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"WRITING 6 DAYS OUT OF 7": THE PUBLISHING HISTORY OF MRS. E. BURKE COLLINS

Deidre A. Johnson

Sharkey, Emma Augusta (Brown) (Collins).—[Mrs. Ro. R. S.—]
b. Rochester, N. Y.; p.o. 313 Valence st., New Orleans, [‘Writing,
6 days out of 7, not for amusement, but for \$6,000 per year. . . .
Prose work partly sensational, as it pays the best.’]

— Mrs. E. Burke Collins’s entry in Griswold’s *Directory of Writers for
the Literary Press*, 3rd ed. (1890)

Through a combination of prolific writing and determination, Emma Augusta Brown Collins Skelton Sharkey—better known to her readers as Mrs. E. Burke Collins—kept her name in the public light and earned a respectable income from her fiction for almost two decades. Her entry in the *Directory of Writers* is revealing both of her pragmatic attitude and her arduous schedule—allegedly six hours of writing per day, six days per week, turning out those “partly sensational” sketches and serials for popular story papers.¹ What the entry does not mention is the sheer volume of work required to earn an income of \$4000-\$6000 per annum. An 1894 biographical essay in *The Magazine of Poetry* (written by her then-publisher and possible paramour, William J. Benner, Jr.) credits Collins with “almost one-hundred novels and thousands of sketches and poems.”² Considering that Collins had been publishing serials for approximately 15 years and sketches for about 20 years when the profile appeared, those totals translate into just under two miscellaneous pieces weekly and slightly more than six novels annually. Collins’s work for Norman L. Munro’s *Family Story Paper* during the years 1880-89 (as shown in the accompanying bibliographic listing) offers one example of the volume of her publications; it is in some ways a chilling testament to the relentless stream of stories required of those who tried to earn a comfortable living through their pens.

Like many of her counterparts, Collins began publishing with story papers out of financial necessity. In 1867, at age 21, Emma Augusta Brown had married a young lawyer, Emmett Burke Collins. After four years of marriage, the couple moved from her hometown of Rochester, New York, to Ponchatoula, Louisiana, where Emmett’s father had purchased property. A year later, Emmett Collins was dead, the victim of an “accidental” (but self-inflicted) gunshot wound.³ Widowed and living 1100 miles from her family, Emma Collins turned to writing, submitting stories to local newspapers and periodicals, and even trying to publish her own literary magazine, *Over the Country*.⁴ The magazine was a failure, but Collins enjoyed better success in selling short stories to the *New York Clipper* and other periodicals. She remarried in July 1879, to a young Louisiana farmer named James F. Skelton, but continued with her writing.⁵ In March 1880, she had her first serial published in Norman L. Munro’s *Family Story Paper*, and from at least October 1880, she also began supplying the *Family Story Paper* with numerous sketches (short stories running approximately one to one-and-one-half columns).⁶

It was probably fortunate for Collins that she had not ceased writing after her marriage, because less than two years later, she was again a widow. After James Skelton’s death, Collins appears to have left their home in Tangipahoa, Louisiana, to share a residence in New Orleans with Skelton’s family.⁷ That arrangement may have provided her with more time to work on her fiction, for the following May her serials also began running in a second major story paper, Street & Smith’s *New York Weekly*. By 1883, she was selling Street & Smith an occasional sketch as well.⁸

Collins married for a third time in October 1884.⁹ Although several biographical pieces describe her new husband, Robert R. Sharkey, as “a Mississippi cotton planter, who is the nephew and sole male descendant of the late Governor Sharkey, of Mississippi,”¹⁰ Collins did not stop her work for the story papers. Either Sharkey was contributing less to the family coffers than his background suggests or the two were enjoying an expensive lifestyle. By 1887—if not earlier—the Sharkeys maintained two residences: they spent summers in Tangipahoa and winters in New Orleans (both locations far from any connection with a Mississippi cotton plantation).¹¹ Their home in New Orleans was that of Collins’s former in-laws, and Collins’s widowed mother-in-law Justine Skelton and a brother-in-law lived there with the Sharkeys for a time.¹²

One of the first magazine articles about Collins appeared the year after her marriage to Sharkey. Calling her “prodigiously fertile, and remarkably rapid in composition,” it included the carefully worded assertion that “She realizes more money from her writings than any other writer of newspaper stories merely, in

the far South."¹³ Over the next few years, Collins received notice in other articles, most of which also highlighted her prolificacy and earnings. The author of a January 1888 article in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* remarked that Collins's "pen is probably the most prolific in the business," while noting that Collins "does not earn as much as Mary E. Bryan" (another Southern author, whose "pen yields her over \$6,000 a year").¹⁴ A short piece in *The Critic* in April 1888 was the first to credit Collins with "earn[ing] nearly \$6000 a year"¹⁵—which, by late June, had become "earns \$6,000 a year by writing serials of the Southworth type."¹⁶ As evidence of Collins's prodigious output, the *Eagle* author had asserted, "I have known a serial from Mrs. Collins' pen to be running in the *New York Weekly*, another in the *Family Story Paper*, and a third in the *Saturday Night*. Beside [that,] she furnished a sketch weekly to the *Family Story Paper* and also did other literary work."¹⁷ The writer was correct, if slightly behind on Collins's career: she had begun writing for James Elverson's family story paper *Saturday Night* early in 1886, and, by the time the *Eagle* article appeared, was also producing serials for a fourth paper, *Fireside Companion*. The latter was published by none other than George Munro, brother and rival of the *Family Story Paper*'s Norman L. Munro.¹⁸

Collins's stories for Norman Munro's *Family Story Paper* from mid-1880 through early 1888 offer one example of the volume of her work. As the *Eagle* noted, for most of that period her short stories were a staple in the paper, regularly occupying the first one and one-half columns of the fourth page. In the six months from 1 November 1880 through 25 April 1881, for example, all but one of the 26 issues of *Family Story Paper* carried a sketch by Collins, bearing titles such as "Jean's Diamonds," "Rhoda's Happiness," or "Aunt Marcia's Story." Many issues included an installment of one of her serials as well: "Dare the Detective" appeared from 15 November 1880 through 17 January 1881; eight weeks later, "Opal's Secret" began on 14 March 1881.

More information about the extent of Collins's writing may be gleaned from her sole surviving account book, which spans the years 1889-93.¹⁹ By that point, she had stopped submitting sketches to the *Family Story Paper* and was instead devoting her greatest effort to the *Fireside Companion*. The account book shows that during the year 1890, Collins sent George Munro 52 sketches for the *Companion*. Those from the first half of the year ran 8-10 manuscript pages apiece, or slightly over a full column's worth of story (since 8 manuscript pages equaled one published column); those for the last half of 1890 each averaged about 7 pages. In all, the sketches totaled 388 manuscript pages. Collins also submitted three complete serials for the *Companion* (two with 15 installments; one with 12) and part of two others (beginning one, concluding another), for an additional 1496 manuscript pages. Although she had stopped supplying Norman

Munro with sketches, Collins was still writing for the *Family Story Paper*: she sent four serials of 12 installments each, ranging from 257 to 323 manuscript pages, and one installment of another serial—in all, 1130 manuscript pages. In 1890, her grand total for the two Munros was 3034 manuscript pages—for which she received \$3810, or approximately \$1.25 per manuscript page.

Such payments reveal why Collins needed to be so prolific: at \$1.25 per manuscript page, it was the only way she could earn a four-figure income. Although no correspondence from 1889-91 with either publisher survives, the account books suggest that rather than sending stories on approval, Collins was working under contracts. Her agreement with George Munro must have required a weekly sketch, for which she received \$5, and one installment of a serial—three chapters—for an additional \$40 per week. Her reasons for preferring George to Norman are evident in the account book: she earned only \$30 per installment from Norman—although, in fairness, the installments were also shorter, each averaging about 23.5 pages compared with the 28-34 pages she usually sent George.²⁰ Nonetheless, although newspaper articles sometimes referred to her stories as "the Southworth type," Collins was not receiving the type of wages that spectacularly successful story paper authors like Mrs. E. D. E. N. Southworth or Laura Jean Libbey (whose serials often appeared concurrent with Collins's in the Munros' papers) commanded. The differences are all too evident: Southworth had earned \$40 per week from Robert Bonner for her *New York Ledger* installments back in 1857; 10 years later, she was drawing \$75 per week, and that figure had doubled by 1878. Laura Jean Libbey, the darling of the story papers, negotiated similar raises, moving from \$60 per weekly installment from Norman Munro in 1886 to \$100 per week from Robert Bonner in 1887, then signing with George Munro in 1890 for \$150 per week.²¹ Collins, whose work never attained the popularity of a Southworth or Libbey, thus had to settle for considerably less, earning half their income for more than twice the work. (It may have been a vicious circle: because she was writing so frenetically to earn money, she lacked the time to craft stronger stories that might have convinced her publishers to offer more to retain her services.)

Judging by the placement and timing of her stories, by the late 1880s Collins was also no longer in her ascendancy as a writer. Although in the early 1880s her serials premiered on the first page of the *Family Story Paper*, generally holding that favored position for two weeks, by the middle of the decade, many of her serials instead began inside the paper, on page five. There was no advance publicity heralding a new Collins story, nor, in many cases, an accompanying illustration: they were treated as filler. The account books also show that months—or even years—might elapse between the time one of the

Munros received a completed serial and the time he chose to run it, another indication they felt her work was not in demand.

Title	Sent	Published	Time between receipt of first installment and publication
Lancaster's Love; or, The Richest Girl in Boston	11 Jan - 15 Mar 1889	25 May - ____ 1889	2 mos
A Fatal Love; or, Repented at Leisure	21 Mar - 24 May 1889	2 Nov. 1889 - 11 Jan 1890	5 mos
A Modern Delilah; or, A Game for a Million	29 May - 2 Aug 1889	8 Aug - 10 Oct 1891	24 mos
The Wrong Man; or, A True Heart's Sacrifice (published as "Her Life's Desire")	8 Aug - 10 Oct 1889	26 July - 10 Sept 1892	33.5 mos
One Woman's Wrong; or, A Butterfly of Fashion	17 Oct 1889 - 2 Jan 1890	29 Mar - 21 June 1890	2.5 mos

Fig. 1: Schedule of Collins serials submitted to Norman L. Munro in 1889

As figure 1 shows, while Collins sent Norman Munro five serials in 1889, he published only three of them within 2-5 months after receiving the last installment—and he held two others for 24 months or longer.²² In the case of George Munro, the account book reveals steadily lengthening periods between reception and publication of Collins's serials, suggesting his gradual disenchantment with her work. Most of the serials Collins provided for George Munro in early 1889 appeared in the *Companion* within a month after she submitted the final installment; in the second half of 1889, her serials generally ran about three months after they were sent. By 1890, the gap was four or five months, and two of the three stories Collins sent after April 1891 remained in Munro's files for more than a year.

Although Collins continued writing through most of the 1890s, and her tales were reprinted in the story papers and some paperback series well into the twentieth century, health issues and changing fashions in fiction worked against her continued success as a writer. She went through several periods of illness during and after 1895, eventually leaving New Orleans for Hendersonville, North Carolina, where she died on May 6, 1902.²³

Unlike her rival Laura Jean Libbey, Collins never attained long-term popularity or fame and its concomitant financial rewards. Supporting herself—and perhaps, at times, her spouses—through her writing, she maintained a relentless production schedule, which, for almost two decades, enabled her to create story after story shaped to meet the demands of her many publishers. Her accomplishment stemmed from her practical and unromantic approach to writing, demonstrated by her steady production of stories and pragmatic acceptance of marketplace economics, a striking contrast to the romanticized world of her fiction.

Notes

The author wishes to thank Lydia C. Schurman and J. Randolph Cox for their generosity in providing copies of research materials and sharing information about Collins and her publishers.

1. W. M. Griswold, comp. *A Directory of Writers for the Literary Press*, 3rd ed. (Bangor, ME: W. M. Griswold, 1890): 45, *Google Books*.
2. E[ric] B[raddon] [William J. Benners, Jr.], "Emma Collins Sharkey," *The Magazine of Poetry* 6 (1894): 214, *Google Books*. Benners' romantic entanglement with Collins is discussed in Lydia C. Schurman, "Marital Meanderings, Illicit Affairs, Murder and Mayhem! Real Life Stories from the Dime Novel World," *Dime Novel Round-Up* 79 (February/April 2010): 13-14.
3. More detailed information about Collins's background and early life appears in Deidre A. Johnson, "Mystery Within Mystery: E. Burke Collins and 'Dare the Detective'," *Dime Novel Round-Up* 78 (October 2009): 149-50.
4. *Geo. P. Rowell & Co's American Newspaper Directory, 1876* (New York: Geo. P. Rowell & Co, 1876): 86, University of Texas Digital Library. See Mrs. E. Burke Collins, "Beryl," [New Orleans] *Daily Picayune* 17 January 1875: 9, *America's Historical Newspapers* or Mrs. E. Burke Collins, "Madeline's Sacrifice," *The Louisianian, Semi-Weekly Louisianian, The Weekly Louisianian: Selected Short Stories, 1871-1881* (Alexandria, VA: Alexander Street Press, 2005), *Black Short Fiction and Folklore: African, African American, and Diaspora* <lit.alexanderstreet.com> for examples of her early fiction. The Alexander Street Press database incorrectly lists Collins's ethnicity as African and her race as Black.

5. Johnson, 149-50. See Mrs. E. Burke Collins, "After All," *The New York Clipper* 14 October 1876: 228; Mrs. E. Burke Collins, "A Night of Peril," *The New York Clipper* 23 February 1878: 380, for examples of her fiction from this period.

6. Edward T. LeBlanc, Unpublished bibliographic listing of *Family Story Paper*, n.d. LeBlanc's bibliographic listings for the story papers do not include short stories. The earliest issue of *Family Story Paper* seen is 4 October 1880, and it contains a sketch by Collins. She may have been submitting short stories for some time prior to October.

7. 1880 United States Federal Census, 8th Ward, Tangipahoa, LA, Roll: T9_471, enumeration district 182, image: 0784; *Ancestry.com*; "Died" [James F. Skelton obituary], *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, 10 April 1881: 6; *Soards' New Orleans City Directory 1882*: 643, *U.S. City Directories* [database on-line], *Ancestry.com*; *Soards' New Orleans City Directory 1883*: 683, *U.S. City Directories* [database on-line], *Ancestry.com*. Special thanks are due to the staff of the Louisiana Division, Special Collections, at the New Orleans Public Library for their help with research in their collection.

8. Edward T. LeBlanc, Unpublished bibliographic listing of *New York Weekly*, n.d. See, for example, Mrs. E. Burke Collins, "Jessie's Ring," *New York Weekly* 38 (3 September 1883): 8, or Mrs. E. Burke Collins, "Dolly's Fortune," *New York Weekly* 38 (10 September 1883): 8, for two examples of her short stories.

9. Hunting For Bears, comp. *Mississippi Marriages, 1776-1935* [database on-line], *Ancestry.com*.

10. "Sharkey, Mrs. Emma Augusta," *A Woman of the Century*, eds. Frances A. Willard and Mary A. Livermore (Buffalo: Charles Wells Moulton, 1893): 647, *Google Books*.

11. "Table Talk," *The Literary World* 16 (31 October 1885): 388, *Google Books*.

12. *Soards' New Orleans City Directory, For 1887, U.S. City Directories* [database on-line]. *Ancestry.com*: 773, 783. (Entries for Robert Sharkey, Justine Skelton, Charles Skelton.)

13. "Table Talk."

14. P. S., "Short Story Writers," *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, 8 January 1888: 10, *Historic Brooklyn Daily Eagle*.

15. "Notes," *The Critic* 9 (21 April 1888): 198, *Google Books*.

16. "In Literary Fields," *Dunkirk [NY] Observer Journal*, 29 June 1888, msg. pg, *Old Fulton NY Post Cards* [online database of New York newspapers].

17. "Short Story Writers."

18. Edward T. LeBlanc, *Bibliographic Listing of Fireside Companion* (Edward T. LeBlanc, 1990); Denis R. Rogers, *Bibliographic Listing of Saturday Night* (Fall River, MA: Edward T. LeBlanc, 1963), [*Dime Novel Round-Up* Bibliographic listing No. 11].

19. E. Burke Collins, Account Book, 1889-93, MSS 28B; Box 1; Folder 9; William J. Benners Collection, Fales Library, New York University. Collins arranged her account book by publisher, and, for each publisher, listed the titles of sketches and stories submitted (also identifying installments and chapter titles), the number of pages, the date each item was sent, and the date she received payment. Most of the entries cover 1889-91. Information in the rest of this paragraph is also from the account book.

20. Collins, Account Book.

21. Susan Coultrap-McQuin, *Doing Literary Business: American Women Writers in the Nineteenth Century* (Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 1990): 71; Mary Kelley, *Private Woman, Public Stage: Literary Domesticity in Nineteenth-Century America* (Chapel Hill: U of NC P, 2002): 22; Jean Carwile Masteller, "Serial Romance: Laura Jean Libbey and Nineteenth-Century Story Papers," *Dime Novel Round-Up* 74 (December 2005): 208. Coultrap-McQuin writes that Robert Bonner, publisher of the story paper *The New York Ledger*, "gave Southworth, as he did his other writers, five-year contracts that provided weekly payments for weekly submissions."

22. Collins, Account Book. Information in Figure 1 and the rest of this paragraph are also from the account book; dates of publication are from LeBlanc's bibliographic listings.

