The Gospel of Education:

Louis Round Wilson and Library Development

by Robert Sidney Martin

The history of libraries and librarianship in North Carolina cannot be written without frequent mention of the name of Louis Round Wilson. No other individual has had a greater impact on the growth of libraries and the development of the profession of librarianship in North Carolina. Over a career spanning seven decades Wilson's contributions were manifold. Although principally known as an academic librarian and library educator, his activities were not limited to these fields, and his influence is seen in every area of library endeavor. This essay will not focus on Wilson's specific accomplishments, but rather will examine the philosophical underpinnings that informed his actions.

Although Wilson's achievements and contributions have been fully chronicled elsewhere[1] and need not be recounted in detail here, a brief overview will provide a useful backdrop for the ensuing discussion. He served as University Librarian at the University of North Carolina from 1901 to 1932 and during that period was fully involved in the transformation of the university from a small liberal arts school to a major modern research university. During the second decade of the century, he led the way in the development of the Extension Division, and later helped to create the University of North Carolina Press. He established the School of Library Science and was among those involved in developing the Institute for Research in Social Science. He was also a leader in the affairs of the Alumni Association, serving as the editor of the *Alumni Review* for more than a decade.

No other individual has had a greater impact on the growth of libraries and the development of the profession of librarianship in North Carolina.

Beyond the campus Wilson's accomplishments were, if anything, even more diverse and impressive. He was one of the small group of librarians and civic leaders who established the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) in 1904 and was twice elected to serve as its president. He was one of the representatives from NCLA who persuaded the American Library Association to meet in Asheville, North Carolina, in 1907. He was instrumental in securing the legislation creating the North Carolina Library Commission and served as its chairman during its formative years.

Later, Wilson's activities reached out beyond the borders of his native state as he took leading roles in his profession, first at the regional and then at the national level. He was among those who made the Southeastern Library Association an important force in the development of library resources in the region. He led the way in the effort to establish meaningful library standards for both secondary schools and colleges. He served as a consultant for numerous institutions, reviewing the status of their own library resources. His extraordinary leadership and effectiveness ultimately led to national prominence and took Wilson away from his native state and region to serve his chosen profession in roles at the national and international level, most notably as Dean of the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago.

What led Wilson to devote such energy and determination to the cause of libraries? How was he able to exert such a profound influence over the course of so many years? In order to understand Wilson's role in the development of libraries and librarianship, not only in North Carolina but throughout the South and the nation, it is first necessary to understand his roots and origins and to set him firmly in the context of his time and place.

Wilson was born in 1876 in Lenoir, in the mountainous, rural western portion of the state. His world view, formed in the crucible of his early family life and fired in the kiln of his schooling, was informed by two distinct influences, one spiritual and one secular.

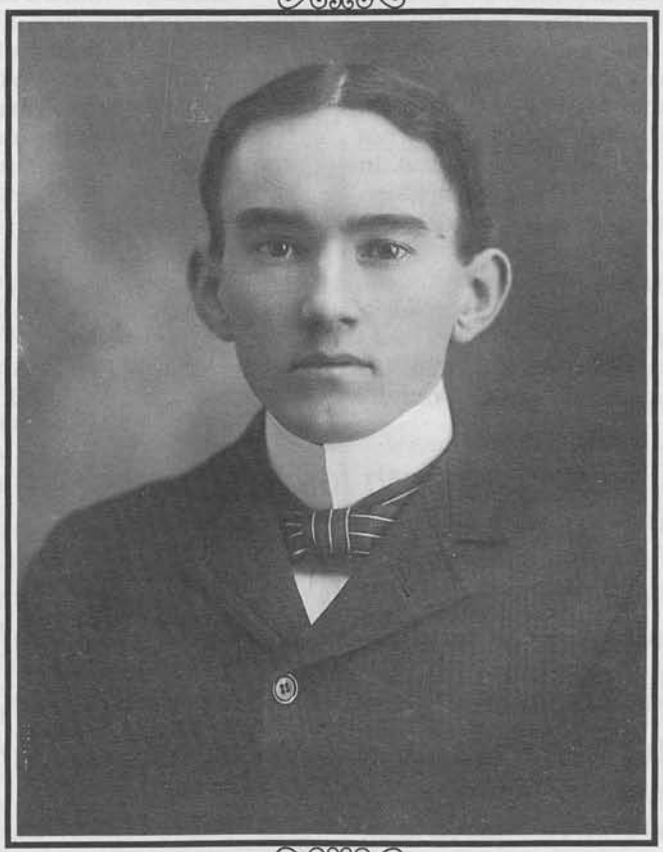
The first of these influences was religion. His family was deeply religious and active in the affairs of the Methodist church. He inherited from his mother and father a deep and abiding faith in God. These spiritual values imbued in him by his family shaped his outlook and opinions for his entire life. The Methodist theology was one based on a personal test of faith, and the governance of the church was strongly democratic. It was not a fundamentalist creed based on a literal interpretation of the Bible, but rather one that attempted to understand scripture in its historical and critical context. The most prominent figure in the liberalizing of American theological thought was Lyman Abbott, and his journal, *The Outlook*, was regular reading in Wilson's boyhood home[2]

One direct result of the higher criticism was the discovery that the Bible contained a social message. Southern Methodist bishops declared in 1902 that their flock could not ignore the political, industrial, and social influences that surrounded them, and in the years that followed, the Church gradually incorporated the Social Gospel into its *Book of Discipline*. It advocated a host of social reforms, ranging from the regulation of child labor to the application of Christian principles to the use of capital. Before World War I, Southern Methodists emerged as "advocates of Social Justice, proclaiming the Christian obligation to fashion

Christ's Kingdom on earth.[3]" Wilson was predisposed to accept this dogma, and in both his private and professional life he made use of every opportunity to propagate the Social Gospel.

In addition to the spiritual beliefs that led him to accept the Social Gospel, Wilson also inherited a great reverence for the power of education to transform individuals and uplift society. Both his parents were well educated by the standards of the times, and both were dedicated to insuring that their children received the full benefits of a good education. In this they were successful: all four of Wilson's siblings were extremely well educated, and all but one devoted their own careers to education. His sister Alice earned a degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and served for many years on the faculty of East Carolina University. His brother Robert was professor of chemistry at Duke University, while brother George held a law degree from Columbia University and had a distinguished legal career. His brother Edwin was for many years the headmaster of the distinguished Haverford School in Pennsylvania.

The era in which Wilson came of age was one of great ferment for education in the South. "Education has been the South's greatest challenge," one historian of the South has written.[4] At the close of the nineteenth century that challenge was at its greatest. "Far behind the rest of the country in nearly all respects," according to C. Vann Woodward, "Southern education suffered from a greater lag than any other public institution in the region." The reasons for this lag were many and complicated, but ultimately they were reduced to money. The South raised little more than a third of the national per capita average tax for schools and still was stretching its resources to the limit. Moreover, "the special difficulties which beset the South," including a higher ratio of children to adults, less taxable wealth, sparsity of settlement, and the parallel systems for each race," placed her educational problem in a unique category."[5]



Louis Round Wilson, ca. 1902. *(From photo in the North Carolina Collection, UNC Library, Chapel Hill; 86-701.)*

A great educational awakening stirred in the South at the end of the century, however, led by a group of men determined to change the status quo. A movement to promote universal public education arose, and North Carolina was in the forefront of this movement: "Starting from further behind than almost any other state, North Carolina began her movement earlier, and by the time the regional movement was underway her leaders were in a commanding position."[6] These leaders included Walter Hines Page, Edward P. Moses, Charles D. McIver, Charles B. Aycock, and Edwin A. Alderman.

The crusade for public education begun by these men and others like them became one of the central tenets of the Progressive Era political philosophy. As sociologist Frank Tracy Carlton wrote in 1908, "The problem of the twentieth century is to make education an engine for social betterment."[7] The awakening social conscience implicit in this statement was one important facet of the Progressive impulse in American public life in the first decades of the twentieth century. There was a growing belief that the sufferings of individuals were neither the fault nor the inevitable lot of the victims, and that the best way to alleviate these sufferings was neither charity nor revolution, but education. As Lawrence Cremin has observed, "the Progressive mind was ultimately an educator's mind, and its characteristic contribution was that of a socially responsible reformist pedagogue." Only an educated public could participate in the informed political action in which the progressives so deeply believed.[8] Implicit in all Progressive thought about education is the notion that education is not something undertaken and accomplished in youth, but rather it is a process that continues throughout the lifetime of the individual.

Indeed, it has been argued that to comprehend the Progressive movement fully it is necessary to understand the educational crusade it fostered, particularly in the South. "The educational renaissance during the first part of the century mirrored as did few other movements the region's growing faith in progress; the manner in which education became the *raison d'etre* of political liberals, social welfare advocates, economic expansionists, and northern philanthropists for the remaking of southern commonwealths . . .."[9]

The moral commitment to social causes was a common thread that linked Wilson's political and spiritual beliefs, as it linked the Progressive and the Social Gospel movements. These two vectors came together in an especially synergistic way to inform and energize the thrust for public education. Education had always been a major ecclesiastical concern in the South, and Southern Methodists in particular had ambitious educational plans. Education was also one of the principal elements of the Progressive platform. In Wilson, both forces—the Social Gospel and the Education Creed—came together as complementary facets of a single stimulus which might be termed the Gospel of Education.

Wilson's native fervor for education, inherited from his family, was strengthened by his undergraduate experience at the University of North Carolina. Transferring from Haverford College in Pennsylvania, Wilson completed his senior year at Chapel Hill in 1899. There he came in contact with the cadre of educational leaders who helped to transform public education in North Carolina. The individual who had the most profound and lasting effect on young Wilson during his senior year was the university's president, Edwin A. Alderman, who set the tone and temper of the university. In the words of his biographer, Dumas Malone, Alderman "became the symbol and spokesman of southern education .... In his time he was one of the prophets and builders of his section, and, more than any other single man, he embodied its educational history."[10] Alderman imparted to his students the education creed and instilled in them a zeal for the amelioration

of society through education. His profound influence on the students who studied under his administration can perhaps be illustrated by the fact that fully a third of the Class of 1899, Wilson included, indicated their intention to make teaching their career.[11] Alderman was well acquainted with Wilson and praised his "scholarship, character, ability, and devotion to his work;" he was proud to recommend him as "one of our very best students."[12]

Encouraged by his family and strengthened by his experience at Carolina, Wilson decided to devote his life to education, and originally pursued that goal as a teacher, serving for two years instructing students in country schools. In 1901 he returned to Chapel Hill to further his own studies, pursuing a graduate degree in English philology.

In those days only about one-third of American colleges had full-time librarians who held no other administrative posts. It was not uncommon to award the position of librarian to an enterprising graduate student in lieu of a fellowship or assistantship. Wilson accepted such an appointment at UNC and thus began his career in librarianship serendipitously. Gradually, however, he came to see the central role that libraries play in education, not only in schools and colleges, but also in society in general. In short, he became convinced of the educational mission of libraries of all types, and he resolved to pursue his own crusade for education through the institution of the library.

Wilson emerged as one of the leading spokesmen for the library movement in the South. He spoke before ever-broadening audiences about the benefits that libraries of all types could confer. Although he was himself a university librarian, his interests were not limited to the academic library. He forcefully argued for improvements in school libraries and became a leading advocate for meaningful standards for school library resources.[13] Wilson's belief in the Gospel of Education and its application to libraries is perhaps clearest, however, in his outspoken expression of the educational mission of the public library. Nowhere did he summarize his developing philosophy and outline his ideas about public libraries quite as thoroughly as in his 1909 address to the Southern Educational Association.

In Wilson, both forces — the Social Gospel and the Education Creed — came together as complementary facets of a single stimulus which might be termed the Gospel of Education.

Founded in 1895 as a professional organization for teachers, superintendents, and principals, the structure and program of the Southern Educational Association mirrored that of the National Education Association. It had departments for every facet of the educational enterprise, including superintendence, higher education, normal schools, and industrial education.[14] To these it added, in 1907, a Department of Libraries "for the purpose of promoting interest in libraries and library work, with special reference to their relation to schools and educational effort."[15] Wilson took no part in the initial meeting of this group, but when next it met, in Charlotte in December, 1909, he was a participant. The featured speaker was Salome Cutler Fairchild who spoke on the value of library training, but Wilson's address on "The Public Library as an Educator" was a prominent part of the program.[16]

In his address Wilson observed that educators had taken to thinking of the library as merely supplementary to the school. "We insist on driving two of our educational forces tandem fashion," he pointed out, "with the school in the lead, rather than both abreast, each pulling its proportionate share of the load." This was wrong, Wilson argued; "each is indispensable to the other and ... each in certain particulars supplements the other and is complemented by the other." The school's function is to equip the student with the basic tools of learning and culture; beyond that it could not go. The library's function, on the other hand, is twofold: "to serve as an aid to the material progress of the individual and to promote the culture of the community through the individual." Indeed, Wilson argued, it is the library that "lays the true foundation of culture." By "culture" Wilson meant "more than reading and more than information;" he meant (like Matthew Arnold), an acquaintance with the best that has been thought and said in the world.

Wilson summarized his thesis:

> . . . it is the duty of the public library to cooperate with the school in its endeavor to awaken in the citizen-to-be an inspiration to make the most of his powers; to give him the alphabet of learning and activity; to train his powers of thought and expression; and to supply him with the implements with which he may attain culture. Apart from its connection with the school, its chief function is to serve as the lifelong university for the individual, in which he may find freely, without money and without price, an opportunity for the continuous development of all his powers.[17]

Wilson's paper has a remarkably modern ring, particularly in its emphasis on "lifelong learning." It aptly summarized his library creed, and represents a full statement of the philosophy to which he clung for the remainder of his life: that the library is, at bottom, an educational institution, and that its educational function is its most important mission. Looking back on it many years later, Wilson recalled, "I do not know where I acquired that philosophy, but I voiced it in the paper and I have held to it throughout my life."[18] Wilson not only held to that philosophy, he repeatedly expressed it in papers and speeches, and he acted upon it in every way he could. His devotion to the educational mission of the library underscores that in accepting a career as librarian rather than teacher, Wilson was in no way abandoning his basic goal to be an educator, but rather recognizing an alternative path for achieving that goal.

Wilson was by no means unique in proselytizing for the Gospel of Education, but he was perhaps the foremost apostle of the library's role in the educational enterprise. It would behoove us to remember that education remains an important facet of the mission of the library as we strive to find the proper role for libraries in twenty-first century society.

References

[1]The most complete treatment of Wilson's early career is Robert Sidney Martin, "Louis Round Wilson at the University of North Carolina, 1901-1932," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1988). See also Maurice F. Tauber, *Louis Round Wilson: Librarian and Administrator* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1967). A brief summation of Wilson's life and career is Maurice F. Tauber, "The Contributions of Louis Round Wilson to Librarianship," *Wilson Library Bulletin* 31 (December 1956): 315-26.

[2]Ferenc Morton Szasz, *The Divided Mind of Protestant America, 1880-1930* (University, Ala.: University of Alabama Press, 1982): 17, 19, 25.

[3]Kenneth K. Bailey, *Southern White Protestantism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964): 40-42.

[4]Thomas D. Clark, *The Emerging South*, 2nd ed., (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968): 149.

[5]C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South, 1877-1913* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1971): 398-99.

[6]Ibid., 400.

[7]Frank Tracy Carlton, *Education and Industrial Evolution* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1908): 17.

[8]Lawrence A. Cremin, *The Transformation of the School: Progressivism in American Education, 1876-1957* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961): 59, 88-89.

[9]Dewey W. Grantham, Jr., "The Twentieth Century South," in Arthur S. Link and Rembert W. Patrick, eds., *Writing Southern History: Essays in Honor of Fletcher M. Green* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965): 422.

[10]Dumas Malone, *Edwin A. Alderman: A Biography* (New York, 1940): 26, viii.

[11]*The Hellenian* (1899): 45-46.

[12]Edwin A. Alderman, letter of recommendation, February 9, 1900, Louis Round Wilson Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, II:1.

[13]Wilson's activities in promoting library standards, especially through the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, are treated in detail in Robert Sidney Martin, "Louis Round Wilson and the Library Standards of the Southern Association, 1926-29," *Journal of Library History* 19 (Spring 1984): 259-81.

[14]Charles William Dabney, *Universal Education in the South*, 2 vols. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1936), 2:17.

[15]"Southern Educational Association—Department of Libraries," *Library Journal* 32 (1907): 119.

[16]"The Charlotte Meeting," *North Carolina Library Bulletin* 1, 2 (March-May 1910): 10-11.

[17]Louis R. Wilson, "The Public Library as an Educator," *Library Journal* 37 (January 1910): 6-10.

[18]Louis Round Wilson, "Louis Round Wilson: Librarian," Wilson Papers, II:123, p. 136.

Richard Barker County Library Memorial Fund

In honor of his years of service on the Watauga County Library Board of Trustees, the Library has established a memorial fund for Richard Barker. Donations to this fund will be held in trust and , in accordance with his family's wishes, will be used to memorialize Mr. Barker's interest in music. An anonymous gift of $500 was donated to begin this fund, matched by a donation from the Watauga County Friends of the Library, and several additional contributions have been made.

Contributions may be made to:
Richard Barker County Library Memorial Fund
Watauga County Library
106 N. Water Street
Boone, NC 28607

The More Things Change ...

"The average college alumnus," says Governor Hodges, as an enthusiastic alumnus himself, "gets more excited about a good dribbler than he does about the library. It should not be that way, but I do believe we have to think about both."

"It will be a break for libraries when the thought about both is on an equal basis. And that day will come when a popular librarian gets the gift of a blue and white Cadillac with the golden keys. At the moment, however, librarians in our colleges will be glad to settle for the money necessary to buy books to keep their libraries in pace with the advance of other libraries in other colleges in other states."

Editorial in *Raleigh News and Observer*
North Carolina Libraries, March and May 1957, p. 62.