



URL: www.natstand.org.uk/pdf/StBrodyGAO005.pdf
Person: G. A. O. St Brody
Title: Wilkie Collins, a subscriber to St Brody's Flora of Weston (1856)
Source reference: Lovatt, C. 2007.
Bulletin, Bristol Naturalists' Society
No **457**. 6 - 7
Transcription date: 2017 January 17
Annotated by:
Copyright:

TRANSCRIPTION



Creative Commons Attribution-
NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0
International License.

Lovatt, C. 2007.
Bulletin, Bristol Naturalists' Society
No 457. 6 - 7
Reproduced here with the permission of the author.

Wilkie Collins, a subscriber to St Brody's Flora of Weston (1856)

Clive Lovatt draws attention to the inclusion of Wilkie Collins, the famous Victorian novelist, in the list of subscribers to St Brody's Flora of Weston-super-Mare. A later passage in one of Collins' books, The Moonstone, describes the pursuit of natural history and could conceivably be based on observations of St Brody and his teaching.

Wilkie Collins (1824-1899) is well known as a contemporary and friend of Charles Dickens and the author of *The Woman in White* (1860) and *The Moonstone* (1868). It appears that Collins' biographers and students may have overlooked his appearance amongst the 83 subscribers to Gustavus St Brody's *Flora of Weston* (1856).

There is no doubt as to the identity: Collins was a friend of Edward Francis Smyth Piggot and the two were called to the bar together in 1851. His brother John had a home at Yatton and also owned Grove House at Weston-super-Mare, now used as Town Council offices and the subject of an application for lottery funds for renovation. Staying in Weston-super-Mare at Christmas in 1851, Collins attended some soirées of mesmerism and clairvoyance and published an account of them in six letters on "Magnetic Evenings at Home" in *The Leader*.

In September 1855 the two friends sailed from Weston-super-Mare to the Scilly Isles, a trip described by Collins in "The Cruise of the Tomtit", published in Dickens' *Household Words* in December 1855. Collins renames Weston as Mangerton-on-the Mud. On Monday 17 September 1855 whilst preparing for the trip, they stayed with a local doctor, Joseph Stringfield, who also appears (though Piggot does not) as a subscriber to St Brody's book. Collins stayed with Stringfield at other times too, and later stood bail for him during the doctor's messy separation from his wife, putting up £250.

On the title page of his little book, the *Flora of Weston*, St Brody (1828-1901) described himself as a Professor of Natural History, Lecturer on Botany etc. but White in the *Flora of Bristol* (1912; pages 93-95) characterises him better as an itinerant teacher of French (he was born in France) and natural science. St Brody was elected a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London in 1863 and compiled excellent herbaria of plants from Weston (now at Bristol Museum, intact) and Gloucestershire (at Gloucester Museum, integrated). There is a further account of him in the *Flora of Gloucestershire* (1948; pages cxxix to cxxxi).

St Brody probably issued a 'flyer' for his *Flora of Weston*, as he is known to have done for an intended Flora of Somerset. The list of subscribers that he gathered together may well reflect the interesting social mix in this developing seaside resort as well as the writer's need for financial support in the venture. The book has no commercial publisher's name on the title page, so must have been self-published. Many of the men are styled Esq. (including Wilkie Collins, Esq.), rather than Mr, or are of the professions such as clergymen, doctors, or J. P.'s. I can only recognise one amateur botanist (Reverend W. R. Crotch, and he also wrote on shells of the neighbourhood). Many of the women are styled Miss rather than Mrs, but there is only one young Master.

His inclusion in the Flora's subscribers' list places Wilkie Collins and St Brody in the same social Circle, and at most, two handshakes apart. Did they actually meet, perhaps at dinner with Stringfield, or at some soirée or public function? Subscribing for a book implies some interest in, or knowledge of, the author, the subject, the place, or the shared intellectual pursuit of writing for publication, though it can be subject to social pressure from the author or friends in common. Scholars do not seem to have identified St Brody as one of Collins' correspondents, or that Collins may have had any particular interest in natural history.

But perhaps in the same way as he observed the men of Mangerton-on-the Mud grimly watching the Tomtit depart, with a novelist's eye Collins noted St Brody's teaching and its effect. A decade later, Betteredge, the butler in *The Moonstone* (Chapter 8) complains of the mess left when gentlefolks, with too much time on their hands, indulge themselves in the intellectual pursuit of natural history. However, this well-observed piece reads like a ready-made jotting from an author's pocket book, for all the mess the characters actually made was to the panelling of a door.

"I have seen them (ladies, I am sorry to say, as well as gentlemen) go out, day after day, for example, with empty pill-boxes, and catch newts, and beetles, and spiders, and frogs, and come home and stick pins through the miserable wretches, or cut them up, without a pang of remorse, into little pieces. You see my young master, or my young mistress, poring over one of their spiders' insides with a magnifying-glass; or you meet one of their frogs walking downstairs without his head--and when you wonder what this cruel nastiness means, you are told that it means a taste in my young master or my young mistress for natural history. Sometimes, again, you see them occupied for hours together in spoiling a pretty flower with pointed instruments, out of a stupid curiosity to know what the flower is made of. Is its colour any prettier, or its scent any sweeter, when you do know? But there! the poor souls must get through the time, you see--they must get through the time. You dabbled in nasty mud, and made pies, when you were a child; and you dabble in nasty science, and dissect spiders, and spoil flowers, when you grow up."

St Brody, in the Preface of his *Flora* states that, with the exception of eleven species reported to him, "no species has been described which has not been found and minutely examined by myself". Although today best known (if known at all) as a botanist, St Brody proclaimed himself a Professor in Natural History and his Flora was "compiled for the use of the young". Trawling the local newspapers of the period may pick up some further evidence for the case, but a Sgt. Cuff (Collins' immortal creation in this first Detective Novel) would be needed to *prove*, some 150 years on, that Collins and St Brody met, and that observations of him and his fellow naturalists and his young students at Weston-super-Mare, form the basis of the passage quoted above.

I wish to thank Paul Lewis, one of the editors of Wilkie Collins' four volumes of collected letters (The Public Face of Wilkie Collins, 2005), for the information here on Wilkie Collins, (both direct and through his websites) and for his helpful comments.

Clive Lovatt, Malawi, 7 January 2007, clivemlovatt@yahoo.com