

Angus Wilson's Union reunions

by Stephen Gray

FEW recent English-language authors of standing have written about the bond between the “old country” and its “brave new world of the colonies” as astutely as Angus Wilson. He was the one who in his post-Second World War British society of austerity and rationing, when even that grand tradition of the formal novel was thought to be dying a death, together with their Empire itself, would set about reviving themes of value and interest to a broader, new look and internationalising world. In the 1950s he launched titles like *Hemlock and After* and *Anglo-Saxon Attitudes*, which would become the new classics. Thereafter, until his death in 1991, he would persist in a well-publicised career as one of the key achievers in

the renewed literary canon. He was a spokesperson for traditional values, but with a tongue able to lash out with caustic humour at hypocritical old fogies when called upon.

Many of his fiction titles have been reissued recently through Faber Finds as well, so that a rather mealy-mouthed revaluation in *The Times Literary Supplement* (on 28 October 2011) seemed uncalled-for. This was by D. J. Taylor, one of Wilson's successors at the University of East Anglia, where he had held the first ever honorary chair in a new department of creative writing. In riposte Randolph Vigne in the Cape, one of Wilson's oldest acquaintances, could only record that Sir Angus, as he became, had always been a figure of “generosity of spirit and fascination

with the characters of others rather than his own". In other words, he was socially aware, with eyes and ears wide open beyond their stuffy island parish.

The biographical entries on Wilson usually stress that, despite being of stolidly Scottish stock, his mother of the same was actually South African. Few pursue the implications of what for his parents was a "mixed" marriage, as it were, which had begun with courtship in Natal. Born in the United Kingdom in 1913, Angus was the very last of six sons, a sort of afterthought or *laat lammetjie*, such that when he entered prep school one of his own elder brothers was his headmaster. This was on the East Sussex coast where they had long been resident in a succession of hotels and boarding houses, with his mother's demise once he was at Oxford aged eighteen.

But sentimental family links between their English South Coast and Natal province had evidently been kept up, since in May 1922 Master Angus Johnstone-Wilson sailed on the *Dunluce Castle* on what for his parents was a return to Durban. Their stay would last a year to a year and a half, although in trying to pin it down, as Margaret Drabble has put it, his time spent there "expanded in his memory to occupy great tracts of his childhood".¹ Specifically he remembered being treated as "a little baas" tended to by the "old Zulu servant George", and to being deposited at Berea Road Infants School by ricksha.

Better still, with the mainland British Wilson family growing depleted, in the Kloof meanwhile he was fussed over by a clan of some 55 bronzed relatives, mostly cousins, breeding successfully. They were the descendants of fortune-seekers who had emigrated in the 1860s,

originally as jewellers, and who had made good in the professions as stolid citizens.

Derived from this formative experience Wilson would write one of his earliest short stories, published in his first collection entitled *The Wrong Set* in 1949. The powerful "Union Reunion" is not only about a three-generation family get-together, but served to map out the territory which would henceforth be much his own in British fiction. The central character is one Laura who had quit the field in 1900 for "home", only to be returning from the previous post-war world in 1924 to the Umgeni Valley. With these white South African settlers having earned their spurs at Delville Wood, it only remains for them to pack into the family Fords, Humbers, Wolseleys and Oldsmobiles to converge on a Sunday lunch. This is held in the matriarch's palatial bungalow, bordered by *salvia* and by "Barbiton" daisies (spelling is always a hazard in Wilson and nor are the latter's blossoms "scarlet drops").

However, the menu they converge upon includes every type of roasted poultry, hand slaughtered, with homegrown vegs served by the "barefooted umfaan in his white cotton vest and shorts with red edgings" through to bright pink stewed guavas and granadillas, "their shells cracked and dented like pingpong balls". Wilson's recollection could work meticulously.

The postprandial conversations he could recall succinctly as well: "how the old pioneers landed from boats in baskets"; how because of "bloody Gandhi you can't get a decent houseboy any more"; how the modern youths are "getting spoony" and wanting "it"; after all, "blood's blood" and for now it's better

to sleep “with the revolver under the pillow”. The dowager grandmother whose eighty-eighth birthday is the reason for this celebration at last recognises visiting Laura: “The family doesn’t meet often enough,’ she mumbles, sinking into her dozy, pickled state again, ‘makes you think of something besides self for a bit!’”

Such is Wilson’s fullest fictional recreation in semi-autobiographical style of his youthful experience abroad, written with his usual sourpuss verve. Thereafter only passing mentions of South African colonial life with which his mainland readers would not be familiar occur, yet according to Drabble there is another short story of his, unpublished, stored away among his papers at the University of Iowa in Iowa City.

But in his story “Necessity’s Child” in *Such Darling Dodos* (1950) there are vivid beach scenes which do recall his youth in the subtropics. In 1958 when he published the novel *The Middle Age of Mrs Eliot*, she is the charity-inclined London lady who loses husband in a staunchly colonised Asian territory about to turn Communist; stranded there, she has to make do, but is not sufficiently game to try Africa yet.

In 1961 in *The Old Men at the Zoo* the action is literally kicked off by an imprisoned African giraffe when a curator, tiptoeing through clipped flamingos and pelicans, surprises it and is hooped to death. In 1963 in *Late Call*, which is a comedic swingeing of Little Britain’s New Town life bolstering against the metropolis of Angry Young Men and Beatlemania, of Coca-Cola and hamburgers, there is an extraordinary coda which establishes a larger perspective. Try evacuating to East Griqualand for a lucky break.

Besides such snide references, Wilson did keep up with South African matters after a fashion, particularly as a book reviewer. One instance is his response in *Encounter* to A.S. Mopeli-Paulus’s *Turn to the Dark*.² Obviously Wilson was nauseated by the ritual murder and cannibalism of old Basutoland, but without his recommendation the novel would most probably have received no press coverage at all.

Once he is no longer the librarian who wrote occasional well-boomed books, but a full-time celebrity figure into often plangent radio and press commentaries, he received a commission from *The Sunday Telegraph*. This was to make a return trip from “the old country” to his mother’s birthplace, which he now was given to calling “my second home”.

As a liberal from the New Society post-Suez, he was to face a country experiencing its very last days as the Union. Making cracks like “the British Empire even at its height was never more than a convenient outlet from the middle-class high-mindedness of Winchester and Rugby” to the newer generation of “some fifty members of my family”, all doing well enough as the anti-apartheid struggle began, was not to go down too well .

Flying in by Comet on 2 January 1961, over “6 000 miles of nothing”, he did manage in his three-week tour to fit in much more than sightseeing. In “that last outpost” of Natal he had tea with Alan Paton “on the stoep of his beautiful home” (and later would pay tribute to him in *New Republic*). They agreed that the local whites were more “outdoor people” than “reading men”. In the Cape where he was hosted by Vigne he met some African (as opposed to Afrikaner) nationalists, getting various details spot-on and some

wildly askew. (What he spelled as the “tottie-system” he figured was derived from “Hottentot”, rather than from the routine of maintaining labour loyalty with tots of wine, which was cheaper than food.) In Johannesburg he met with some Black Sashers and some Progressives in Houghton, where he saw “statues of nude African girls by the sides of deep blue swimming pools”.

The results were published as “South Africa: A Visit to my Mother’s Land” in two parts over February and March 1961, and collected with other travel pieces in *Reflections in a Writer’s Eye* in 1986. So the Anti-Apartheid Movement had gained a prominent intellectual and spokesperson against some practices of his foster lotus-land.

But before that visit Wilson had made the first of many stopovers in the United States, so that he could publish another piece, a stout round-up essay called “The Whites in South Africa”, for American readership in *Partisan Review*. Though much of this material overlaps with the journalism, he now considered the motherland bond “severed” with the coming of the Republic declared on 31 May. He has less time than ever for those “white dodos” of his own kin marooned on the “veldt” and “Plattenland” [*sic*], begrudging that they should have become so affluent when his own subject race were turning into Europe’s *nouveaux pauvres*. Only a few rather flashy highlights appear to have delighted him: an Adam Leslie satirical revue evading censorship; the opening run of the musical *King Kong* in the unsegregated Wits Great Hall; and the pennywhistlers of Eiloff Street [*sic*]. (With Wilson these dyslexic, Germanised local spellings do betray a certain secret arrogance, with proofreading that could never be

bothered, beyond the reach of *Hart’s Rules*.)

When his fellow novelist and friend Drabble loyally followed his South African trails in order to document her capacious biography of him, she tracked down many more local figures whom he admired, but whom perhaps he felt it would have been out of place to publicise abroad. There was the country’s “only satirist” in book form, Anthony Delius of *The Last Division* of 1959; the multilingual Uys Krige, who defied language segregation; and Nadine Gordimer, who he considered wrote for export anyway. Otherwise it would all be boycotting Outspan oranges, yet not the local chablis. *Jacquerie* imminent.

To keep the dollars flowing in 1977 Wilson published one of his last books, the biography *The Strange Ride of Rudyard Kipling: His Life and Works*. Principally this was undertaken for his photographer partner and himself to enjoy a tour of their subject’s youth in India (Simla, the boys in Lahore à la *Kim* and a stripped Mowgli). Kipling’s later South African years are grievously skimped, possibly out of embarrassment over the old bard’s tubthumping for Rhodes. On pages 299–300 he even attributes to a nearly senile Kipling some sketches which were published in *The Cape Argus Weekly*, not by him or any G.W., but by young Stephen Black. But with Wilson’s petulant denials aside, those Empire-building voyagers writing their bestsellers, after servants and sun and suffering from nostalgia, did have some traits in common. While as a public speaker on political issues Wilson could not make another return to South Africa once the Verwoerdian system was so to be boycotted, with the rest of the continent throwing

off its shackles, he did not cease to criticise his own “relics of old”. These he considered “gridlocked into a liberal humanism” that was not working either: they were so many Ronald Searle-type rentiers living off their overseas investments and queering the pitch. So in his dotage Wilson upped and settled in another sunny clime, in the South of France.

NOTES

1. Drabble, Margaret, *Angus Wilson: A Biography* (London, St Martin's Press, 1999), p. 33.
2. *Encounter*, 35, 1956, p. 86.