

Wilson's Year of Crisis

WOODROW WILSON: LIFE AND LETTERS. Vol. VII: War Leader. April 6, 1917—Feb. 28, 1918. By Ray Stannard Baker. New York: Doubleday, Doran & Co. 1939. \$5.

Reviewed by RAYMOND J. SONTAG

WITH this volume Mr. Baker begins a courageous and laudable experiment. Abandoning all topical arrangement and all interpretation, he sets down, day by day, what Woodrow Wilson said, wrote, and did, and what others said, wrote, and did to the President. Domestic and international events which obviously affected Mr. Wilson's fortunes or actions are briefly noted. Cross references enable the reader to keep clear the evolution of problems, and an unusually full index makes topical analysis possible. The whole volume is as impersonal in composition as the chief usher's diary of appointments, upon which, indeed, Mr. Baker has drawn heavily. Unless the appetite of our generation has been hopelessly corrupted by biographers who serve their evidence to the reader not only premasticated, but predigested, this opportunity to form a relatively independent judgment on Wilson's war record should be welcomed.

Of course, the qualifying word, *relatively* independent, should be emphasized. Out of a mass of evidence, Mr. Baker has chosen those fragments which he thinks of importance. We cannot pass final judgment on his selection until the Wilson papers are made available to qualified students. To a vastly greater extent than in the earlier volumes, however, the reader is left to his own resources. It will be interesting to observe how many are willing to expend the effort needed to assemble a finished portrait from the fragments scattered through these pages.

To bring this cold chronological record to life, the reader must live through the war days, and live through them as Woodrow Wilson. He must picture himself in Washington almost uninterruptedly, including the summer, and without benefit of air-conditioning. The days begin easily, usually a round of golf, followed by a few hours in his study. Then come the afternoon appointments, on August 16, for instance:

Oliver P. Newman, commissioner of the District of Columbia; Representative Anthony of Kansas; Senator Fletcher of Florida and Representative Small of North Carolina; Senator King of Utah; Franklin D. Roosevelt, Assistant Secretary of the Navy; Secretary Daniels, Admirals Benson and Mayo and Captain Jackson; Judge Robert S. Lovett, within a few days appointed a member of the War Industries Board to superintend the priority of shipments; Attorney General Gregory.

Before and between appointments there

are letters to write, some of lasting importance: to Secretary Baker, on price-fixing; to Herbert Hoover on control of wheat and rye; to Theodore Wright explaining that "I dare not intervene by way of special exemptions in the matter of the army draft"; to Colonel House, outlining a reply to the Pope's plea for peace: "I am rushing this through my type-writer (and through my mind, too, for that matter), on a desperately busy day, and may not have expressed my conclusions happily, but I am in no uncertainty as to their substance."

Then, relaxation. If there are evening appointments, the President takes a drive



Harris & Ewing

Woodrow Wilson in 1918

in the late afternoon with Mrs. Wilson; then dinner, at which the desire of guests to talk business must be rigidly suppressed. If the evening is free, he works in the study until dinner, and goes to Keith's afterwards.

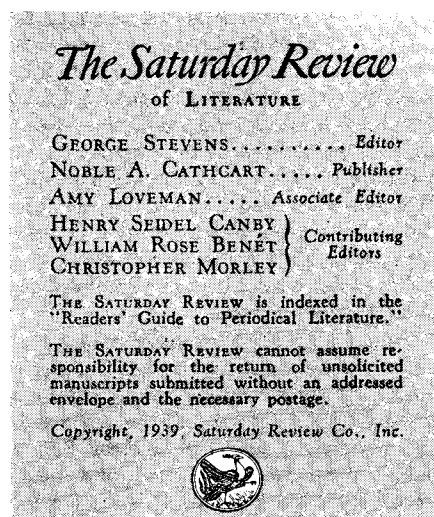
So it went. Golf to refresh the body; a drive or the theater to refresh the spirit. For the rest, people to be seen, reports to be read, letters to be written. People who beg, people with panaceas, people who bully, all demand decisions, decisions on little details—why do you insist on ending sentences with prepositions?—decisions involving the comfort and security of the American nation and other nations. The members of the shipping board fight like cats in a bag: they must be dumped overboard and a new start made. Mr. Hoover and Mr. McAdoo snarl at each other: they are indispensable and must be made to work together. Restrictions on the freedom of the press cause endless headaches: just where should the line be drawn? Gutzon Borglum pounds at supposed inefficiency in the production of aircraft; and in 1917 a President who is exceptionally well informed on questions of personnel can write to his secretary: "take this letter

yourself to whoever is the head of the aircraft production management and find out just how much is in it." Advisers must be—and were—given full responsibility, but they must not be allowed to forget that ultimate control over policy rested with the President: "I hope, my dear Mac, that hereafter you will let me see these messages before they are sent and not after, because they touch matters of vital policy upon which it is imperative that I should retain control."

Time for large questions of policy must somehow be found in the rush of detail. Railroads, food, shipping, the rights of neutrals, the conduct and the purpose of the war itself, upon all a clear line of action must be established and never abandoned. Mark all the passages relating, for instance, to war aims and coöperation with the Allies in this volume; then read them consecutively. A remarkably consistent course becomes obvious. The rule was, military and financial coöperation to the limit, but absolutely no merging of political activity. The United States was an "associated" power, not one of the Allies. This strategy was dictated by a steady recognition that the Allies were fighting for objectives which the President intended to oppose when the fighting ceased. These policies were embodied in the secret treaties which Balfour had, with certain exceptions, sent to Wilson (pp. 74, 75). To preserve freedom of action for the United States at the peace conference the President vigilantly resisted all efforts to establish community of political action. "When the war is over," he told Colonel House, "we can force them to our way of thinking, because by that time they will, among other things, be financially in our hands; but we cannot force them now" (p. 180). Therefore, he ignored the secret treaties, and revealed his own war aims only gradually. On one question of policy after another, it is possible to see a clear line from which Wilson never deviated.

Some years ago, Lord Cecil of Chelwood commented on the way in which continued responsibility destroyed a statesman's faculty of decision. "That seems to be one of the faculties that wear out soonest. To decide makes a considerable strain on the nervous force and the strain increases with apprehended unpopularity of the decision. Then ensues a search for some means to avoid effort. Postponement in its various forms is welcomed." Most of us, living over the first months of war through these pages, will marvel to discover how little of this characteristic vice of statesmen was to be found in Woodrow Wilson after many years of executive responsibility. "Take the whip hand," he admonished House; at the end of February, 1918, the President still had the whip hand.

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Writ in Sound

ALTHOUGH the Talking Book for the blind has existed barely six years as an accomplished fact, it had its genesis in the last century. It dates in reality from the day, in a New Jersey laboratory, when Thomas A. Edison's experimental wax cylinder gave forth its initial squeaks and squawks. Even at that date Edison foresaw the Talking Book.

It is difficult to understand why it took so long for Edison's invention to reach the blind as he foresaw. But this delay almost exactly parallels the history of finger-reading for the sightless. It is, after all, the blind who know best what the blind need. It was the Frenchman, Louis Braille, himself without sight, who invented the system of raised dots which bears his name. It was again a blind man, Robert B. Irwin, Executive Director of the American Foundation for the Blind, who proved a pathfinder in the new medium—that of sound. He, through the national organization which he directs, had developed braille printing in this country to a point where he had made the books for finger-reading both less cumbersome and less costly by half. But he felt sure that thousands in this country's blind population of 130,000 could never master braille. The American Foundation's investigations proved his surmise correct. They showed that only twenty-five per cent of the country's blind from coast to coast were reading braille with any degree of proficiency or pleasure.

He interested a philanthropic New Yorker who had long shown an interest in the blind, and she consented to underwrite a substantial part of the sums needed for experimentation. He interested the Carnegie Corporation with the same success and began two years of research. As a result, the engineers employed devised a long-playing disc, substantially lighter in weight and more durable than the commercial phonographic record. They devised a reading machine equipped with speed and tone regulators which the blind could easily manipulate, and on June 29,

1932, *The New York Times* announced the birth of the Talking Book.

As blind readers know it today, it consists of a portfolio of discs on which trained readers from the stage and radio have recorded much of all that is rewarding in classic and contemporary literature. The blind users know also the reading machine as something that resembles a portable phonograph, specially fashioned and simplified and easy to work and control by touch.

Although each side of these twelve-inch records plays for fifteen or sixteen minutes, it takes from fifteen to eighteen records to record an average size book. This means that it has a reading time of approximately nine hours. When one gets away from the average length book, however, one encounters figures like these: Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" runs to thirty-four double-sided discs and is the longest novel yet recorded by the American Foundation for the Blind. The longest book on the discs happens to be the New Testament, which takes forty records. Other books in the higher brackets include Thackeray's "Henry Esmond," thirty-two records; Paul Leicester Ford's "Janice Meredith," thirty-one; Wilkie Collins's "The Woman in White" and "The Moonstone," each requiring twenty-six discs.

Naturally, experimentation did not stop with the first successful volume. The chance lay ahead to make full use of this new literary medium to develop the full range of the Talking Book as a volume writ in sound. Mr. Irwin, whose interest increased with each new development, felt that blind readers might gain something of the author's personality and his meaning if they heard the author's actual voice. He persuaded several authors to read the opening "page" or two of their books on the Talking Book disc. John H. Finley and Congressman Kent E. Keller, for instance, did not stop when they had completed a single "page" or side, but read right through "A Pilgrim in Palestine," and "Prosperity through Employment," respectively, without relinquishing the task to a professional reader. In most cases, however, in which authors' voices are used, the bulk of the work is taken by a trained voice. Those whose voices initiate their volumes for the blind include Alexander Woolcott, Stephen Vincent Benét, Dr. Raymond L. Ditmars, William Beebe, and Eleanor Roosevelt.

The next logical step lay in introducing incidental music and sound effects. The recording of Dickens's "A Christmas Carol" offered an initial opportunity, and the strains of "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen," introduced to the blind that well-loved book. In recording Stephen Vincent Benét's poem, "John Brown's Body," the Foundation went a step further and used a number of voices to interpret various sections of the book and incidental music of the Civil War Period, as well as martial sounds that enhanced

the book's atmosphere. By that time it had, of course, recorded many of Shakespeare's plays as regular Talking Books. That is, a single reader embarked on each scene and act, reading the characters, locales, and stage directions as they appeared in the text. These plays, read by a single reader, proved so popular with the blind that the Foundation, with the encouragement of Mr. M. A. Roberts, of the Library of Congress, decided to take the next logical step and produce the plays in full, with complete casts of Broadway players, with all necessary sound effects and period music. Some of the plays acted in this way for the blind are Aeschylus's "Agamemnon," A. A. Milne's "Mr. Pim Passes By," Sophocles's "Oedipus, King of Thebes," George Bernard Shaw's "The Devil's Disciple," Shakespeare's "A Midsummer Night's Dream," and Eugene O'Neill's "Anna Christie." From all of which it will appear that the list of Talking Book titles from which blind readers may now choose, is a thoroughly comprehensive one. It ranges, in fact, from the Psalms of David to the stories of P. G. Wodehouse. It takes in its compass the standard books of fiction, of poetry, of biography, works on history, books of travel, and the fairy tales of science as told by Sir James Jeans, William Beebe, John Burroughs, and Robert A. Millikan.

Today most of the titles turned out in sound are selected by the Library of Congress. The American Foundation for the Blind has equipped a studio and trained a personnel which records the Talking Books without profit for the Library of Congress in order to make the appropriation for Talking Book records produce as many titles as possible. These are placed in the twenty-seven regional public libraries across the country which operate departments for the blind. The Talking Books travel from library to reader and back in stout cartons, postage free.

Most publishers have shown a heartening willingness to cooperate with the Talking Book in giving permission either free or at a nominal charge for the recording of works to which they hold the copyright. Actually, both the Foundation and the Library of Congress strictly adhere to the policy stamped on each record: "Recorded solely for the use of the blind."

Up to the present the American Foundation for the Blind has turned out 229 complete Talking Book volumes, and 2879 double-sided discs. Many of these records are short stories, poems, or essays—complete units in their own right.

The present writer, a Talking Book reader of two years' standing, is confident that the appreciation he feels for these volumes writ in sound is echoed by the constantly growing number of sightless readers across the country to whom science has opened up new intellectual worlds of profit and pleasure.

F. FRASER BOND.