



Wilder, Thornton 1897-1975

by Jeff Johnson

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.
Entry Copyright © 2006 glbtq, Inc.
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

Pulitzer Prize-winning American playwright and novelist Thornton Niven Wilder was a prolific writer prominent in twentieth-century literature. A discreet homosexual, his sexual proclivities were kept far out of the limelight.

Wilder's mainstream literary works are landmarks of American literature, but they reveal scant traces of his homosexuality. He can be credited for acting as a behind-the-scenes ambassador for the Lost Generation, making their avant-garde themes accessible to a middle-brow American public.

Family Background and Education

Wilder was born in Madison, Wisconsin on April 17, 1897, though he spent most of his boyhood in Berkeley, California. As an adolescent, Wilder isolated himself in academic projects, heeding his father's admonitions for constant self-improvement.

Wilder's entire family was one of achieving, industrious, self-reliant Congregationalists with a strong work ethic. His father was the outspoken editor of a small-town newspaper in Madison, Wisconsin. In 1906 he was appointed U. S. consul general to Hong Kong and, later, to Shanghai. After retiring from the foreign service in 1914, he directed the Yale-in-China Association and became known as a popular public speaker.

Wilder's mother, Isabella Nevins Wilder, was especially close to her son and encouraged his literary aspirations. The daughter of a Presbyterian clergyman from Dobbs Ferry, New York, she wrote poetry, was adept at foreign languages, and took a leadership role in civic affairs. In 1920, she became the first woman elected to public office in Hamden, Connecticut.

Wilder's twin brother died at birth, but his other siblings achieved varying levels of prominence. His older brother Amos became a well-known theologian; his sister Charlotte became a poet who, after a promising beginning, suffered a debilitating nervous breakdown that resulted in her being institutionalized for much of her life; his youngest sister Janet became a zoologist. The sibling with whom Wilder was closest was Isabel, who never married; she and Wilder lived together in Hamden, Connecticut after the deaths of their parents.

In his childhood Wilder bridged the cultural gap between his father's private schools in China and his mother's liberal/artistic household in Berkeley. His roving intellectual enthusiasms (James Joyce, Willa Cather, Marcel Proust, Lope de Vega, Johann von Goethe, small-town America) blossomed in his adolescence, especially his interest in theater.

At fifteen the budding playwright was cast as Lady Bracknell in Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, but his strict father forbade this drag role. Later, Wilder delighted in playing central characters in his own plays, such as the Stage Manager in *Our Town* and Mr. Antrobus in *The Skin of Our Teeth*.



A 1946 portrait of Thornton Wilder as Mr. Antrobus in his play "The Skin of Our Teeth." Photograph by Carl Van Vechten. Courtesy Library of Congress Prints and Photographs Division.

Wilder graduated from Berkeley High School in 1915 and then entered Oberlin College, where he studied Greek and Latin. In 1917, he transferred to Yale University. After serving eight months in the Coast Artillery Corps during World War I, he returned to Yale, where he received his B. A. in 1920. In 1926, he was awarded an M. A. in French literature from Princeton.

Wilder's first professional theatrical success was *The Trumpet Shall Sound* (1926), an allegorical farce about servants taking over their employer's house. This was followed closely by the critical success of his first published novel *The Cabala* (1926). Inspired by a trip to Italy, the novel details the interwoven lives of privileged aristocrats engaged in power struggles into which the visiting American narrator is recruited to play a crucial role.

Friendships among the Lost Generation

Wilder described himself as "The only writer of the Lost Generation who did not 'go' to Paris," a statement that was not literally true but which expresses his attachment to American life and values even as many of the writers of his generation yearned to escape what they saw as the stifling conformity of small-town life.

Wilder's warmest friendships included Gertrude Stein and Alice Toklas whom he met in Chicago in 1934, when he was teaching comparative literature at the University of Chicago. Through them he befriended many of the gay artists in their circle. Like other writers of this period, Wilder's energies were devoted to the production of vibrant artworks that were allusive and symbolic, converting his personal circumstances into universal myths.

Broaching "The Subject"

For all the liberation of the Jazz Age and the period following, homosexuality was only discreetly discussed among writers of the Lost Generation. Samuel Steward (1909-1993), Wilder's friend, recorded a conversation in the 1930s with Gertrude Stein in a rare broaching of "The Subject":

"Suddenly she grabbed my knee. 'Sammy,' she said, 'do you think that Alice and I are lesbians?' I had a genuine hot curl of fire up my spine. 'I don't see that it's anybody's business one way or another,' I said. 'Do you care whether we are?' she asked. 'Not in the least,' I said. . . . 'It bothers a lot of people,' Gertrude said. . . . 'Did Thornie tell you?' 'Only when I asked him a direct question and then he didn't want to answer, he didn't want to at all. He said yes he supposed in the beginning but that it was all over now.' Gertrude laughed. 'How could he know. He doesn't know what love is. And that's just like Thornie.'"

Wilder seems to have been regarded even by his closest friends as a kind of Henry James figure, somewhat sheltered and cerebral, and frightened of sex.

The relationship between Wilder and his one documented companion, Steward, may have begun as a furtive sexual fling in Zurich in 1937. Steward, a writer, pornographer, tattoo artist, and one-time college professor, was, in pointed contrast to Wilder, open and adventurous. He wrote popular erotic gay works in the 1970s under the pseudonym Phil Andros.

Wilder seems to have backed away from Steward after several awkward encounters. Intimate affection eventually became fond intellectual acquaintance. Typical of some gay men of the era, Wilder preferred to play the role of the perennial Respectable Bachelor. Although he never publicly discussed his homosexuality, later in his life he is believed to have had discreet affairs with younger men.

Despite his reticence concerning his sexuality, Wilder was a notably convivial man who enjoyed friendships with writers and actors and academics.

A Private Public Life

Wilder is the only writer to receive Pulitzer Prizes for both literature (*The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, 1927) and drama (*Our Town*, 1938; *The Skin of Our Teeth*, 1943).

In his novel, *The Bridge of San Luis Rey*, a rope suspension bridge in Peru snaps, plummeting five people to their deaths. A Franciscan monk, Brother Juniper, witnesses the event. He investigates the accident, seeking to justify God's ways, wondering why these seemingly random five people were meant for that particular fate. Or--the question that haunts the book--was there any meaning at all?

Heaven's My Destination (1935), Wilder's first novel set in America, satirizes an evangelical traveling salesman and fundamentalism. For many years the author regarded this as his best work.

In the play, *Our Town*, one of the twentieth century's most frequently produced dramas, the small town of Grover's Corners, New Hampshire is a sort of Anytown, U.S.A. Wilder presents a charming and folksy celebration of the daily lives, the simple loves, and the hopeful relationships of a typical American town's inhabitants. We witness their traditions of church, childhood, marriage. We confront the town's deceased ancestors in the most timeless tradition of all: death.

The Skin of Our Teeth is a broad apocalyptic farce in which the many Ages of Man clash on one stage. Ice Age meets Global Warming meets War meets Disaster. Dinosaurs roam the backyard. Archetypes collide. Homemaker battles with Femme Fatale. Climatic and man-made catastrophes destroy civilizations through time-lapsed millennia, but the Family of Man (ably represented by the Antrobus household) manages to rebuild with comical persistence, always surviving by the skin of our teeth. Produced in the midst of World War II, the play offers optimism while frankly acknowledging the perils that beset human life and continuity.

During World War II, Wilder enlisted in the armed services, eventually becoming a Lieutenant Colonel in the Air Force and earning the Legion of Merit and the Bronze Star.

In the 1940s, Wilder also wrote the screenplay for Alfred Hitchcock's *Shadow of a Doubt* (1943).

After the war, he reworked an earlier play, *The Merchant of Yonkers* (1938), a comedy set in New York in the 1880s, that features the adventures of a neighborhood matchmaker, Dolly Levi, who eventually snares herself the perfect husband. It was not much of a success originally, but it became *The Matchmaker* (1955), a popular vehicle for Ruth Gordon, and it evolved into the even more popular Jerry Herman-Michael Stewart musical *Hello, Dolly!* (1964).

In *The Alcestiad* (1955), Wilder reworked the Greek legend of Alcestis, featuring a wife, mother, and queen who gives her life for her husband Admetus. She was loved by Apollo, and was brought back from hell by Hercules. This was likely Wilder's most troubled play, taking many years to write, and never very popular. He conceived it as an imitation evening at an Ancient Greek theater, complete with a short comic satyr play called *The Drunken Sisters*.

Amid this theatrical flurry, Wilder also managed to produce more novels. *The Woman of Andros* (1930) concerns a courtesan's passionate love for a younger man. In *The Ides of March* (1947), Julius Caesar is a convenient historical character around whom Wilder weaves his own musings about ultimate power. *The Eighth Day* (1967) begins as a murder mystery where a man is wrongly convicted of killing a neighbor. The adventures of his escape and the repercussions of the murder become occasions for meditations upon time, identity, and existence.

Because of their folksy storytelling and economic presentation, some of Wilder's works became instant American classics. *Our Town* and *The Bridge of San Luis Rey* have joined the canon of high school reading

lists.

Although Wilder's plays were considered experimental in their staging and his works often reflect the influence of avant-garde writers and thinkers, his art is packaged with a down-to-earth wholesomeness designed to appeal to middle-class American audiences.

Still, it is a mistake to think that Wilder's works are complacent or unchallenging; he always nudged the American values he depicted with provocative afterthoughts.

"The chief thing to remember about conventions is that they are soothing," Wilder observes in his essay, "American Characteristics"(1950). Behind a mask of soothing conventionality, Wilder hid deliberate suggestions of a dark side.

For example, his one-act-play "The Happy Journey to Trenton and Camden" (1931) purports to be a merry family car outing. But the "journey" turns out to be anything but a "happy" one because the family is visiting an older married daughter who has just given birth to a stillborn baby.

Homosexual Traces

Wilder's plays and novels contain no explicit gay themes. Nor is there substantial gay subtext to decode. His sexuality was so well-closeted that it is scarcely hinted at even "between-the-lines."

It could be speculated that the character of Simon Stimson in *Our Town* is Wilder's poignant portrayal of a man whose sensitivities and sexuality have been stifled by the enforced conformity of a small town. Stimson is the town drunk and organist for the Congregational Church. The character commits suicide, suggesting that his is the tragedy of a closeted gay man.

The title character in Wilder's last novel *Theophilus North* (1973) is an older bachelor artist in Newport, Rhode Island. His genteel position as a tutor from the outside world makes him privy to the personal problems of many of the town's elite. Like Wilder's first novel, *The Cabala*, *Theophilus North* is an anthology of various characters' stories. North finds himself acting as a pivotal player and advisor to their lives and may reflect Wilder's own experience as a tutor in Newport when he was a young man.

Conclusion

Thornton Wilder died on December 7, 1975. His many honors, in addition to three Pulitzer Prizes, included the Gold Medal for Fiction from the American Academy of Arts and Letters (1952), the first Presidential Medal of Freedom (1962), and the National Book Committee's Medal for Literature (1968).

In Wilder's public and personal life, the "love that dared not speak its name" usually remained unspoken. Nevertheless, this devoted acolyte of art spoke volumes about the redeeming power of understanding, hope, and love in all its forms. One can only wonder whether he might have addressed more explicitly the question of homosexuality (and its repression) had he lived in a more tolerant time or place.

Bibliography

Blank, Martin, ed. *Critical Essays on Thornton Wilder*. New York: G. K. Hall, 1996.

_____, et al. *Thornton Wilder: New Essays*. West Cornwall, Conn.: Locust Hill Press, 1999.

Castronovo, David. *Thornton Wilder*. New York: Frederick Ungar, 1986.

Harrison, Gilbert A. *The Enthusiast. A Life of Thornton Wilder*. New Haven and New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983.

Keehnen, Owen. "A Very Magical Life: Talking with Samuel Steward." 1993. [www.glbtc.com](http://www.glbtc.com/sfeatures/interviewssteward.html): <http://www.glbtc.com/sfeatures/interviewssteward.html>

Lifton, Paul. *Vast Encyclopedia: The Theatre of Thornton Wilder*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1995.

Thornton Wilder Society Webpage. <http://www.tcnj.edu/~wilder/>

Wilder, Thornton. *The Journals of Thornton Wilder. 1939-1961*. Donald Gallup, ed. New Haven and London. Yale University Press. 1985.

_____. *American Characteristics and Other Essays*. Donald Gallup, ed. New York: Harper & Row, 1979.

About the Author

Jeff Johnson holds a doctoral degree from Carnegie Mellon University. His Political Science dissertation included research documenting the emergence of gay civil rights in third world countries. He also holds a B.S. degree in Computer Science from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga. He lives in New Orleans where he works as a writer/consultant for technical publications.