

Willie King: One of Angus Wilson's 'Old Men at the Zoo'

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*'After the age of thirty fiction gets inextricably mixed into fact.'*¹

Angus Wilson was 48 in 1961 when *The Old Men at the Zoo*, in which he enunciated this dictum, was published. It was in any case his novel in which fact and fiction coincided most closely. The London Zoo of the book was largely based on the British Museum, the institution which he had joined in 1937 and where he worked, with the exception of his time at Bletchley during the Second World War, until he left in 1955 to write full time. For the evacuation of the Zoo in the novel he clearly drew on his personal experience of removing the contents of the Museum to safety in 1939 and the devastation which the war wrought on the Museum is mirrored by what befalls the Zoo in the novel. His cast of characters also owed much to his Museum days. His notes for the novel include the names of Forsdyke, the Director, Witney, the Secretary of the Museum, Ellis, the Superintendent of the Reading Room, and Marsden and Thomas, successive Keepers of Printed Books.² And yet the one character who was most closely modelled on a member of the Museum staff, Matthew Price, the Curator of Birds, owed nothing to these. Wilson openly admitted that it was a portrait of the late Willie King, a Deputy Keeper of British and Medieval Antiquities.

It was a bravura depiction. The hero remarks 'Matthew combined the macaw, the guinea fowl, the peacock and the seagull in his voice. It was a discord that in my years at the Zoo I had come to love'.³ Price is described as an old-fashioned and aristocratic if somewhat louche aesthete, 'who had evolved a wonderful power of hearing, reading and knowing nothing about a world he had long since decided was "not for him"'.⁴ He was the personification of *noblesse oblige*, with an instinctive sense of responsibility for his staff, second only to his affection for his birds.⁵ Those of his sentences which did not begin with the exclamation, 'Oh, God!' were nevertheless trenchant if mannered: 'It's rather hell those shits talking all that balls'.⁶ His camp manner, in fact, belied the fact that he had served in the army during the Great War and he displayed surprising efficiency in an emergency. During the evacuation of the Zoo, the narrator comes across him directing operations: 'his elegant willowy figure seemed more exotic than ever in a white silk shirt, the sleeves rolled up to the shoulders, and tight black evening trousers... As he leapt, pirouetted, and generally danced his way from one spot to another he seemed like an eighteenth century-duellist'.⁷ He does, indeed, meet a heroic end, attempting to

I have greatly benefitted from the generous assistance of Aileen Dawson, formerly a Curator in Willie King's old Department at the British Museum, which now forms part of the Department of Britain, Europe and Prehistory. For her work, as the leading authority on King as a member of the Museum staff and a historian of ceramics, see: Aileen Dawson, 'William King (1894-1958), Museum curator and friend of Norman Douglas', in Wilhelm Meusburger (ed.), *Norman Douglas, 9. Symposium, Bregenz and Thüringen, 7./8.10.2016* (Feldkirch/Graz, 2017), pp. 24-39, and 'William King (1894-1958), curator, a study in inter-war ceramic scholarship', *Transactions of the English Ceramic Circle*, xxvii (2017), forthcoming.

¹ Angus Wilson, *The Old Men at the Zoo* [hereafter *OMATZ*] (1979 edn), p. 250.

² Margaret Drabble, *Angus Wilson, A Biography* (London, 1995), p. 277.

³ *OMATZ*, p. 53.

⁴ *OMATZ*, p. 90.

⁵ *OMATZ*, p. 201.

⁶ *OMATZ*, p. 91.

defend his birds from a ravening mob.⁸ The sense of duty was an accurate description of Willie King but, as will be seen, his death was less romantic.

The start of his life had been propitious. William Augustus Henry King was born on 23 February 1894, the son of Lt. Col. Henry Somerset King. He was descended from Peter King, 1st Baron King of Ockham and Lord Chancellor under the first two Georges. He was sent to school at Eton. There he and Peter Lycett Green had become bosom friends of the slightly older Osbert Sitwell. United by their interest in the arts, the three of them revolted against the cult of games and carried on a continual skirmish with the Philistines. Sitwell characterized King as 'an intellectual by nature, detached, precise, determined, but bringing to everything an exhilarating dash of the fantastic and absurd'.⁹ It was at Eton that King began to exhibit the love of music that was perhaps the great passion of his life. He fell under the influence of Colin Taylor, a music master at the school who was also the mentor of another of King's friends, Philip Heseltine, known to posterity as Peter Warlock. Together they collaborated in a series of sentimental ballads, Taylor calling himself Cecil Trent, while King took the pseudonym Edith Stokes.¹⁰ When he went up to Balliol College, Oxford, he carried his enthusiasm with him. In February 1914 he invited the young modernist composer, Leo Ornstein, who was soon to cause a sensation in London, up to Oxford to perform. Heseltine wrote excitedly to Taylor that he was said 'to out-Schönberg Schönberg' and then that Willie King 'has regaled us with the strangest of strange musics!'¹¹

On the outbreak of the Great War, King volunteered. He had a strong sense of duty. Asked during the Second World War what he was doing in uniform he was to reply 'When there is a war of course one is in the Army'.¹² Much to his father's annoyance he tried to avoid being commissioned¹³ but in December 1914 was gazetted a Second Lieutenant in the 3rd Battalion, Royal Sussex Regiment.¹⁴ This was a reserve battalion and remained in Britain throughout the war, serving from 1915 as the Newhaven garrison. Somewhat unexpectedly, King enjoyed army life though his take on it was very much his own. A friend who served with him in the Second World War recalled that he always carried his swagger stick at right angles to the ground in the same manner as a cathedral verger. He was known in his Regiment as 'The Poet',¹⁵ not least by his Colonel Cecil Alers Hankey with whom he established a close friendship, afterwards visiting him at Binderton House, West Dean, between the wars.¹⁶

In truth, his war service provided plenty of opportunities for him to continue his musical life, not least because he found serving under him in the 3rd Royal Sussex his old music master Colin Taylor, who started a small choral society in which Willie sang 'Seventeen come Sunday'.¹⁷ In his wartime letters to his friend the composer Roger Quilter, he recorded his many musical ventures and also his literary tastes. D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* was 'jolly good'¹⁸ but H. G. Wells's *Mr Britling Sees It Through* 'very tiresome'.¹⁹ Henry James was a firm favourite. Of *The Golden Bowl* he enthused, 'I adore... [his] audacity in... creating a world of beings

⁷ *OMATZ*, p. 265.

⁸ *OMATZ*, p. 288.

⁹ Osbert Sitwell, *The Scarlet Tree* (London, 1946), p. 264.

¹⁰ Valerie Langfield, *Roger Quilter: His Life and Music* (Woodbridge, 2002), p. 44.

¹¹ Barry Smith (ed.), *The Collected Letters of Peter Warlock* (Woodbridge, 2005), vol. ii, pp. 250, 252; see also Peter Dickinson, *Music & Letters*, 2006, p. 121.

¹² *The Times*, 27 Feb 1958, p. 10.

¹³ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 85.

¹⁴ *London Gazette*, 4 Dec. 1914, p. 10305.

¹⁵ *The Times*, 27 Feb. 1958, p. 10.

¹⁶ Dorothy [Viva] E. L. U. King, *The Weeping and the Laughter* (hereafter *TWATL*) (London, 1976), pp. 179-80.

¹⁷ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 101.

¹⁸ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 87.

¹⁹ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 95.

vibrating with exquisite sensibility to every possible implication out of six of the biggest shits, bitches and lunatics one could ever hope to meet'.²⁰ Sometimes his literary and musical tastes combined. 'Oh Roger, isn't *Pride & Prejudice* the most wonderful of all novels? Will you write an opera about it if I do the libretto? Not another *Boatswain's Mate*, though'; this latter a jibe at the opera by Ethel Smyth.²¹

Before the war he had been intended for the Foreign Office but, at a loose end after it, both Dame Una Pope-Hennessy and Eric Maclagan of the V&A suggested he join the Museum, where he worked under Bernard Rackham in the Department of China and Glass.²² Here he developed a love of and expertise in ceramics, which was to form the basis of his future career, particularly Sèvres and Chelsea. He was also, in 1921, a founder member of the Oriental Ceramic Society, of which he served as Secretary in the late 1920s when A. L. Hetherington resigned because of ill health.²³ It comes as no surprise, therefore, that when Maclagan, by then Director of the Museum, transferred him from China to Woodwork, he moved on in 1926 to a post at the British Museum under R. L. Hobson, a fellow member of the Oriental Ceramic Society.

At the Museum he began by working on glass. He was fortunate that there was a vacancy. His predecessor, the collector Billy Winkworth, had only lasted four years. Possessed of independent means, Winkworth found the constraints of the Museum irksome. He was frequently absent from it and the final straw, according to one story, was that, after he had been missing for several weeks, he reappeared merely to change clothes and set off for the Derby.²⁴ Certainly, his own obituary notes that when he had asked Hobson if he could actually handle the ceramics he was entering in the acquisitions register, Hobson replied 'We are not here to enjoy ourselves, Billy'.²⁵ Willie King, by contrast, managed to enjoy himself very much indeed. Ironically, it was to be Winkworth who after King's death contributed an appreciation of him to the *Burlington Magazine*, which summed up his strengths and limitations: 'For general ideas such as the art of ceramics in the abstract, he had little affection; the study of technique seemed to him plebeian; science and chemistry he abhorred. He seemed like a character who had strayed from the heights of Edwardian diplomacy into a narrower social sphere.'²⁶ Winkworth observed that King rarely undertook research and that his real interests lay in literature and music. Clearly he felt drawn to the eighteenth century for he meditated a life of Swift, which never saw the light of day, his one publication in this field being his 1930 edition of the *Memoirs of Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough (An Account of the Conduct of the Dowager Duchess of Marlborough [by N. Hooke]), together with her Characters of her Contemporaries and her Opinions*.

In the interval between leaving the V&A and joining the BM, Willie had got married. His bride was Dorothy Booth, always known as Viva, to whom he was introduced at a party of Eugene Goossens by Leigh Ashton, a colleague at the V&A. The great-granddaughter of the novelist Captain Marryat, Viva had led a difficult and unconventional life, being a friend of Augustus John and a former mistress of Philip Heseltine, and making ends meet by working as a dressmaker. The marriage occasioned a split with the Sitwells, who disliked her, Osbert calling her 'The Scarlet Woman' and 'The Queen of Bohemia'.²⁷ The honeymoon was in Munich, where they sat through *The Ring* – twice.²⁸ Viva was to say that Willie gave her love but not passion²⁹ and a young man who met him at Bletchley during the Second World War

²⁰ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 105.

²¹ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 90.

²² *TWATL*, p. 13.

²³ Frances Wood and Jean Martin, 'Towards a New History of the Oriental Ceramic Society: Narrative and Chronology', *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society*, lxxvi (2011-2012), pp. 95-116.

²⁴ *TWATL*, p. 139.

²⁵ *The Times*, 19 Feb. 1991, p. 12.

²⁶ *Burlington Magazine*, c, 663 (June 1958), p. 218.

²⁷ *TWATL*, p. 133.

²⁸ *TWATL*, p. 130.

²⁹ *TWATL*, p. 131.

claimed that Willie propositioned him with the immortal line of Catullus 'Pedicabo ego vos et irrumabo'.³⁰ On the other hand, Willie greatly angered his wife at much the same time by falling in love with the young actress Georgina Cookson.³¹ Viva herself, described in later life as 'the old nymphomaniac',³² was to develop a craving for affairs, feeling that if they were with homosexual men it would be less disloyal to Willie.³³ Indeed, so marked was her propensity in this direction that Francis King observed, 'she always struck me as not so much a woman as a queen trapped inside a woman's body'.³⁴ However, the real difficulty which emerged in the marriage and cast a shadow over it was quite different. Viva had been warned by Peter Lycett Green that Willie drank. The problem was so serious that eventually they travelled to Vienna to consult Alfred Adler, one of the few psychologists to specialize in addiction. It was to no avail.³⁵ Willie's devotion to the arts was equalled only by his love of alcohol.

This failing, not helped by his invariably lurching at his club, the St James's in Piccadilly, had an inevitable physical effect and it may help to explain the striking descriptions contemporaries have left of Willie. For Angus Wilson he was the embodiment of an aesthete, 'skeleton thin, exquisite in gesture, scarlet and purple in the face, Mephistophelean in the eye and dressed in shiny old blue suits'.³⁶ The years did nothing to soften this impression. James Lees-Milne, who encountered the Kings in Spring 1949 at Stratfield Saye, staying with their mutual friend Gerald Wellington, observed 'Willy King has no manners and his appearance is grotesque – face blue all over like a parakeet. At first he is taciturn but after a bit warms up and is funny but caustic'.³⁷ Alec Hyatt King of the British Museum's Music Library came across Willie on King's visits to it to look at the score of any opera to which he might be going that night. Indeed, he noted that Beecham once had him turned out of the front row of the stalls at Covent Garden for his audible and persistent criticisms of his conducting. Despite greatly liking him, Hyatt King observed 'Willie was invariably drunk, in a gentlemanly way. He was thin and stooping; he had a high-pitched drawl and walked quickly with short steps. His nose and eyes stood out from his rather purple face and when in later life he grew a short beard, his profile was unforgettable'.³⁸ The tendency of all who described King to search for highly coloured and often avian metaphors to describe him may well explain why Angus Wilson was drawn into using him as a model for his Curator of Birds.

In the mid-1930s both Willie's parents died. His relations with his father had long been strained. Indeed, he and Viva had resorted to sticking disused gramophone needles into a model of the old man in the hope of precipitating the event. His demise left Willie wealthy. He and Viva took the lease of a house in Thurloe Square, bought a Rolls Royce and hired a chauffeur. In fact, Willie spent at such a level that his inheritance was exhausted by the end of the war. During the Second World War, they had moved into the Rembrandt Hotel. Willie joined the Royal Artillery and was then made a regimental educational officer in Carlisle. Here history repeated itself. In 1917, told to deliver a lecture on the history of his then Regiment, he lamented 'it is so dull & I can find no exciting details of 18th century camp life'.³⁹ Now ordered to lecture his men on the economic resources of our Soviet

³⁰ Drabble, *Angus Wilson*, p. 121.

³¹ *TWATL*, p. 194.

³² *TWATL*, p. 233.

³³ *TWATL*, p. 194.

³⁴ *Yesterday Came Suddenly* (London, 1993), p. 225; I am indebted to Arnold Hunt for this reference. See also John Richardson, *The Sorcerer's Apprentice: Picasso, Provence, and Douglas Cooper* (London, 1999), p. 11: 'Viva was the wife of an eccentric British Museum curator — mauve in the face from too much sherry — who felt that his institution should be closed to the public and that the treasures in his charge should be available only to scholars... Her taste for artistic young men had earned her a certain notoriety: "a friend of Mrs. King" was a genteel euphemism for "homosexual."'

³⁵ *TWATL*, pp. 156-57.

³⁶ Angus Wilson, 'Beneath the Surface', *Books and Bookmen* (June 1976), p. 29.

³⁷ *Midway on the Waves* (London, 1985), p. 166, 26 Mar 1949.

³⁸ 'Quodlibet: Some Memoirs of the British Museum and its Music Room, 1934-76', in P. R. Harris (ed.), *The Library of the British Museum* (London, 1991), pp. 171-2.

³⁹ BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 101.

ally, he exclaimed 'Oh absolute hell!' and played them records of Purcell's *King Arthur* instead.⁴⁰ Retired on grounds of age, he then joined Angus Wilson and other Museum colleagues at Bletchley from 1942 to 1945, an assignment officially disguised as working for the Foreign Office.

Though the war disrupted Viva's social life, it did not entirely end it and one of the new acquaintances she made was the novelist Norman Douglas, who had arrived in London from Lisbon at the beginning of 1942. The Kings took Douglas under their wing. He was supposed to be helping Willie to learn Italian, presumably for intelligence work,⁴¹ though Willie had begun to teach himself the language during the Great War by dipping into D'Annunzio, whom he characterized as 'the biggest bore in Europe'.⁴² Douglas soon adopted Willie, at least for the time being, as his Literary Executor. Together they went through annotating all Douglas's works. The copy of the autobiography *Looking Back*, which Willie marked up with further scandalous details of Douglas's life, is now in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library.⁴³ Willie also wrote the preface to the 1946 edition of *South Wind*. In so far as the novel with its famous opening sentence, 'The Bishop was feeling rather sea-sick', is, like *The Old Men at the Zoo*, a *roman à clef* King provides a key to the identities of the characters. Had he lived to see it, he could scarcely have objected, therefore, to being outed himself as the original for Matthew Price in Wilson's novel. For the revised edition, Douglas decided to omit three brief passages. Willie strongly objected to the last of these omissions which fell at the very end of the book. He may have had good literary reasons for this, though possibly he felt a subconscious resistance to the deletion of the ending of the 1917 edition 'Could you oblige me with a fairy-tale?' so that the work now closed with the sentence 'For it was obvious to the meanest intelligence that Mr. Keith was considerably drunk.'

After the war, Willie returned to the Museum. The anxiety which his colleagues experienced each afternoon when, following a liquid lunch, he made free with the priceless porcelain collection, did not hamper him from being promoted to Deputy Keeper in 1952, nor from his coming back to the Museum almost daily for a year or so after his retirement at the age of 60 in 1954. It was during this latter period that he presented what is now Add. MS. 48303, 'Cod-Pieces by Prosdocimus de Beldamandis junior', Prosdocimus being a fifteenth-century musical theorist whose name had been appropriated by Peter Warlock. However, his alcoholism now caught up with him. By 1957 the redoubtable Viva was no longer able to look after him and he was transported to The Priory at Roehampton, a hospital specializing in addiction. The last Christmas of his life, she discovered him sitting alone in his room with a paper fool's cap from a cracker on his head.⁴⁴ He died of cirrhosis of the liver on 23 February 1958, his 64th Birthday.⁴⁵ His obituarist fell back on Pater to capture his spirit. 'In few men has the gem-like flame burned with greater intensity or with a more lovable quality.'⁴⁶

This is not quite the end of the story. Viva lived on until 1978, her life as full and scandalous as while Willie was still alive. Angus Wilson kept nagging her to write her memoirs. The salon she had kept had, after all, boasted most of the famous and infamous in the world of the arts. Eventually, in 1976, when over eighty, she produced *The Weeping and the Laughter*.⁴⁷ She dedicated it to Angus Wilson. For all its factual inaccuracies – she even got wrong the year of Willie's death (giving it as 1963)⁴⁸ – it was a frank picture of both her life and her marriage. Too

⁴⁰ A. Wilson, 'Beneath the Surface', p. 30.

⁴¹ *TWATL*, p. 197.

⁴² BL, Add. MS. 70598, f. 105v.

⁴³ Mark Holloway, *Norman Douglas: A Biography* (London, 1976), p. xix.

⁴⁴ *TWATL*, p. 221.

⁴⁵ Death certificate.

⁴⁶ *The Times*, 24 Feb. 1958, p. 15.

⁴⁷ A typescript of this, together with other photographs and papers of Viva King, formed Lot 221 in Bonham's sale of 9 November 2016.

⁴⁸ *TWATL*, p. 218.

frank, Kay Dick the reviewer in *The Times* thought, implying that it was Viva who had driven Willie to drink.⁴⁹ Angus Wilson and six of her other friends wrote to complain, describing the insinuation as 'totally unjustifiable, and needlessly cruel'.⁵⁰ Willie would probably have been amused by the kerfuffle. He took a dismissive view of life and its troubles. At the beginning of the war, James Agate recorded lunching with him at the St James's Club and telling him Campbell Dixon's mot about the film *Gone with the Wind*, that it was 'an epic about a nonentity'. Willie had thought about this, before eventually replying 'But then so is the *Iliad*'.⁵¹

⁴⁹ *The Times*, 13 May 1976, p. 16.

⁵⁰ *The Times*, 19 May 1976, p. 17.

⁵¹ James Agate, *Ego 4. Yet More of the Autobiography of J. Agate* (London, 1940), p. 234, 24 April [1940].