also of the Wilkie Collins Society, London, who dug up the initial evidence concerning the author's "American Stories;" and commented helpfully on an earlier draft of this article. Repositories of historical US newspapers in digital form used in this project include: the Library of Congress, "Chronicling America" (URL: [chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)), Tom Tryniski's "Old Fulton New York Post Cards" (URL: [fultonhistory.com](http://fultonhistory.com)), New York Public Library, "America's Historical Newspapers" (available on site only), "NewspaperArchive" (a subscription service; URL: [newspaperarchive.com](http://newspaperarchive.com)), and ProQuest, "Historical Newspapers" and "National Newspaper Premier" (both subscription services). In the first three cases, grateful thanks are due to the individuals and institutions concerned for making this material freely available for non-commercial use.

<sup>2</sup> "Wilkie Collins' Last Plot," (New York) *Buffalo Express* (Sep 29, 1889), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Cited *ibid*.

<sup>4</sup> Other venues may well emerge as digitalization proceeds. The story has recently been reprinted, with text and illustrations from the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* version, in Law, ed., *Wilkie's Two Late "American Stories,"* pp. 36-52.

<sup>5</sup> See Johanningsmeier, "The Devil, Capitalism, and Frank Norris," p. 105.

<sup>6</sup> See Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace*, especially pp. 34-98.

<sup>7</sup> See Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press*, pp. 64-84, 167-8.

<sup>8</sup> The first novel by Collins to be syndicated by Tillotson's in American newspapers was *The Evil Genius*, which is reported to have appeared in eight such papers (see Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press*, p. 239). Serial appearances have now been confirmed in both the Saturday edition of the *Chicago Daily News* and in the (New York) *Sunday Mercury*, from as early as November 7 and 8, 1885, respectively.

- <sup>9</sup> See, for example, his letter to Charles Kent, May 11, 1886, Baker et al., *Public Face*, IV p. 167.
- <sup>10</sup> See Law and Maunder, *Wilkie Collins: A Literary Life*, pp. 151-53.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., pp. 149-50.
- <sup>12</sup> See to Mary Anderson, April 14, 1885, Baker et al., *Public Face*, IV pp. 89-90, and Anderson, *A Few Memories*, pp. 141-7.
- <sup>13</sup> By the October, he was consulting Bancroft's ten-volume *History of the United States*, which concludes with the immediate aftermath of the War of Independence (Baker et al., *Public Face*, IV pp. 125-6). With Anderson's return to the United States that autumn, the project seems to have lapsed.
- <sup>14</sup> See Law, *Serializing Fiction in the Victorian Press*, Figure 16, facing p. 139.
- <sup>15</sup> "Wilkie Collins's Last Days," (New York) *World* (Sep 29, 1889), p. 17; duplicated as "Secrets of Wilkie Collins's Life," in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* (Sep 29, 1889), p. 10, and, as "A Slave of the Opium Habit," in the *Kansas City Star* (Oct 2, 1889), p. 5, among other American newspapers. The article is also reprinted with a discussion in Law, "Different Worlds," pp. 1-2.
- <sup>16</sup> See Law and Morita, "Internationalizing the Popular Print Marketplace," p. 213.
- <sup>17</sup> See Law, *Charlotte M. Brame*, especially pp. 2-14.
- <sup>18</sup> The story is reprinted, with text and illustrations from the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* version, in Law, ed., *Wilkie's Two Late "American Stories"*, pp. 19-35.
- <sup>19</sup> For an excellent contemporary introduction to the development of Fyles's career, with a portrait, see the syndicated article "Franklin Fyles: One of the Most Promising Contributors to the American Drama," in, e.g., (New York) *Oswego Daily Times* (Jan 4, 1896), p. 6.
- <sup>20</sup> See, for example, the review of the opening night: "A New Melodrama: 'Cumberland '61' Produced at the Fourteenth Street Theatre," *New York Times* (Oct 19, 1897), p. 6.
- <sup>21</sup> There is an opening night program in Library of Congress Theatre Playbills and Programs Collection, while a playbill of an 1899 revival is found in *Six Years of Drama*, p. 229; posters for productions in 1897 and 1899 are held at the Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.
- <sup>22</sup> *Catalogue of Title Entries of Books and Other Articles*, nos. 405-17 (Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office, 1899).
- <sup>23</sup> For example, in the Sherman Theatre Collection, Southern Illinois University, in the Charles Morton Agency Collection, University of Chicago, and in the Performing Arts Research Collections, New York Public Library, the copy in fact consulted.
- <sup>24</sup> The reworking seems to be significantly influenced by "A Cumberland Vendetta," John Fox's acclaimed local color novella of 1894, set in the Cumberland Mountains.
- <sup>25</sup> Column numbers refer to those in the story as published in the form of a *feuilleton* in the *Pittsburgh Dispatch* of Oct 6, 1889, p. 20, while folio numbers refer to those in the typescript of the play issued undated by the American Play Company of New York, and held at New York Public Library.

- <sup>26</sup> The underlying patterns are confirmed by data from the *Buffalo Express* not shown in the table.
- <sup>27</sup> I have not so far been able to form a hypothesis concerning the agency supplying this first sequence of stories; Edward S. Van Zile, who authored one of the stories, became manager of the Literary Department of the United Press syndicate, but this was not until 1890 (Johanningsmeier, *Fiction and the American Literary Marketplace*, p. 96).
- <sup>28</sup> See also, among other examples, "Personal and Literary Column," (New York) *Cuba Patriot* (Apr 3, 1890), p. 4, and "Personal and Literary," (Albert Lea, Minnesota) *Freeborn County Standard* (Apr 10, 1890) p. 5, the dates suggesting that the *Star* may have advertised the story a second time in the spring of the following year.
- <sup>29</sup> See, e.g., (New York) *Marcellus Observer* (Feb 13, 1890), p. 7.
- <sup>30</sup> See Bok, *Americanization of Edward Bok*, pp. 78-118.
- <sup>31</sup> See "Mr E.W. Bok and 'The Bok Syndicate Press,'" p. 513.
- <sup>32</sup> That the surviving letters are not collected in a single archive but scattered among a number of owners, some private, suggests that these are unlikely to represent the whole of the correspondence.
- <sup>33</sup> The article was apparently syndicated by Bok under the title "Wilkie Collins Tells the Secret of 'The Woman in White.'" The earliest appearances traced are in the (New York) *World* (Nov 27, 1887), p. 9, and *Los Angeles Times* (Dec 30, 1887), p. 2.
- <sup>34</sup> Bok was not averse to broadcasting extracts from personal letters. The opening of WC's letter to him of 15 January 1889, on the possibility of writing his "own life" read: "Not a line of my 'Reminiscences' has been written, or even thought of. Publishers have suggested that I should write of my own life – and if I live long enough to have a little leisure time, I may possibly try the experiment." (Baker et al., *Public Face*, IV p. 355). Prefaced by the phrase "Wilkie Collins, the English novelist, writes to a friend in New York," these lines soon began to appear *verbatim* as a literary "snippet" in the newspapers, e.g. in "Prominent People," (Minnesota) *St Paul Daily Globe* (Mar 4, 1889), p. 4. Despite this kind of opportunism, the success of the Bok Syndicate Press was relatively short-lived. By the early 1890s, Edward W. Bok was putting more energy into the editorship of the *Ladies Home Journal*, and by 1896 he must have given up entirely on the business of syndication, since he then published a virulent attack on the practice, concluding: "The syndicate is in business for money; for literature it cares very little ..." (Bok, "Modern Literary King," p. 341).
- <sup>35</sup> See "Wilkie Collins," p. 657.
- <sup>36</sup> The New York *World* would have made two payments of just over \$750 each for *Blind Love*.
- <sup>37</sup> The relevant ledger pages have been photographed and transcribed by Paul Lewis, who has kindly provided access to the material in question.
- <sup>38</sup> Though the division of payments into three parts sometimes produces credits such as £166 13s 4d (one third of £500) or £333 6s 8d (one third of £1000).
- <sup>39</sup> According to Officer's "MeasuringWorth" data for the annual average dollar-pound

exchange rate from 1791, the dollar declined from 4.85 to 4.87 against the pound between 1887 and 1889.

<sup>40</sup> This is in marked contrast to the case of an earlier item published in the United States that is undoubtedly a forgery, appearing in the unauthorized 1863 "Illustrated Library" edition of *No Name* from Gardner A. Fuller in Boston. There the prefatory matter included not only a fake autographed portrait of Collins, but also a printed laudatory letter full of false phrases such as, "I congratulate you on the exquisite portrayal of character, and the beautiful typography of this work."

<sup>41</sup> See Baker et al., *Public Face*, IV pp. 380-2, 387-9.

<sup>42</sup> Only if the account in "Wilkie Collins's Last Plot" were mistaken and the quoted letter in fact dated from *before* the onset of serious illness might it be possible to accept it as authentic. This, of course, would necessitate taking the phrase "when the circumstances under which I consented to receive it [the remittance] no longer exist" as referring to health problems preventing the completion of the commission less calamitous than the paralytic stroke at the end of June, and thus introduce other difficulties into an argument for the authorial provenance of "One August Night in '61."

<sup>43</sup> "One August Night in '61: Wilkie Collins's Last Story Plot," (Georgetown, British Guiana) *Daily Chronicle* (Nov 24, 1889), p. 5.