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Bernhard Maier

Elusive Traveller

The Life and Writings of Andrew Wilson (1830–1881)

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For Doris,
best of travel companions
for more than thirty years

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Introduction

> Out of the darkness of the grave we summon the dead that we may live their past lives free from earthly conditions; into the darkness of the grave our thoughts wander, that they may breathe the pure air of a prefigured but undiscovered heaven.
>
> (Andrew Wilson, "A Ride through Sutherland," p. 247)

On the 9th November 1805 – a day before they heard the news of the death of Lord Nelson and the victory at Trafalgar – William Wordsworth and his sister Dorothy visited the village of Martindale on the eastern shore of Ullswater, "a sequestered spot, shut out from the view of the lake." Conceding that the place could scarceley be called a village, "for the houses are few, and separated from each other," the poet took special note of "the chapel, with its 'bare ring of mossy wall,' and single yew-tree."[1]

What Wordsworth called "the chapel" is the old church of St Martin that still stands at the entrance to Bannerdale in How Grain valley. If you wish to go there by public transport, you have to take an exercise in deceleration. Arriving from either north or south at Penrith railway station, you have to wait for the bus that will take you to the village of Pooley Bridge at the northern tip of Ullswater. There you have to wait for the boat that will take you to the pier at Howtown about halfway down the lake. From Howtown you have to follow the steep and winding road that will take you to the church of St Peter standing on the summit of the ridge that separates Howtown and Martindale. Descending again, you finally reach, at the bottom of the valley, the old church of St Martin that had served the parish until 1882 when it was given up in favour of the newly built church of St Peter. On one of the gravestones that were erected in the shadow of the single yew-tree in the old churchyard you may read with some difficulty the following inscription, carved below the image of a Greek cross in a circle:

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[1] William Wordsworth, *A Guide through the District of the Lakes in the North of England, with a description of the scenery, &c. for the use of tourists and residents*, fifth edition, with considerable additions (Kendal: Hudson and Nicholson, 1835), p. 125.

HERE LIES THE BODY OF

Andrew Wilson

TRAVELLER, ORIENTALIST, AND

MAN OF LETTERS

(Author of "The Abode of Snow")

BORN AT BOMBAY, APRIL 11, 1830

DIED AT BANK HOUSE, HOWTOWN, JUNE 8, 1881

The quietness and seclusion of the place, combined with the striking contrast suggested by the names of Bombay and Howtown, may well prompt the modern visitor to ask what kind of life the man described by these bare lines may have led. The question is by no means easily answered, for a cursory internet search yields only tantalisingly few hints. Apart from a short entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* – containing an erroneous year of birth and other minor oversights – they consist mainly of stray references in Victorian newspapers, journals, magazines and books of personal recollections. Many of Andrew Wilson's journalistic writings were published unsigned, although his most substantial contributions may be traced by using the *Wellesley Index of Victorian Periodicals*. Probably the most extensive source for Andrew Wilson's life and work consists of more than 250 unpublished letters to the editors of *Blackwood's Magazine*, preserved in the National Library of Scotland. They reveal a striking personality that was as much a typical product of the period in which he lived as he was – in the words of a fellow student – "the most singular chap I have ever known."[2] This is his story.

[2] See below, p. 127.

1 A missionary couple and their eldest son

> Births. – At Bombay on the 11th of April, the Lady of the Rev. John Wilson, of the Scottish Mission, of a Son.

Thus reported the *Bombay Gazette*, three days after the event, under the heading "Domestic Occurrences" on 14th April 1830.[3] Unlike the other two births noted in the same column, the parents of this newborn child were destined to be celebrities in their day. Margaret Wilson became the subject of a substantial *Memoir*, published three years after her early death by her surviving husband, while John Wilson inspired a voluminous *Life*, published three years after his death, at the age of seventy, by a friend and colleague.[4] But although modern readers will be grateful to the authors of these two books for all extracts and quotations from unpublished source material that has since been lost, they will also find it difficult to form from them a clear idea of Margaret and John Wilson's personalities, for both lives are depicted not so much as objects of historical study, but rather as exemplary models of Christian piety. That said, there are also significant differences between the two books. While the *Memoir* focuses mainly on the energy, skill and efficiency with which Margaret Wilson managed to combine her duties as wife and mother with those of missionary and educator, the *Life* of her husband deals almost exclusively with his work as missionary and scholar, making only the slightest reference to his family life. Thus the modern biographer who is interested in the son rather than his father and mother will turn first and foremost to John Wilson's *Memoir* of Margaret Wilson. But here another *caveat* applies: Both Margaret and John Wilson were evidently conscious of the fact that their letters, diaries and other records would be shown around among relatives and friends during their lifetimes and might later be used to an edifying purpose. This was a factor that influenced their composition, coloured their style and contents, and helped to determine the choice between preservation and destruction. As John Wilson put it with reference to the notes which his newly-wed wife made during their passage to India:[5]

> Mrs Wilson's notices of the voyage from the Cape to Bombay, were written partly for the information of her friends in Scotland, and partly as a record of providential occurrences and natural scenes, which she believed she herself could review with profit in after life. She regarded the appointments of God as extending to every event which could befall

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3 *Bombay Gazette*, 14th April 1830, p. 3.

4 See John Wilson, *A Memoir of Mrs Margaret Wilson, of the Scottish Mission, Bombay; including extracts from her letters and journals*, fourth edition (Edinburgh: William Whyte and Co., 1844), and George Smith, *The Life of John Wilson, D.D. F.R.S., for fifty years philanthropist and scholar in the East* (London: John Murray, 1878).

5 Wilson, *Memoir*, pp. 119–120.

her, and she was careful to mark in them the tokens of his infinite wisdom, unchangeable faithfulness, and abundant goodness.

Yet despite the limitations imposed by the authors' edifying intentions and inevitable lack of historical perspective, both the primary sources and the factual narratives in the *Memoir* and the *Life* are priceless not only for much valuable information which would otherwise have been irretrievably lost, but also for conveying to the modern reader a wholesome sense of alterity, which we will do well to keep alive as we approach a past that often seems to be much more remote than the passage of years might suggest.

The parents

Margaret Wilson née Bayne was born in Greenock in 1795, the second child and second daughter of the Rev. Kenneth Bayne and his wife Margaret Hay. In 1790 her father had been appointed as the first minister of the Gaelic congregation in Aberdeen, but three years before Margaret's birth he had accepted a call to become the first minister of the newly opened Gaelic chapel in Greenock.[6] There he was to remain for the rest of his life, raising a family of seven daughters and two sons, one of whom died when only four years old. All children were born between 1794 and 1811, when Margaret Hay, their mother, died at the early age of 41. The second daughter, Margaret, was evidently a highly talented girl, who – most unusual for the period in which she grew up – was even permitted to take some classes in the University of Aberdeen. There she "was placed in the house of one of the professors of King's College" and "delighted in the study of mathematics and astronomy."[7] As John Wilson put it on the authority of a close relative:[8]

> She became enamoured of study. Intellectual pursuits seemed to have filled her ardent mind with a kind of intoxicating rapture, and the deepest philosophical works became her evening and morning study. […] Moral philosophy attracted her with a charm altogether new and peculiar; and with the works of the most distinguished ethical and metaphysical writers, both ancient and modern, she became minutely and familiarly acquainted. But her's was a mind not to be satisfied with reading merely; she thought, she reasoned, she reflected, and she wrote for herself.

While John Wilson many years later referred to this period in his late wife's life somewhat cautiously as a time of "temporary religious declension" that was "fraught with solemn and important instruction," Margaret's evangelical relatives and friends appear to have frowned upon her pleasure in purely

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[6] See Ian R. MacDonald, *Aberdeen and the Highland Church (1785–1900)* (Edinburgh: Saint Andrew Press, 2000), pp. 24–28.
[7] Wilson, *Memoir*, pp. 26–27.
[8] Wilson, *Memoir*, p. 27.

intellectual and scientic pursuits. At any rate, her eventual return to the more conventional piety of her Greenock environment appears to have been greeted with satisfaction, as we may infer from the statement of a contemporary witness who claimed that[9]

> the good Shepherd [...] sought her in the wilderness, and taught her by painful experience, that the soul who had once been nourished by the living waters of the well of Bethlehem, cannot long be satisfied with the deepest draughts of mere worldly enjoyments.

Just what the painful experience here referred to was, we shall probably never know, but her father obviously felt that he should not wholly ignore Margaret's scholarly interests. When she "expressed a wish to superintend the education of her younger sisters," they "were accordingly withdrawn from their public classes, and placed under her charge."[10] Under this new arrangement, Margaret was permitted to continue her studies privately, as her admiring husband acknowledged many years later in his *Memoir*:[11]

> She devoted much attention to the polite literature of Britain, and especially to its poetry, to which she was passionately attached, the beauties and sublimities of which she appreciated, and which awoke all the tenderest sympathies of her soul. Religious poetry, as worthy of the emotions which its loftiest inspiration excites, met with her greatest attention; and she was enriched with its treasures to a degree which I have never seen surpassed. [...] In the ancient language of Rome, she had made considerable progress. Through the medium of their native tongues, she became familiar with the best authors of France and Italy. The German literature she studied as far as translations and a slight knowledge of the language could carry her.

Thus matters stood, when in April 1821 the sudden and unexpected death of the Rev. Kenneth Bayne at the early age of 54 changed the fortunes of his family dramatically. In the spring of 1826 the family decided to remove their household from Greenock to Dares Cottage near Inverness, perhaps to be closer to relatives on their father's side, but a letter from Margaret, dated 30th May, reveals that the siblings left their native place with a heavy heart:[12]

> We watched the town in the receding distance, till its last spire had faded from our view. [...] We kept close together, each in her turn making a feeble endeavor to amuse the rest, which was again succeeded by a fit of greater despondence, till the bell rung for breakfast. It was a dull one, as we were compelled to join a group eager in the pursuit of amusement, and whose happy countenances expressed no sympathy which could at all respond to ours.

In a letter dated 12th August 1826, Margaret frankly admitted, "I do not think I can ever like the North. All my affections hover around beloved Greenock."[13] The extent to which the newcomers felt strangers in their new surroundings

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9 Wilson, *Memoir*, p. 28.
10 Wilson, *Memoir*, p. 29.
11 Wilson, *Memoir*, p. 30.
12 Wilson, *Memoir*, p. 49.
13 Wilson, *Memoir*, p. 55.