

AN AUTHENTIC BIOGRAPHY OF WOODROW WILSON

By Frank Parker Stockbridge

WOODROW WILSON: LIFE AND LETTERS. IN TWO VOLUMES. By Ray Stannard Baker. Doubleday, Page & Co. \$5.00

WOODROW WILSON kept no diaries, wrote no personal memoirs. But before his death there was begun and since his passing there has continued the collection, arrangement and publication of the source-material upon which every biographer, commentator and historian of the future must rely for an interpretation of the man in terms of his times and his reaction upon them. The gigantic task of systematically, painstakingly assembling every known or ascertainable fact about Woodrow Wilson, from his most remotely traceable ancestry to his last act in life, was intrusted to the one American man of letters whose qualities as author and journalist made him, in Mr. Wilson's opinion (with which this reviewer most heartily agrees) the best fitted man to perform it, Mr. Ray Stannard Baker.

On January 25, 1924, ten days before his death, Mr. Wilson wrote the last letter which he ever signed. Addressed to "My dear Baker", it began: "Every time you disclose your mind to me you increase my admiration and affection for you", and, referring to his personal correspondence and papers, said: "I would rather have your interpretation of them than that of anybody else I know".

Long before Woodrow Wilson's dramatic entrance upon the stage of practical politics, Ray Stannard Baker had made two distinct and enviable reputations in the field of letters. Under his own name he had become recognized as one of the most accurate and thorough analysts of the social movements of the times, a reporter who brought a penetrating vision and a lucidity of style to whatever he wrote, upon whatever topic. His sympathies and interests, moreover, were those of that notable group of journalists, of which

he was one, who seceded from the old McClure's Magazine and founded The American Magazine as a medium for the interpretation of the social and political unrest which was seething with increasing turbulence under the surface of things American in the first decade of the present century. And under the *nom de plume* of "David Grayson" a pseudonym carefully guarded for years, he had won a wide following of readers with that series of wholesome essays, "Adventures in Contentment" and its successors, essays which revealed their author as a person of keen sensibilities, warm sympathies and a clear understanding of the difference between sentiment and sentimentality.

A Progressive Republican, as we "come-outers" of 1910 styled ourselves, Baker met Woodrow Wilson early in that year, under circumstances which not only revealed to him the Princeton President's penetrating grasp of the problems of political reform, but brought him into that intimate personal contact which never failed to charm those favored with an invitation to step behind the curtain of reserve with which he guarded his sensitive shyness against the intrusions of those of whose like-mindedness with himself he was not assured. In spite of their mutual attraction, Mr. Baker records, he could not regard Mr. Wilson at that time as a potent political factor; even so astute a judge of men and affairs regarded him as "too academic" ever to make a deep impression upon the extremely practical methods of politics as it was played. But by 1912 Mr. Baker had succumbed to the logic of events and was casting his vote for Wilson for President. It was not until 1918, however, that the relationship between them was established which resulted in his becoming the privileged confidant and authorized interpreter of Woodrow Wilson to the world.

Late in 1918, upon his return from Europe, where he had served as a special commissioner of the Department of State to report on economic and social conditions in the Allied countries, Mr. Baker was appointed by President Wilson to direct the press arrangements of the Peace Conference. From then on the two men were in continuous contact, in Paris and in Washington. Working in an upper room of the White House until Mr. Wilson's retirement from the Presidency, then in the Wilson home on S Street, with full access to all the documents, Mr. Baker wrote the three-volume history of the Peace Conference which was published in 1922 under the title "Woodrow Wilson and World Settlement". He followed this by compiling and editing, in collaboration with Professor W. E. Dodd, "The Public Papers of Woodrow Wilson", in six volumes. Then, in January, 1925, almost a year after Mr. Wilson's death, Mrs. Wilson turned over to him all of her late husband's private papers and correspondence, without any reservations whatever as to his use of them.

What an opportunity for the biographer! Merely to list the documents which he had with which to work indicates the incalculable richness of the material out of which Mr. Baker has written these first two volumes of his biography of Woodrow Wilson, "Youth" and "Princeton."

There was, first, the President's official file, sixty-seven steel cases containing more than two hundred thousand letters and documents. Then there were fifty-eight letter-books containing copies of 29,000 letters written by Mr. Wilson while in the White House, and his confidential file, seventeen boxes containing more than thirty thousand more letters and documents. Add to that imposing list the personal file which the President kept in his own private study, comprising the ultra-confidential letters and messages relating to the War, some of them in secret code, many in the original shorthand of the President himself—some sixteen thousand documents here. In another set of files were all of the documents relating to the Peace Conference, including the secret minutes of the Council of Four. Still another treasure-trove was the collection of fifteen thousand letters

written by and to Mr. Wilson between his retirement from the Presidency and his death; another was the collection of his private letters and papers up to his inauguration as President, some twenty-five thousand documents here, mainly concerned with his career at Princeton as professor and President.

Five tons of Wilsoniana! Ten thousand pounds, in their packing cases, these memorabilia weighed as shipped to Mr. Baker's home at Amherst. And they are not the only sources from which he has drawn. In 1921 the author began a systematic correspondence with every person still living, of whom he could learn, who might have letters or personal records or recollections of events which would throw light on his subject. From the members of Woodrow Wilson's numerous family, from boyhood friends, college classmates, associates on the faculties of Bryn Mawr, Wesleyan and Princeton, and from hundreds of others there poured in a flood of intimate and illuminating detail. And the most valuable contribution of all was a corded and sealed wooden box containing, among other voluminous family records, the twelve hundred letters which had passed between Woodrow Wilson and the wife of his youth, Ellen Axson, between 1883, two years before they were married, and his entrance into National politics nearly thirty years later. Love-letters, every one of them, from the first to the last.

There is nothing left for the biographer of the future to discover about Woodrow Wilson. Ray Stannard Baker has it all. Not that every minute detail is included in these two volumes or will be contained in the volumes to follow. How many those will be neither the author nor his publisher professes to know. "I have necessarily had recourse to the generous use of asterisks," writes Mr. Baker, "but with this assurance, that they are asterisks of condensation, never of concealment. Without omissions, this book might easily run to fifty volumes, and nobody ever read it."

But the books as he has written them will certainly be read, by friends and foes alike of Woodrow Wilson. They present to both a new picture of the man, and a truer one

than has heretofore been drawn. A fascinating picture, the first two volumes of which, covering the first fifty-four years of Mr. Wilson's life, reveal the sources both of his strength and of his weaknesses.

We see the boy, first, in the light of his ancestry and youthful environment; an ancestry of great preachers, learned teachers and adventurous journalists, an environment in which the stern *Covenanter* tradition ruled the conscience but in which Southern courtliness and gaiety lent grace to the atmosphere of plain living and high thinking, where education was deemed the prime essential of life, in which Darwin was reconcilable with the Word. Lax in his formal schooling, we see him sitting at the feet of a brilliant and cultured father, learning to think clearly, reading omnivorously, spending in reflection and introspection many of the hours which more vigorous boys devoted to outdoor sports; for Woodrow Wilson never had robust health. The whole story of his life is constantly being interrupted with records of nervous breakdowns, physical collapses; a temporary paralysis of the right hand which compelled him to train the left to write, a rupture of the optic nerve which doomed him to lifelong partial blindness in one eye. These physical inequalities helped to make him the shy, retiring boy and man which he always was.

"He was never schooled in the habits of the crowd," writes Mr. Baker, revealing in a sentence the roots of the personal animosities and antagonisms which beset his later years. The crowd desires its heroes to be like itself, merely magically elevated by circumstance; it can understand a Coolidge, the apotheosis of the commonplace; it could not understand a Woodrow Wilson.

Mr. Baker draws a picture to help the discerning to understand him; a picture of an unusual boy, hanging a portrait of Gladstone over his desk at sixteen and announcing that he, too, intends to become a statesman! We see him engrossed in Walter Bagehot's exposition of the operation of the British Constitution, pondering in his youth the defects in the American system of government which made the Civil War possible, building on the foundation of these boyhood

experiences and reflections the project of adapting to American institutions the British scheme of a Government directly responsible to the people, a theme which, developed in his remarkable thesis "*Congressional Government*", became the cornerstone of his political philosophy. Only a man thoroughly imbued with the principle of "going to the country" over the heads of politicians and party leaders would have relied, as Woodrow Wilson was to rely, upon the support of the mass in preference to that of its chosen representatives. The appeal to the people was his sole political weapon. We see him forging it through all of the formative years, as a student at Davidson college and at Princeton, in the University of Virginia Law School and at Johns Hopkins; testing it with pen and voice throughout his teaching career; using it with effect in his great controversy as President of Princeton, as he was to use it with still more devastating effect in the later years to which these present volumes do not extend. It never failed him so long as he had the strength to wield it.

There was no anti-British tradition in Woodrow Wilson's inheritance, to deter him from attempting to adapt American politics to British principles. While Mr. Baker does not directly indicate that conclusion, he points out that, with the exception of Andrew Jackson, Woodrow Wilson was the only man who ever rose to the American Presidency without pre-Revolutionary American ancestry; all four of his grandparents were nineteenth-century immigrants, Scotch, Irish and English, with the Scottish strain dominant. And he was the only President who ever publicly compared his responsibilities and position with those of a British Prime Minister.

Tradition, indeed, meant little to Woodrow Wilson. Born in the South, reared in an atmosphere in which sectional hatreds were at their fiercest, in the dark days of the war between the States and the nightmare aftermath of Reconstruction, so completely a Southerner that until he entered Princeton he had never heard the "*Star-Spangled Banner*" played, he nevertheless saw so clearly what disaster would have ensued upon the success of the Confederacy that, while still

a student, he declared himself a Federalist, a Hamiltonian. Not until he was well along toward middle life did he come to hold Jefferson and the Jeffersonian principles in any considerable respect. In the evolution of his political *credo*, an evolution which Mr. Baker traces through forty years of documentation in the shape of personal memoranda, letters, public addresses and writings, Mr. Wilson found himself in the end more of a Jeffersonian than a Hamiltonian, but holding such a balance between the two that partisans of either could conscientiously follow him.

The great service which Mr. Baker has done for the historian of the future is to organize and present the narrative of these preparatory years in such fashion that the subject himself tells the story of his political mind. At fifty-four, when Woodrow Wilson at last entered politics, his character was fully formed, his principles sharply defined. How this character, these principles grew, with the aid of what books, what experiences, what loving friends (and how many of them there were!); what manner of man he was in his domestic and personal relations, behind the armor of reserve which guarded his

shyness against public intrusion; what, in short, was the reaction of his times and environment upon Woodrow Wilson is the theme of these first two volumes. The reaction of Woodrow Wilson upon his times began in 1910, and historians will be wrangling on the question of what that reaction was, one supposes, until the end of time. Every reader of the present volumes will, however, look forward with impatience to Mr. Baker's exposition of those later phases of Mr. Wilson's life.

It hardly needs to be set down that in manner as well as in matter the biography of Woodrow Wilson is an intensely interesting book; Mr. Baker's style has suffered no diminution of charm with the years. He is never dogmatic, pronounces no magisterial judgments, realizing that his task is to present his subject with all the impartiality of which a loving friend is capable, a task in which he has succeeded admirably. If there be a fault to be found it is that the author has succeeded too well in self-repression, in a natural revulsion against the "I said to Wilson and Wilson said to me" school of biography, of which far too many examples have found their way into print.

A SHELF OF RECENT BOOKS

SAGAS OF THE FORTUNE MAKERS

By Louis Sherwin

COMMODORE VANDERBILT. *By Arthur D. Howden Smith. McBride. \$3.50.*

CERTAIN RICH MEN. *By Meade Minnigerode. Putnam. \$3.50.*

JACQUES COEUR, MERCHANT PRINCE OF THE MIDDLE AGES. *By Albert Boardman Kerr. Scribner's. \$3.50.*

"WISE men and Gods are on the strongest side," chirruped the jovial Sir Charles Sedley, whose daughter became the mistress of King James II. A motto I piously commend to all biographers, especially in the United States. The lack of it left us for many years poisoned with an insufferably mawkish, hag-ridden conception of nineteenth century America. The fortune makers, the men of real ability and vitality, were held up before us as villains all. We were taught to look at them with the sickly vision of the Sunday school and the priggish envy of the Socialist lecturer. Serious biographers avoided the really interesting figures in the history of the republic, magnificoes of the railroads, mines and counting houses. They asked us to admire instead the floundering gesta of flatulent "statesmen", the pompous posturings of reformers, the sanguinary blunders of soldiers.

To any one with a groatsworth of wit it is quite obvious now that the best brains of this country in the last century went into what is loosely described as business. Even the least stupid of the clowns in Washington were a feeble lot compared to such stout sons of Belial as Collis P. Huntington and Commodore Vanderbilt, the subject of this lively, though partisan, biography by Arthur D. Howden Smith and one of Meade Minnigerode's "Certain Rich Men". Unscrupulous they were, to be sure, and grabbed whatever

they wanted that was not nailed down. It is true that they bribed legislatures, which probably was shocking. But it can hardly be urged that they corrupted the animals. You can't corrupt a carbuncle.

Men like old Van Derbilt (as he always signed himself) were fashioned by and for their times. Obstinate and weaker fellows who got in their way — which turned out to be the way of progress — they ruined without compunction. Such competitors as they could not buy up they devoured as voraciously as a Russian Kommissar will gobble a tubful of caviar. But even Meade Minnigerode, who takes the less admiring view of the cantankerous Commodore, admits that "the country gained by it, he and his stockholders profited". It is quite apparent, for instance, that if our country's solons had had their way we should still be having to change trains three times between New York and Chicago. In order to accomplish the necessary work the railroaders had undertaken, it was necessary either to bribe the cattle or shoot them, an alternative patently expensive and impractical.

Howden Smith has achieved a spirited piece of work, graphic, informative, even exciting. He freely admits the ungenial commodore's erotic wanderings, his brutality towards his family, his Boeotian manners and military habit of speech. (Like Bugs Baer's grandfather, Cornelius Van Derbilt never used oaths except in conversation.) All of which adds enormously to the picturesqueness of the character. For he was, after all, an amazing old Roman. When you consider that his greatest achievement, seizing a group of decrepit railroads and building them up into the New York Central system, was not even begun until he was in his seventieth year you are bound to be infected by some of his biographer's admiration.