

# NEWS

of the National Humanities Center



## SPECIAL SUPPLEMENT

### Edmund Wilson, American: A Conversation with Lewis Dabney

This summer **Lewis Dabney** (GlaxoSmithKline Senior Fellow 2001–02) submitted a draft of *Edmund Wilson: A Life and an Age in Literature*, to Farrar, Straus & Giroux. Dabney, a professor of English at the University of Wyoming, has worked on the book for nearly twenty years, with interruptions to edit the last of Wilson's journals and a book of essays celebrating the centenary of Wilson's birth. He has also published a study of Faulkner. At the end of July, surrounded by boxes of files encompassing the fifty-year career of the literary critic, historian, and social commentator, Dabney talked to *News of the National Humanities Center* about the privileges and responsibilities of recreating Wilson's life and age.



**Despite the joke about biography being for those who don't want to bother with footnotes, some scholars find it more difficult than writing an academic monograph. Has that been true for you?**

The particular difficulty of writing this biography—which is also one of the pleasures of writing it—is to have had to achieve perspective on a good deal of the intellectual life of the twentieth century while understanding a personal life that was an exploding melodrama. So I have been riding at least two horses. On the other hand, I have one advantage over my colleagues who are writing scholarly monographs, in that I'm telling a story that has a certain general appeal. I start out with young Wilson on the open upper deck of one of New York's Fifth Avenue buses going downtown in September 1922. He is carrying the text of a prize-winning poem on which he has been asked to write an essay. That poem is "The Wasteland." He has just published his first big review, of an abstruse new novel called *Ulysses*. On the subject of Wilson I have the advantage that—if I can say intelligent and useful things—educated readers will be interested. Now of course I could drop the ball and the reader firmly close the book, but that is a different challenge than addressing one's group of specialists.

**Did you know early on that Wilson was going to be a lifelong project, or was there a moment when you said, "Wow, I have been working on this for thirty years?"**

I would say both. As a young graduate student in the summer of 1963 I was invited by Edmund Wilson to his place in Upstate New York for four days of continuous conversation and, from his wife's point of view, probably too much white wine. I had written a review he liked of his Civil War book, *Patriotic Gore*. In the middle of the night Wilson and I ran into each other on the way to the bathroom, and he looked very hard at me and said, "You know, you should be writing your own essays and poems instead of annotating mine. You know too much about me." The next afternoon, when we were resting, there was a knock on my door and Wilson appeared, in his hands one of the thirty-odd ledgers in which he kept his lifelong journal. He held this up and, pointing to an entry (they are seldom dated) asked, "When did I write this?" Not knowing whether he really didn't know or was just testing me, I supplied a date, which satisfied him. My distinct feeling was that while he admitted to no interest in having an academic Boswell, he was damn well going to do what he could to get a good one.

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*continued*

### How did you come to be interested in Wilson?

When I was educated in the fifties and early sixties at Swarthmore and Columbia, the reigning literary school was the New Criticism, which taught us all how to read poetry closely, to value poetry as an art. The great alternative to the New Criticism was Edmund Wilson. His engagement with literature via personality and society and politics was extremely appealing to me. In those days everyone who was not a textual critic with an emphasis on poetry was influenced by Wilson. He came out of liter-

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ary journalism as this had been practiced in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England and France, and out of the American cultural tradition from Poe and Mencken and Van Wyck Brooks. As a student of modernism, then of Marx, he was the father of the New York intellectuals. For my friends and me he had the added attraction of being someone who had known and mentored not only Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway and John Dos Passos, but practically everyone else of that talented generation. He fell in love with Edna Millay, was for seven years married to Mary McCarthy. When Fitzgerald died, Dos Passos

retreated from the avant-garde, and Hemingway succumbed to his own public image, guess who stepped into Wilson’s life as his new best literary friend? Nabokov. And the other great friend of Wilson’s later years was Auden. In the window-glass of the bedroom I slept in at the old stone house was a poem Auden had engraved with a diamond stylus: “Make this night loveable, Moon / And with Eye single, / Looking down from up there”—he appeals to the moon to bless his friends and save them from committing treachery for love. I had the great advantage of getting a contract to write this book—after editing the Viking Portable Wilson—when a lot of people were still alive who had known Wilson well. Mary McCarthy gave me three days of interviews at a time when she wasn’t saying much to her own biographers about Wilson except expletives in the form of stories. But she took me seriously as Wilson’s biographer; she deeply respected Wilson despite the tensions in their marriage and what each wrote about the other afterwards. I’ve had an enormous amount of — not gossip, though of course it is gossip, but in a high sense — informed help from other people who cared about what Wilson stood for. Looking back on it all, I became the heir of many who valued Wilson — I must have spoken with almost all the New York intellectuals about him, as I have with well-known historians from Arthur Schlesinger to Sean Wilentz, with anthropologists, current *New Yorker* writers, art critics. It is a role I’d scarcely anticipated when I wrote that piece on *Patriotic Gore*.

### What especially sets Wilson apart and gives him a claim on a lasting place in history?

We’re never sure who’s going to survive, but four decades after Wilson’s

important work was done readers of the *New Yorker*, the *New York Review of Books*, and the other American and British literary supplements regularly see his opinions cited. Wilson had enormous energy and he was posted at the center of his culture during the crucial years of the twenties and thirties. He was able to recover from the breakdown of that avant-garde during World War II, through his curiosity and interest in everything under the sun and his ability to communicate with his readers. He was extremely eclectic, but had established command of the intellectual culture of the Americans in the 20th century, and he carried his readers with him. Malcom Cowley told me that he read the *New Yorker* to find out what Edmund would be doing next, as he moved from prophets of the Civil War and actors in it to the Iroquois to Israel and the Dead Sea Scrolls. Wilson will survive partly because he wrote well in a style that had a basis in conversation and the architecture of the periodic sentence. It was the old training in lucidity, force, and ease. He wrote constantly all his life. The journals cover fifty years of his experiences, and there are thousands of essays and reviews and scores of books, many of which he recycled and improved upon, because he was always improving his prose. He also wrote 70,000 literary letters. He was a writing animal. When he had his nervous breakdown in 1929, on the eve of the Crash, he believed that there was a pencil writing for him all by itself. Obviously there are many, many people who could write all the time and not be that good. But if you started out as a journalist who could understand Joyce and Eliot and Proust and Yeats for educated American readers, who could understand Marx via Freud and absorb both into practical criticism, if you start-

ed out with that kind of edge and could maintain it over five decades, you might just be a great writer. Especially if you had your own story to tell, to give your work drama. Wilson once distinguished between the great artist who, like Dante, tells his own story in his masterpiece—for us it might be *Moby-Dick* or *Huckleberry Finn*, both deeply autobiographical—and the great writer who scatters his story through a variety of literary forms, letters, fiction, private journals, etc. Swift was his example, though he might have cited Johnson or one of the French historian-critics to whom he owed much. Wilson too got his story told, if not in any one place.

**And there was the exploding melodrama of his life.**

His private life was a great drama. It was disorderly, romantic, in some respects quite self-indulgent. His prose, his whole intellectual effort, was one of trying rationally to understand the world and impose the order of art upon chaos. This cast of mind grew out of his own tendency to produce chaos, as well as from the continuous cultural revolutions of his time. So intellectually precocious, he had no sexual experience of consequence until he was initiated by Edna Millay at 25. Seven years later, he'd been married and separated and was involved in three affairs at once, which led to his breakdown; with booze; and with his struggle to be a novelist. The energy that led him into new subjects made him want to go to new places, admire more women and their minds, involve himself with them. And being a modern writer, he believed he should put it down on the page. On the other hand, the human relationships are fascinating, not something that can be reduced to the word "womanizer." The other big factor was

alcohol. Wilson's relationships with his wives and children were badly affected by his drinking. He was the only literary alcoholic of his generation whose work was not. The reason must be sought in his genes, but it also had to do with the fact that he could keep regenerating himself through new subjects, because he was not essentially a novelist or a poet. He wasn't writing from within, though he brought something from within to his subjects. His ability to master and dramatize his material was never vitiated because he drank too much, went on binges, relaxed through liquor, could lose his temper. But all that was the opposite of his effort at intellectual control and the imposition of meaning on experience. The part of an educated man, he once said, was "to give life meaning and point." The metaphor for this struggle, which has to be used carefully and not reductively, was one that Wilson created in the essay of his middle years based on a reading of Sophocles' play "Philoctetes." In "Philoctetes, the Wound and the Bow" he envisions the artist through the figure of a mythic warrior who has a wound. The wound is a smelly, suppurating ulcer that makes him very unattractive—for Wilson it is the equivalent of a neurotic malady—but it is the necessary complement to the bow without which Troy won't fall. Wilson reads that play through the interrelation between Philoctetes and Neoptolemus, the young warrior chosen to bring him back to the community. Philoctetes is the artist and Neoptolemus is in a certain sense the critic, by virtue not of any theoretical bent nor even of the informed literary taste on which criticism rests, but because he can understand the artist's difficult humanity. Wilson projects himself as both the wounded hero with the talent and the

man who can help society absorb what the artist creates. That was what Wilson did as a critic and portraitist of personalities, making both the work and the man or woman who created it available to readers. That is what, in a small way, I have tried to do as well.



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