

AN APPRECIATION OF WOODROW WILSON

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MY first impression of Woodrow Wilson was received in a letter written when he was President of Princeton University and inviting me to join its teaching staff. It was a courteous letter, I recall. But what impressed me was not just its courtesy. There was something more which at this date I find difficult to describe, but which comes back to me now as a note of kindly welcome to a choice comradeship. Some brief sentence it may have been, some turn of phrase or mere *nuance* of expression; but it gave one to feel, not that he was being asked to take a job and work at it apart, but rather that he was being invited to join a delightful fellowship in which men worked and studied together in a very human kind of *camaraderie*. The impression I got from that letter my subsequent acquaintance with President Wilson at Princeton served only to deepen. I never found him an "aloof" person. On the contrary, I believe that the ideal of good comradeship in all contacts, comradeship in all worthy effort and especially in things of the mind, was an ideal deeply implanted in his nature.

One of his old friends has told how this side of his character showed itself during his undergraduate days at Princeton. Recalling their association together as members of a debating group and as classmates, Dr. Robert Bridges of New York notes how Wilson soon began to use in such circles the word "Comradeship." "That point of view," said Dr. Bridges, "Wilson never lost. As President of the College, Governor of the State, President of the United States or negotiator of the peace of the world, the root of it all for him will be comradeship, the comradeship of men and nations." I believe that Dr. Bridges has here hit upon a really radical characteristic, a characteristic which must be taken into account—if not indeed form the starting point—in any attempt to arrive at true understanding of the man and his work.

Comradeship in things of the mind is an ideal hard to retain in the modern university. As knowledge grows from more to more, as the variety and scope of subjects of instruction increase, community of thought tends to disappear. Those who teach are apt to be drawn down into their own subjects, and to lose contact

with their colleagues. Each tends to build his own world about him, to spin alone "toiling out his cocoon," which shuts him in to himself and out from his fellows. Between teacher and taught the contacts of the class-room furnish but scant opportunity of companionship. Even among students themselves, comradeship in study and in the enthusiasms of knowledge is all too limited. In Wilson's own expressive phrase, the sideshows tend to crowd out the circus. "Student activities" have come to mean common activities quite other than those of thought and study. With all this Wilson was, I believe, profoundly dissatisfied, and he strove to bring about a condition of things in which the spirit of comradeship would breathe upon the life of the university community with stimulating and vitalizing power.

It was this idea he had in view in introducing the preceptorial system at Princeton. The preceptor was above all to be a companion and a guide to the student in his study and his thinking.¹ It was in order to carry the same idea further that he sought, though he sought unavailingly, to introduce what was called the "quad system" at Princeton. The purpose of that system was quite obviously a better comradeship among the students. Wilson proposed to have a proportionate number of students of the different years live together in a common residence and dine together at a common table. At each table was to be one of the preceptors, whose function was to be one of beneficent regulation rather than officious interference. Like Goldsmith's village preacher, he was to allure to brighter worlds and lead the way. Under such conditions Wilson conceived that a fine comradeship of thought on an improved level might be fostered. A sense of responsibility would constrain the older students to a high example, and the younger students would be infected with a zeal to emulate. The impulses of youth would be long-circuited through paths of intellectual and spiritual comradeship, and a finer product would result.

It was a conception which took strong hold of his imagination, and he boldly resolved to try to realize it. But, convincing and compelling though his advocacy of the plan was, he failed. He encountered the prejudice of vested interest and the stubborn *vis inertiae* of the established order. The numerous upper-class clubs, which are a feature of university life at Princeton, saw that the plan meant their own dissolution, and neither they nor their numerous offspring among the alumni were ready to make the sacrifice involved. The larger good of the student-whole seemed remote,

¹ Under the preceptorial system the student had assigned to him in every subject a preceptor, whom he met once a week to talk over his work and reading, and to discuss any difficulties he might have. It was especially effective in lecture courses.

as compared with the immediate comforts which they themselves enjoyed. Older members of the Faculty and Trustees were timid of change. Wilson had himself written in *The State*, that "conformity to what is established is much the easiest habit in opinion. . . Change, which roughly breaks with the common thought, will lack the sympathy of that thought, will provoke its opposition, and will inevitably be crushed by that opposition." He now experienced the truth of these very wise words. A later and more poignant confirmation of their truth he was destined to experience in the larger world of national and international thought and action.

Nor was his comradeship a thing appearing only in matters of education and educational policy. It did not need a common enterprise of great moment or special character to call it forth. In the common contacts of social life he was altogether friendly and genial, not at all of the austere or remote type which some have imagined him. Dr. Bridges was unquestionably right in contradicting "the impression of his aloofness acquired in some parts of the country." I do not wish indeed to represent him as a man of bubbling *bonhomie* or perpetually radiant vivacity. The physical basis of that quality was perhaps lacking. He was not indeed without his Pauline thorn. His comradeship was of a quieter and gentler type, but it was none the less real and deep. Serious thought had left its impress of quiet and even severe dignity upon his countenance, but it was a dignity which could readily dissolve into an expression of engaging cordiality and charm. He unbent easily and naturally. On a train journey he could be the life of the smoking-room. Nor did he neglect the smaller amenities of social life. He found time to make social calls. I remember the occasion of his first call when, sitting in the chair in which I now sit, he chatted easily and pleasantly about personal matters. He spoke, I recall, of the pleasant holidays he used to spend in Canada before he became President of Princeton, and of a bit of land which he had bought on one of the Thousand Isles for a summer cottage, and with what regret he had to abandon it after he became President of the university. He made, I remember, humorous reference to notices he used to get, calling upon him to do road work or "Statute Labour" in respect of this land. Invitations to dinner at the President's house were always readily accepted. These were always cheerful functions—simple family affairs, with not more than three or four guests. The talk was always good. The President told stories well. And invariably he found something of special interest to talk about. I remember, for example, that on one occasion he spoke of Canadian banking, how its branch system offered a far

better opportunity for a career and so attracted men of a superior type and of greater abilities as compared with the men usually to be found in the United States banks. In his official position as head of the university, he was easily accessible and ready to talk freely with any member of the staff. I remember one occasion when, calling on him for what I thought would be a brief interview, I was kept for nearly an hour, while he talked very freely on educational ideals in general. He was a frank admirer of the English ideal of the educated gentleman. Unlike many university teachers in the United States at that time, he was no Germanophile in matters of education. His intellectual mother was not Germany. I recall, too, how candidly he confessed his dissatisfaction with prevailing American ideals of education which sought the show rather than the substance, the livery rather than the real knighthood of the educated mind.

He was in private converse no moody, silent, meditative man. In his fascinating and very illuminating little volume entitled *What Wilson did at Paris*, Mr. Ray Stannard Baker has told how even during those grilling months of struggle at Paris in the spring of 1919 he would frequently indulge in amusing talks with his friends, and "talk on every subject in the world except the business of the moment. He reveals," writes Mr. Baker, "in these quiet and friendly relationships a side of him—a human, genial, humorous side—which too few of his fellow-citizens have seen." The same writer thus describes Wilson's behaviour aboard the *George Washington* on one of his voyages from France:

He and Mrs. Wilson were frequently on deck. Several times they took a hand at deck shuffleboard, and they came in quite regularly to the moving picture shows or concerts in the evening. Sometimes after meals or evening entertainments several of their fellow passengers would join the President and Mrs. Wilson and have a good talk—very little of the problems—but talk, once for example, of Lafayette, again of the French people and their characteristics, often of golf and golfing—with many stories and much laughter. The President is a past master at telling stories, especially Scottish stories. On several occasions he invited members of the party in to luncheon or dinner, starting the meal invariably with a simple grace said in a low voice. After one of these luncheons I heard a member of the party say: "Well, I never knew the President was that kind of a man at all—so human and so simple."

If we understand this side of his nature, we can understand why he felt certain kinds of attack so keenly—the sneering attacks which misconstrued his motives. Mr. Lloyd George has told

how deeply he felt the "vicious, cruel vituperation" that was heaped on him at home and at Paris. "But Wilson's character was such," he said, "he was of such fine stuff, that he was immensely sensitive to this public abuse." There was usually enough of the Stoic about him to master the pain, but once at least it found utterance—in that simple speech of his in the Brooklyn Navy yard at the funeral of the marines who died at Vera Cruz:

I never went into battle; I never was under fire; but I fancy there are some things just as hard to do as to go under fire. I fancy that it is just as hard to do your duty when men are sneering at you as when they are shooting at you. When they shoot at you, they can only take your natural life; when they sneer at you, they can wound your living heart; and men who are brave enough, steadfast enough, steady in their principles enough to go about their duty with regard to their fellow men, no matter whether there are hisses or cheers, men who can do what Rudyard Kipling in one of his poems wrote, 'Meet with triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same,' are men for a nation to be proud of. Morally speaking, disaster and triumph are impostors. The cheers of the moment are not what a man ought to think about, but the verdict of his conscience and of the consciences of mankind.

Next to the impression one got of the human quality of the man was the impression of a mind finely trained and admirably equipped with knowledge. He had studied law, and had had the benefits of its rigorous discipline. History and political science were his own special field, and no one can read his political writings without being impressed by the extent and accuracy of his knowledge of the past. For literature for its own sake he had the artist's enthusiasm, an enthusiasm reflected on every page of his writings, particularly by his books entitled *An Old Master*, and *Mere Literature*. Nor was his reading confined to English writers. He was obviously well acquainted with the great classical writers of Greece and Rome. I recall one occasion when he attended an evening meeting of the Classical Department called to consider the aims which we should set before ourselves in our classical instruction. It was quite apparent that he needed no guide to tell him who was who among the classical writers, and for what each stood. I particularly recall his reference to a work entitled *The Mind of Euripides*, then recently published, and his casual mention of the pleasure that he himself had derived from reading it. Not many College Presidents in the country would have been interested in such a book! A day or two afterwards I happened to be talking with Dr. Richards of the Department of Modern Languages. "MacRae," he said,

“that Wilson is a wonder. He attended a meeting of our Department the other day, and I was truly amazed at his knowledge of the Moderns.” Such then was his wide acquaintance with literature. His knowledge of the past was not restricted to knowledge of what men had done or suffered, and of the outward circumstances of their lives. He had explored their inner thoughts and emotions as recorded in the works of bards and seers. And without such knowledge who can really know the past?

Of what may be called the *character* of his knowledge as distinguished from its *extent*, a word may be said. It was distinctly well informed knowledge, informed and shaped by his own thinking into significant conclusions and results. It was not an unorganized mass of mere minutiae. He was no fact-mongering pedant, no Alexandrian *goniobombyx*. He had the architectonic genius which could combine the smaller results of minute investigators into a significant whole. He had the generalizing faculty, but was free from the common vice of generalizing from insufficient data. He knew that that alone could be called “broad and careful wisdom” whose conclusions are based upon the widest possible inductions from the facts of experience in all its phases. (*The State*, ch. IV, p. 58). A man of wide and thorough knowledge, he was also a man of eloquent speech. His utterance was clear and distinct. His discourse was neither too rapid nor too slow, but moved vigorously along with evident ease and freedom, and with complete mastery of motion. His gifts of exposition were very great. Sequence and order, emphasis and perspective were well managed. His diction was at once clear and choice—like the herald Mercury it was well compounded of grace and strength. Florid ornament he did not affect. But metaphor and illustration he plentifully employed. And here and there the golden coin of fancy flashed in a word or phrase that illumined as well as adorned. His power over an audience willing to hear was very great. The Faculty at Princeton, at least all but the refractory and recalcitrant part, he moulded easily to his views. He dominated without domineering. Even the quad system the Faculty endorsed; it was among the Trustees that the opposition to it prevailed. Over the alumni, at least until the split over the quad system came, his influence was complete. His expositions of the ideals of the university never failed to arouse their enthusiasm, and his address at the annual alumni dinner was always the climax of the occasion. I have seen them stand and cheer him tumultuously for prolonged periods. Of his written discourse little need be said. The world, an intently perusing world, has read portions of it for itself, and does not need to be told. With

the thought which it contained the world may not have agreed. But the power with which it was expressed none, I think, will wish to deny.

Of his quality as a teacher I cannot speak from personal experience. I never heard him in the class-room. But there was no mistaking the verdict of the students. He was, they all said, a "wonderful" lecturer. He set old things in a new light. The following, taken from one of the current *Reviews*, must have been written by a former student: "He was not a teacher of things printed in books, nor of the bare facts of history. He taught the output of his own mental operations. He took the ores from all the mines of knowledge, and in the crucible of his own mind converted baser metal into the pure gold of truth." The imagery may be a bit exuberant; but the idea behind it correctly represents, I think, the impression he made on all his students.

Perhaps the thing of deepest significance for a true understanding of Wilson and of what he sought to accomplish in national and world affairs was a thing to be gathered from his writings rather than from personal contact. I refer to his conception of the equality of conditions and opportunities for individual self-development which should be the great aim of society, and of government as the organ of society. It was more than a conception with him; it was an article of creed, a fundamental and imperative principle of action. He envisaged society as an association of individuals organized for mutual aid—for aid to self-development. Of what man could accomplish acting alone he had a poor opinion. "Man's lordship comes by combination, his strength is concerted strength, his supremacy is the supremacy of union. Outside of society man's mind can avail him little as an instrument of supremacy." Such was his view. Again: "Society is indispensable for the individual's self-development. The ideal society is one which affords equal conditions and opportunities for individual self-development to all—for individual self-development in infinite variety. Only in such infinite variety of individual powers can be found that wealth of resource which constitutes civilization, with all its appliances for satisfying human wants and mitigating human sufferings, all its incitements to thought and spurs to action." Government is the organ of society. The proper end of government, therefore, as the organ of society, is to procure equalized conditions and opportunities of individual self-development. The means government should adopt for this purpose is regulation not interference, regulation of conditions, not interference with individual action. He insists on the essential distinction between these things. "Regu-

lation is the equalization of conditions, so far as possible, in all branches of endeavour; and the equalization of conditions is the very opposite of interference." All combinations which necessarily create monopoly strike at opportunity for self-development. All such combinations society itself must control directly or indirectly. "To society alone can the power of dominating by combination belong. It cannot suffer any of its members to enjoy such a power for their own private gain, independently of its own strict regulation or oversight."

He was essentially, if we could recover for the word its ungraded sense, a Socialist—if we had not "dubbed with the too great name of Socialists" a certain class of thinkers. "If," he wrote in *The State*, "the name had not been restricted to a single, narrow, extreme and radically mistaken class of thinkers, we ought all to regard ourselves and to act as *Socialists*, that is, believe in the wholesomeness and beneficence of the body politic." These views are clearly and impressively set forth in Chapter IV of his book, a chapter which all should read and understand who would understand the inner secret of his policies throughout his public career. It is a wonderful chapter, and seems to contain in germ all that he afterwards strove to accomplish at Trenton or Washington or Paris. Many of the notable battles which he afterwards fought were fought for principles which are implicit there. His first fight, when he was Governor of New Jersey, against boss control was a fight for equalized political conditions against illicit political combination. His formulation of the issue for which America entered the war as a fight for the freedom of all nations and "to make the world safe for democracy" but gave resounding expression to the principle of equalized conditions and opportunities of self-development in the international sphere. The expression "national self-determination" was but the equivalent of individual self-development writ larger. And so with his battle for an unselfish colonial policy, and system of mandates for backward peoples. Not exploitation, but equalized opportunity, was to be the standard of conscience and of right. The great League itself, what was it but an attempt to give to international society an organ which would enable it to apply the same great principle in the international sphere?

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With the criticisms which were made of him it is not possible here to deal at large. A few only can be mentioned, and those only in terms of summary reference. None of them touched the integrity of his motives or the sincerity of his purpose. Few of them ventured

to challenge the soundness of his principles. For the most part they were criticisms put forward as mistakes of method—mistakes of method due to a lack of practical experience and knowledge of men and how to deal with men. “He was a schoolmaster rather than a politician,” said Colonel Harvey. Doubtless he was, to those who needed instruction in the proper end and purpose of social and political action, and who resented any attempt to teach them the tested foundations of political liberty. “He was autocratic and tyrannous.” No doubt he was, where principle was at stake. Had those who found him stubborn and called him a Calvinist in politics, only read his Chapter IV, they would have understood. But to those who thought in terms of personal or special interests his line of action was hard to understand. It was like the arc of a circle described from a far-off and unlocated centre, and with an incomprehensibly unelastic radius.

“He was as President a man to have Ministers rather than colleagues—Ministers whose mind must go willingly along with his, rather than colleagues to advise.” This criticism is based mainly on a misconception of the position of the Executive in the United States government. “The executive power,” says the Constitution, “shall be vested in the President.” Where power is vested, there alone is responsibility, and there alone must decision rest. The President of the United States is not as a premier, who is but *primus inter pares* among elected colleagues. He appoints his own “cabinet”, though “cabinet” is not the right name for it. There is no collective cabinet responsibility, involving as a necessary consequence the obligations of common counsel. The President alone is responsible, and responsible not to Congress but to the whole nation. He (and this was Wilson’s own clear view) is the representative of the *whole* people, responsible not only for the due execution of the laws of the United States, but responsible also for the advocacy before Congress of “the greater policies which cannot be entrusted to a body whose members are concerned with local interests, nor to standing committees immune from criticism and managed largely by log-rolling.” A correct understanding of this position takes the wind out of the criticism. No such criticism was levelled at him in respect of his determinations when he was State Governor. There he conferred, as he ought, for the constitutional position of a State Executive is essentially different in this respect. “But he was a poor conferee by nature—would never take advice—always worked out his conclusions alone, and came to conference with his mind fully made up.” This reproach is certainly not wholly true. Where information was needed, when facts and competent opinion had to

be ascertained, he did confer. Mr. Baker has told us how at Paris he always conferred with the experts of his delegation. "I hear it repeated," said Mr. Thomas W. Lamont, one of the financial experts on the Commission, "that he was unwilling to take counsel with his delegation. That is untrue. He constantly and earnestly sought the advice of his associates." But where it was not a question of ascertaining facts and competent opinion, it may have to be admitted that he had this "defect of his greatness"—that his habit of deep and earnest thought did unfit him in some degree for the amenities of conference. He undoubtedly did much thinking alone, as every man must who reverently regards the responsibilities of thinking truly. It was noteworthy that he took his walks at Princeton alone. Very rarely did we meet him walking with a companion. And so it can be understood how, if he had thought the matter out beforehand, he might come to a conference with the clearest conclusions in his own mind as to what ought to be done. And perhaps he did not in all cases perceive the danger of offence to his colleagues which lay in such a situation. He quite possibly lacked something of that practical finesse which can suggest colleagues along to determinations appearing to be arrived at by common counsel, but which are in reality already its own. He was too sincere to dissemble, and too candid to cajole. And perhaps too the very clarity of his own thought made for a lack of that infinite patience which the wise leader so often requires, the patience which defers but does not desist, which regards the weakness and sensibilities of associates, and waits and labours until "the strength of his diffusive thought is by degrees to fulness wrought" and other minds are ready for its willing acceptance.

Again, the charge has been made that he was weak and vacillating in making up his mind to fight Germany. But is it at all certain that he could have carried his people with him at an earlier date? Could any issue, other than that which he did formulate, have transcended national selfishness and served to silence opposition—the issue of a fight for the freedom of all peoples, including the German people themselves? Could that issue have been formulated earlier? Those who reply in the affirmative to any of these questions must be singularly confident of their own knowledge. "He surrendered principle at Paris in the case of the Koreans and Chinese and other peoples whose interests were sacrificed." This is a criticism which involves the strange view that if you cannot help all, you should help none, and that a principle of justice should be applied to no case because it cannot be applied to all cases. "He failed to propitiate the leaders of the Republican party as he might

have done by taking Mr. Root or Mr. Taft or Mr. Lodge with him to Paris." But those who confidently assert this have never made it clear that these gentlemen would certainly have gone or, more important, just what he would have done with them there? One mistake I think he did make when on October 25th, 1918, he issued an appeal to his people to vote for Democratic Senators and Representatives in order that he might be "your unembarrassed spokesman at home and abroad." It would have been more dignified certainly to have asked for the election of patriots and not partizans. It is said that this appeal was made upon the urgent advice of the managers of the Democratic party. If so, it was a case of his making a mistake by taking advice—the very thing which he was blamed for not doing.

The American people failed to support the League. Wilson failed to gauge the depth and tenacity of their long inculcated prejudice against foreign entanglements. Whose was the more blameworthy failure, will be for the future to declare. It is quite possible to conceive that the declaration will be for the leader and against the folk, a folk which a long-nurtured and inveterate prejudice against international co-operation blinded to the distinction between independence and isolation,—the one, as Lord Shaw has so well said, a protest against domination, the other a protest against brotherhood.

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Of ultimate judgments it is yet too soon to speak, at least of ultimate judgments which can have any chance of being generally accepted. Notably frequent in the public comment which his passing has called forth is the admission that to the future must be left the correct appraisal of his real greatness. The emotional reactions to his policies are still too violent to permit of present agreement. The whirlwind and the storm may have passed; but secondary disturbances have followed in their wake, deceptive refractions are still in the air. Heat and cold of party strife produce rarefactions and condensations which disturb the view even of those who would see with clear eyes. And the eyes of many are not clear. Motes and beams of personal illwill and national prejudice, swept up by the blasts, still trouble the sight of many. Moreover it is from practical results that men are wont to argue back to greatness, and the practical results of Wilson's life and work are not yet ready for measurement. But the credit of having envisaged a great idea and of having striven to give it practical effect in the world, even the present must and does concede. The practical value of any great idea in the world depends on the

extent to which it is given institutional form and on the goodwill of men towards it. With great ability and great devotion he strove to supply, and did supply, the institutional form. Goodwill of all alone is lacking. But the spirit of co-operation and brotherhood is growing in the world. The League continues to fulfill its function and to do effective work. Even as I write, a front page item in the morning paper carries the heading of "A Big Day's Work. Astonishing List of Problems Solved by Council of League of Nations." As the League succeeds, so will the greatness of the man who was primarily and chiefly responsible for its existence be recognized. That its full success did not come in his lifetime, that he was not given to see of the travail of his soul ere he departed, that he was not able to say "I am satisfied" but only "I am ready"—this will not prevent men from acclaiming Woodrow Wilson as truly great, but only cause a warmer personal reverence and a deeper human pity to be mingled with their acclaim.