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William L. Wilson and Tariff Reform

Albert S. Abel

West Virginia University College of Law

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BOOK REVIEW

WILLIAM L. WILSON AND TARIFF REFORM. By Festus P. Summers. New Brunswick, New Jersey; Rutgers University Press. 1953. Pp. xi, 288. \$5.00.

"A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country." This review, in this *Review*, by commending to the attention of West Virginia lawyers a recent study of the life and public services of one of the most distinguished members of the Jefferson County bar, is aimed at inducing an interest which will avoid this reproach in this one instance.

William L. Wilson may fairly be claimed by West Virginia's legal profession as one of its own. His fame attaches, it is true, to his activities as statesman and educator; but he spent in the private practice of the law in Charles Town nearly as many years as in his public career in Washington and almost three times as many as in his combined tenures in the presidency of West Virginia and of Washington and Lee universities. It is true that Summers only gives incidental attention to Wilson as a lawyer although we do get interesting glimpses of his setting up a practice just after the Civil War (choosing, very shrewdly, a partner whose qualities complemented rather than duplicated his own), of his unsuccessful candidacy for the circuit judgeship, of his production of legal articles and addresses during the period of his government service, and of his consideration of association with a New York firm as a possible alternative at the time of his return to private life. The indications are clear that he was never in his own mind dissociated from the profession, that, as is commonly the case with those whose daily work is somewhat out of the main stream of its activities, professional attitudes and values were nevertheless so thoroughly ingrained as to shape and explain the quality of his contribution in the different context, in his case of public affairs.

Ironically his major accomplishment, the institution as postmaster general of the rural free delivery system, was not near to his heart and seems to have had only grudging support from him (although Jefferson County was the test tube where this nationwide service was given its first trial). He was, as the title of this biography indicates, vastly more interested and active in the campaigns against the protective tariff which commanded so much attention during the Cleveland and Benjamin Harrison administrations.

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This is not the place to examine the substantive merits of that controversy or of Wilson's contribution, by and large economically congenial and politically uncongenial to me personally, which Summers explores with great understanding and skill. We live in rougher days when cruder devices of economic nationalism than the tariff must be reckoned with. In itself the whole controversy has only the remote and faded interest of a dried leaf from some forgotten autumn pressed in the pages of an unread book though the basic interests and values involved retain their full vitality. Of continuing importance, too, to the lawyer is the illustration of the operation of the legislative process as a reshaping of policy to meet the demands of maneuver and circumstance, a matter relevant whenever issues of the interpretation or application of statutes are involved. Summers develops this with great dexterity in his account of the emergence of the successive tariff laws of the period.

This book is a penetrating and well-written study which could be read with pleasure and profit regardless of the subject's geographical or professional derivation. As a study of a distinguished West Virginia lawyer, it has a special value for West Virginia lawyers.

ALBERT S. ABEL

Professor of Law, West Virginia University