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The Cabinet Diary of William L. Wilson

Marlyn E. Lugar
West Virginia University College of Law

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BOOK REVIEW


William L. Wilson was born in Jefferson County, West Virginia, May 3, 1843. After service with the Confederate Army during the Civil War, he became an assistant professor of Latin at Columbian College, now George Washington University, from which he had graduated. While serving in that capacity, he studied law. Although he received his law degree in 1867, he did not return to West Virginia to practice law here until 1871, following the repeal of the test oath in this state which had barred former Confederates from the practice of law. At Charles Town he prospered as a lawyer and became recognized as an orator, educator and civic leader.

In 1882 he was elected president of West Virginia University. Three weeks after he assumed the duties of the presidency, he accepted the Democratic nomination for Congress in the second district of West Virginia. Being elected, he left the University in June, 1883, to begin his service in Congress which continued without interruption until 1895.

Grover Cleveland appointed Wilson Postmaster General, and after confirmation by the Senate he assumed office April 3, 1895. He terminated his public services at the end of Cleveland's administration in March, 1897, and became president of Washington and Lee University, the position in which he served until his death on October 17, 1900.

His diary covers the last fourteen months of his tenure as a member of the Cabinet—from January 1, 1896, to March 6, 1897. If he kept a diary during the first nine months he was in office, it has not been located. Entries appear for most of the days in the period covered, although there is evidence in the diary that they may not have always been made immediately after the events occurred.

Newton D. Baker served as private secretary to Wilson during the period covered by this diary, and later served as Secretary of War in the Cabinet of Woodrow Wilson. The thirteen-page introduction written by him in 1932 serves to illuminate many of the passages found in the diary. It offers a standard for judging how
characteristic are the diary entries. Although a clearer picture of Wilson’s nature could not be portrayed in such brevity, the manner in which the many incidents are described therein makes one wish that more about the acquaintanceship between the two men had been narrated. Enough is here, however, to whet the reader’s appetite as to the contents of the diary.

The preface and biographical foreword prepared by the editor provide the setting in which the diary was written and more about Wilson’s background. Since the diary apparently was not written for publication, the explanatory footnotes to many of the passages make the comments on many of the problems and events of that period more enlightening. The editor admits that such footnotes have been used sparingly in the belief that the diary speaks for itself. More of these footnotes would make the reading more interesting for those of us who are not as well informed on historical events or who need our memories refreshed. Nevertheless, there is sufficient additional information of this nature in the introductory material to make the reading of this diary fascinating and informative. Not having been written for publication, the reader is taken “behind the scenes with full and frank comment on men as well as measures.”

Aside from the comments on “men and measures,” much is found herein concerning the political picture of the period and the social life of cabinet members during this era. Family problems of the Postmaster General are not neglected. With this diversification of subject matter, it might be thought that the entries would skip from one thought to others with some jumbling. However, even though the manuscript is printed substantially as it was written, Wilson’s style of writing and the editor’s paragraphing permit not only easy transition from one subject to another but also, for those so inclined, allow reading of comments on only those matters in which the reader may have a special interest. In addition, the volume has an excellent index, and the glossary of persons therein serves to identify most of the persons mentioned in the diary.

Wilson’s fluent style of writing makes for easy reading, and his apparent humor makes the effort enjoyable. For a former professor of Latin, there are few phrases in that language, but enough to evidence his past experience. Many comments of other prominent persons are set forth in the diary. The strength of feeling expressed in many of Wilson’s comments comes as a surprise in a diary even
though publication was not anticipated. In brief, the volume is very interesting, especially for one interested in the reactions of a well informed West Virginian as to the men and events of that era.

Publication of this diary was made possible by a grant-in-aid by the West Virginia University Foundation from its History Publishing Fund, which fund was recently established to publish and stimulate the writing of West Virginia books. The editor of this diary advises that all royalties received from this book will be donated to this Fund in order that they may be used for the publication of other West Virginia books. One hopes that other books equally as fascinating to West Virginians may soon be forthcoming as a result.

Marlyn E. Lugar.

Professor of Law, West Virginia University.
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