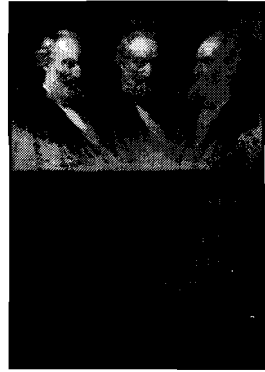


Marinell Ash *et al.*, Edited by Elizabeth Hulse. *Thinking with Both Hands: Sir Daniel Wilson in the Old World and the New*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999. Pp. xv, 352, illus.



Few among the University of Toronto's students today recognize the Daniel Wilson after whom a St. George Street residence is named. They could be forgiven for assuming he was some Titan of capitalism who exchanged a few of his dollars for immediate accolades as a wise benefactor and a spurious and adventitious immortality, rather than a president of their institution. Less well remembered than his contemporaries, Principals Grant of Queen's and Dawson of McGill, Wilson was at best a second tier figure among Victorian scholars, though at the front rank in Canada.

Daniel Wilson (1816–1892) was a Scot or, more to the point, an Edinburgh man and a contemporary of evolutionist Robert Chambers, photography pioneer Octavius Hill and medical innovator James Young Simpson. Auld Reekie would mark Wilson as firmly as it had the earlier generation of giants of the Scottish Enlightenment. Educated in the classics at the Edinburgh High School, he later attended lectures at (but apparently did not matriculate from) the University of Edinburgh. Wilson rounded out his education with books and the variety of opportunities for self-education afforded in Edinburgh and London. He never earned a university degree, though St. Andrew's—for reasons not well explained—granted him an LL.D.

The two-handed thinking alluded to in this book's title referred, among other things, to Wilson's training as an engraver. To pursue this calling Wilson spent some five years in London. There he had the unenviable task of engraving J.M.W. Turner's *Regulus*—at a hundred pounds for two years' work. Although his time as an engraver would be brief, he never ceased drawing. Stacey claims, in his chapter on Wilson as artist, that this commitment “bespeaks a preference for observed fact and a faith in objective truth over abstract theory, received precepts, and second-hand gossip” (239) is a rather wide-ranging one, given Wilson's artistic practice was common among Victorians of his station. It was also during his London years that Wilson married and underwent a religious conversion. Born a Baptist (if such a thing may be said), Wilson joined the

Church of England, in which he would remain an active member, a move that would inform his career rather less than might be supposed.

If Wilson's public reputation depends on a single matter it is his minting in English (it had been circulated earlier in French) of the word "prehistoric." It was, though, a word awaiting coinage when, as Van Riper has explained, awareness of humankind's antiquity exploded in the middle of the nineteenth century. Assessing that reputation is a bit like the proverbial story of describing an elephant by touch: of which aspect of the beast do you grasp hold? For example, in Scotland Wilson is mostly remembered as an antiquarian. That antiquarianism had a practical bent as he fought for historical preservation and proper restoration. He excoriated Edinburgh's Board of Commissioners for City Improvements: *Foul fa' the Commissioners wi' their improvements, / Their biggins, an' oowkins, an' sweepins awa;* (46)

Wilson, although an anti-Darwinist, chose scientific and not religious grounds for his opposition and was moderate in the extent and expression of that opposition. We are given a rather Whiggish assessment of Wilson as anthropologist, old-fashioned in his non-acceptance of biological evolution but progressive in his eschewing of racialism—the authors resort to the term "racism" rather too easily—in anthropological thought.

The accounts, principally by Ash and Hulse, of the private Daniel Wilson although not uncritical are certainly generous. But then again Wilson seems to have been a pleasant fellow who combined personal probity with honestly held convictions and an open mind. If it is difficult to infer a portrait of his wife Margaret from Daniel's writings, his feelings show in his bleak response to an unwanted knighthood: "[W]hat are most covetable honors, now that my Maggie is gone?" (276).

Of greatest interest to most readers of this journal are the chapters on Wilson's Canadian career as professor and administrator. Harold Averill and Gerald Keith offer a lengthy chapter on "Daniel Wilson and the University of Toronto." Wilson gained appointment to the chair of history and English literature at the new non-denominational University College in 1853. Despite his hopes for an appointment at a Scottish university he would spend virtually the rest of his life at Toronto, turning down offers to head McGill and what would become the University of Western Ontario. Wilson became successively President of University College (which did the teaching) and the University of Toronto (which examined and granted degrees).

The tale of the growth and development of the university over which Wilson presided and the often public controversies which attended it will surprise no one already familiar with the history of the provincial university

in this era. But the telling of the story is enlivened by Wilson's always-penetrating, sometimes-acerbic, but never mean-spirited observations, and is a good introduction to the University's post-King's College years.

Then as now, no president, however devoted to his scholarship, could long interrupt his attention to matters of finance. Although the present-day scale of public and private funding for universities would have staggered Wilson, the account of his relations with Vice-Chancellor William Mulock suggests Wilson might recommend supping with a longer spoon. In a peculiar argument, Wilson pressed the case for higher education for women as a counterweight to the pernicious trend towards industry-oriented and professional training for men, which he dismissed as "mere trafficking with knowledge" (167). Often forgotten in accounts of the famous 1890 burning of the University College building is the loss, as well as the library and museum, of another significant intellectual resource—professorial lecture notes. We can commiserate with Professor Wilson as he boasted that classes resumed without interruption the Monday after the fire while privately his spirits flagged as he faced a daily scramble to write up new notes from memory.

Heather Murray assesses Wilson the *littérateur* including his duties as professor of English literature, among the earliest to be so styled. The relative neglect of this aspect of Wilson's career should in some respects surprise us since, as Murray reminds us, the Scottish university system can be said to have originated the academic study of English literature. Murray argues that the stamp which Wilson put on English studies at Toronto can still be seen in its English Department (where she teaches) today with its "characteristic blending of literary and historical studies." (217) Murray also develops further the issue of Wilson's stand on education for women (of which he approved) and coeducation (of which he disapproved) at University College. She gives us some insight into the Wilson of the classroom through his students—including Stephen Leacock, who found Wilson's delivery so distinctive that he was regaling radio listeners with it in the 1930s.

One of Daniel Wilson's successors as University of Toronto President, Claude Bissell, wrote his *Halfway Up Parnassus* at perhaps the last moment when one could reasonably expect all with a university education to recognize the allusion. If Wilson's was not yet an age of full mass literacy it one at least of elite literacy. It was a time also when university leadership meant in the first instance *scholarship* not *management*.

That Wilson was an "ambidextrous polymath" (234) is at least half true. The noun in that assessment is perhaps as much a reflection of our own lamentable standards as it is a description of the breadth of

Wilson's intellectual scope—he lived in an age of less specialization. The book's dust jacket blurb description of Wilson as a well-rounded scholar seems closer to the mark. 'Polymath' also, I would suggest, misses the essential unity to Wilson interests: his concern with time. This shows up in Wilson's antiquarian pokings into Edinburgh's Old and New Towns, his Shakespeare studies, his ethnology, archaeology and history, his coinage of "prehistory", participation in the Darwin debates, and even his engraving of Regulus.

Wilson lived in an era when disciplinary boundaries were more fluid but also in flux, partly because of an emergent professionalism but partly also because of revolutions in time scales. This book offers valuable insight into how a Victorian scholar worked with the past, with respect to sources, intellectual problems, institutions, patronage and publishing.

With no full-length study of Wilson published in seventy years, the appearance of this work is particularly welcome. After her untimely death Marinell Ash's work was continued by the well-qualified specialists who contribute to this volume. They include University of Toronto archivist Harold Averill, anthropologist Bruce Trigger, and Suzanne Zeller, whose chapter on science in Victorian Ontario is a gem.

The result is not so much a biography, though it is catalogued as such, but rather a series of essays. Hulse exercised a rather light editorial hand in bringing the book together. Some essays cross-reference each other but not systematically. Not all are in agreement. Ash, McCardle, and Trigger, for instance, present three quite different accounts of Wilson's stand on mono- vs poly-genism. As well, authors have made their own decisions on what we are expected to know. Thus we are told parenthetically that Hogmanay is New Year's Eve (17) and that a croft is a smallholding (69), but not that Mons Meg is a cannon (46). Similarly one chapter is confident that readers will be aware that Canada West is the future Ontario (97) while a later chapter supplies that information (139).

This is not the book it would have been had Marinell Ash lived. On the evidence, that would have been a fine book, but a true scholarly biographical monograph on Wilson still awaits writing. As it stands *Thinking with Both Hands* is not a lesser but a different book that will be a point of departure for subsequent Wilson studies. (The lists of archival sources and of Wilson's own publications alone make it valuable.) It will join the works of McKillop, Berger, and Zeller as a standard on the place of science and education in Victorian Canada. It is in the end a worthy tribute to two scholars, Professors Ash and Wilson.

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