



Dr. Gordon Wilson

WKU English

Department Head 1928-1959

by Collin Massie

“When I try to separate my life from that of the college, I have great difficulty, for both of them have run along together so long that they seem to be one instead of two.”

- Dr. Gordon Wilson

Dr. Gordon Wilson holds the record to this day as retaining the title “head of the WKU department of English” longer than anyone else, for a very respectable sum of thirty-one years. He was a man of many talents: teacher, folklorist, ornithologist, linguist, author, newspaper columnist, gifted public speaker. Dr. Jim Flynn wrote in his “A Centennial History of the Department of English of Western Kentucky University” that Dr. Wilson was also the first graduate of Western Kentucky to become a regular faculty member at WKU (1). Yet, upon further study, it would appear that Dr. Wilson was not actually a graduate of WKU (2, 3). Dr. Wilson attended school at WKU, but only for his first two years. He earned all three of his degrees (bachelor’s, master’s, and PhD) from Indiana University.

Dr. Wilson, as also mentioned in Dr. Leiper’s profile, co-authored *A New English Grammar* with Dr. Leiper. Published in 1923, it was a text that brought academic distinction to WKU’s English department. He also published a number of other works including *Passing Institutions*, *Fidelity Folks*, and two volumes of *Folkways of the Mammoth Cave Region*, yet perhaps Dr. Wilson is more well-known for his newspaper column

“Tid Bits of Kentucky Folklore” which appeared in about 100 newspapers throughout Kentucky.

As an ornithologist and folklorist, Dr. Wilson made quite the name for himself. Bird-watching branched out from his interest in botany and would become, at the age of twenty-one, something of immense enjoyment for him. He would later found the Kentucky Ornithological Society, become president of the Kentucky Folklore Society, and join both the Society of Natural History and the Kentucky Academy of Sciences. According to Dr. Flynn, he was a tireless researcher of ornithology and folklore, becoming one of the leading experts on birds in Kentucky. His love and interest in folklore was mostly born from his interest in dialect. He was so skillful at perceiving and categorizing Kentucky dialects that he was known to have been able to tell students which region, and often times which county, they hailed from just by listening to them talk.

Looking at the motivations behind his work, rather than strictly the circumstances of his life, he was undisputedly a lover of nature down to his very core, and not so naïve a one as he acknowledged is quite typical. He wrote in one of his articles, “One of the tests of a naturalist is his insight into the darker phases of nature, darker as judged by man’s standards. Just as many tourists see only the obviously beautiful, so many naturalists see only the lighter, more human phases of nature, forgetting that hardly a bird lives out a long life, so beset is it with enemies,” (4). He saw the harshness of nature that mingled and walked hand in hand with its tenderness, and loved it still completely. Understanding this, it is entirely natural to say Dr. Wilson was not only a man passionate about literature (which anyone who heads a university’s English department must be) but a man passionate about life itself.

Dr. Gordon Wilson was born October 14, 1888 in New Concord, Kentucky. The beginning of his many contributions to WKU started in 1911, when he aided in the move of WKU’s library to join it in its new home on the Hill. One year later, at the age of twenty-four, Dr. Wilson joined the WKU English department. Fourteen years following that, directly after the retirement of Dr. Macon Leiper in 1926, he took over as head of the English department, initially as acting head and then formally in 1928. Thus began the 31-year journey until his retirement in 1959. Through all his years as department head, he once estimated that he had taught 36,000 college students and had graduated 1,300 English majors—inspiring numbers by any standard.

Dr. Wilson died on April 12, 1970, at the age of eighty-one, following a short illness. The library building next to Cherry Hall became Gordon Wilson Library in the

year of 1969, one year before his death, in honor of Dr. Wilson's many years of service to WKU. He was well-loved not only as an instructor, but also as a husband, father, and Sunday school teacher at the State Street United Methodist Church in Bowling Green, KY (which still stands to this day, 122 years after its creation in 1895). Like the unyielding spirit of those stones, Dr. Wilson's contributions to WKU's English department are ingrained into its very structure, providing a phenomenal model both of leadership and a passion for living that even the most content spirit would aspire to imitate.

Sources

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