WILSON, Charles (1891–1968)

COAL MINER AND POET

Charles Wilson was born on 18 January 1891 in the pit village of Willington, seven miles south-west of Durham city, to coal miner John Wilson and Mary Ann Wilson (née McBride). Attending Willington Board elementary school, Wilson won several prizes for writing compositions. In spite of his evident ability, as one of eleven children Wilson had to leave school aged thirteen for work in the mine. Attending night school allowed him to continue his education. On joining the Durham Miners' Association (DMA), Wilson soon became a staunch trade unionist, and, in 1909, he was elected to Brancepeth No.2 lodge committee (in having two lodges, Brancepeth was an unusual Durham pit). Two years later, aged twenty, he became secretary of Brancepeth 'C' pit branch of the Northumberland and Durham Miners' Permanent Relief Fund. Only three months after that he gained an even higher lodge position, that of treasurer. Further advancement came in 1912 when Wilson was elected assistant checkweighman. Aged only twenty-one, he was possibly the youngest holder of this highly regarded post in the northern counties.

In early 1914, aged twenty-three, Wilson had his first work published by a Durham City based company. A short book, *Light and Liberty* presented a rather muddled case for the need for the planned Land Reform Bill. Several of the themes of Wilson's poetry first emerged here in prose form. The preface dealt with rural depopulation and the problems of urban living, arguing for a move back to the land. Wilson made much of his case employing examples of rural Irish poverty. He discussed the behaviour of absentee landlords 'making hell' for their tenants. Many of the numerous photos reproduced in *Light and Liberty* also had Irish themes, from several pictures of peasants outside their homes to one of Daniel O'Connell's grave in Dublin's Glasnevin cemetery. There was also one isolated mention of the need for Irish home rule. Wilson noted that some of the 'most corrupt and meanest' men were earls and dukes, some of whom engaged in the 'villainy' of gambling on the stock exchange. He also regarded gentlemen's clubs as 'intoxicating and degrading' as public houses [Wilson (1914) 61–2]. The workingclass, according to Wilson, needed to be educated as well as instructed. There was an urgent necessity to reduce working hours to allow time for education 'so that working men may, morally and intellectually, rise in due accordance with their higher status in the world of trade and politics' [Wilson (1914) 9]. The

increasing political intelligence of the working class, Wilson argued, meant that it needed a greater role in politics. Wilson also made a case for working-class people to have houses of their own. However, Wilson was no class warrior. He regarded the Land Reform Bill as a means of bringing about a 'sensible drawing together of classes' and repeated this claim several times [Wilson (1914) 5]. Instead of leading to 'revolutionary excess', the legislation would 'strengthen the fabric of the constitution' [Wilson (1914) 69]. The government had the power to allay the 'restless spirit abroad' in what were clearly 'no ordinary times' [Wilson (1914) 81].

At this stage in his political development, Wilson was clearly a Liberal. He praised the Liberal government's Old Age Pension Act and other legislation such as National Insurance, and anticipated that the Land Reform Bill would be the government's greatest achievement. For Wilson, the most significant individual in the government was Lloyd George, and devoted a good deal of *Light and Liberty* to extravagant praise for him. Wilson regarded Lloyd George, 'the model of disinterested uprightness and public spirited statesmanship in a position of exceptional difficulty', almost literally, as the saviour of the rural poor [Wilson (1914) 10]. Lloyd George's life 'has adorned his doctrine: his goodness gave a pathos to his ministrations that melted the scoffer' [Wilson (1914) 26]. Indeed, Wilson implicitly likened Lloyd George to Jesus Christ when he noted the Liberal chancellor 'visited the sick and with the help of providence comforted the dying' [ibid]. Perhaps in Lloyd George, Wilson saw someone similar to the man that he could himself become; 'of moderate birth and station – an inspired poet and brilliant orator' [Wilson (1914) 9]. Although a young man, Wilson's political outlook was that of the once established and dominant, but rapidly declining, Lib-Lab tendency within the DMA. The contrast with young contemporary Durham miner militants like Will Lawther and George Harvey (an anarchist and industrial syndicalist respectively in the pre-1914 period) could hardly have been more striking. Lawther and Harvey's politics both moderated in the inter-war period (Lawther's far more so). But both (especially Lawther) were to have a great deal more influence on the politics of the DMA than Wilson.

The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 scuppered the land reform legislation Wilson supported so enthusiastically. However, it also provided the conditions for him to develop his passion for literature, and poetry in particular. In response to news of the first casualty of the war from his village, a man who left a large family in mourning, Wilson wrote a small book of

poems. This sold well in the locality and the proceeds were donated to the bereaved family. This local success was soon overshadowed when Wilson sold 30 000 copies of his poem 'The Battle of Life' to raise finances for the National Relief Fund. Similarly, several thousand copies of another poem, 'Arouse ye tyrants bend your knee, don't do as devils would decree', were sold on behalf of the British and French Red Cross Societies [Wilson (1916?) 8]. These successes made Wilson relatively well-known as a poet outside his native county. He apparently received 'several offers of advancement … literary and otherwise, but he sought not exultation, preferring rather to remain at the humble sphere of labour, and honour to which the miners had appointed him' [Wilson (1916?) 9]. Still, his literary success gave him the opportunity to publish other poems, some of which he had written aged only eighteen. A local publisher produced four short collections of Wilson's poems and several other single poems on card in 1915 and 1916. But better was to come that year when the London-based publisher Arthur H. Stockwell produced volume one of *The Poetical Works of Charles Wilson, The Pitman Poet*, which ran to 159 pages. *The Poetical Works of Charles Wilson* (volume one) reproduced 100 of the total of over 500 poems Wilson had written by 1916. The volume's introduction revealed that Wilson had 'always been an admirer of rural simplicity' and that he spent much of his spare time 'searching for knowledge among … our English peasantry' [Wilson (1916?) 9]. This interest in the peasant condition had also prompted several journeys to the 'poorer parts' of Ireland, and his Irish 'heroes' were celebrated in poems such as 'On Visiting Daniel O'Connell's Grave' and 'To Charles Stuart Parnell'. Religious themes were also apparent. Wilson was a Methodist of the 'broad minded type', who was opposed to 'theological wrangling'. A member of the Free Church Council by 1916, he was teacher of a class of young men at Willington Weslyan Sunday School. Involvement in the local community was also evident in Wilson's secretaryship of Willington and District Ratepayers' Association and his presence on several philanthropic committees in the district. The introduction implied that Wilson enjoyed a regal following as it claimed that several of his poems had been 'admitted into the royal household, by his majesty King George' [Wilson (1916?) 10].

Wilson's crude attempts to ingratiate himself with the rich and powerful, evident in his embarrassingly excessive praise of Lloyd George in *Light and Liberty*, were apparent in sycophantic poems such as 'On receiving from the Hon. Mrs W.H. Gladstone, a portrait of her son,

Lieut. W.G.C. Gladstone' and 'On receiving from the Right Hon. John Redmond MP, a portrait of himself'. The former began with the lines 'A hero fair thy lips express/ A Christian garbed in soldier's dress/ No thirst for blood is pictured here/ But rather Christian virtue clear' [Wilson (1916?) 23]. Another poem celebrated the Lib-Lab Durham miners' leader John Wilson who died in 1915. Charles Wilson later claimed to have had, due to his official lodge position, frequent contact with the DMA leader. Some of his poems dealt with the condition of the working class, and miners in particular. But they lacked political punch. 'A Miner's Lament', for example, contained the lines: 'In days gone by, I've had my share/ Of hardest work, and toil and care/ And in return there's no reward/ Which seems to me, well, very hard' [Wilson (1916?) 109].

The Great War provided Wilson with the themes to inspire and opportunities to publish his poetry. But it also ended his chances of further official advancement within the DMA. Wilson signed up to serve as a private in the machine gun corps. The incumbent Brancepeth No.2 checkweighman subsequently died. Had Wilson still been at the pit, he would have been the natural successor. As he was away at war, another replacement was elected. While Wilson's response to this turn of events is unknown, he never went back to the pit.

Nevertheless, Wilson maintained his literary ambitions. After demobilisation, Coates published another collection of Wilson's poetry, *Sain-Go-Ell and other Songs*. Guy Kendall, headmaster of University College School, Hampstead, wrote an introduction to the work. While critical of the patriotic pieces, Kendall appreciated the love poems and claimed that some should be included in an anthology of new poetry. Furthermore, he thought that Wilson's poetry could form part of a new folk tradition. Wilson explored some familiar themes. The title poem, 'Sain-Go-Ell', was a celebration of rural life. However, his wartime experiences and disillusionment in the immediate aftermath of the conflict inspired several poems, though again their politics was somewhat muted. 'That's All', for example, considered the contrasting fortunes of the rich man who received an OBE for 'making shells and £-s-d.' and 'another fellow who gave up his life for me and you/ His reward was very small/ A little wooden cross – that's all'. The poem ended by calling for 'justice for these [poor] souls – that's all'. 'Reward' focused on a similar theme, that of the promised post-war 'golden age' and its failure to materialise. This poem inspired the Northumberland aristocrat (and Newcastle MP from 1922), Charles Trevelyan, who had recently moved from the Liberal to the Labour Party. Trevelyan wrote a poem: 'After

Reading "Reward"', and both poems were then produced on a single card. At around the same time Coates produced another card entitled 'Two Songs of Remembrance', which contained poems from *Sain-Go-Ell and other Songs*. Concern for his fellow war veterans was also manifest when Wilson became a founder member of the British Legion in the Willington area. He was to hold local and county positions in the British Legion for almost thirty years, also becoming a secretary of the Soldiers', Sailors' and Airmen's Association.

Outside the pit, Wilson could play little obvious part in the miners' struggles of the nineteen twenties. (In contrast to much of the Durham coalfield, the Willington area remained largely undisturbed during the 1926 lockout despite limited blacklegging at the three Brancepeth pits from early November). Wilson began to earn a living selling books on commission. A beneficiary of adult education himself, he also became a Workers' Educational Association (WEA) tutor in English literature. He was instrumental in establishing many WEA classes, not least in his home village where three other family members helped him.

By January 1927, Wilson was gaining press publicity for his WEA literature and drama class in Willington, and especially his student magazine. Edited, naturally, by Wilson himself, the recently established magazine boasted an impressive list of contributors to its 1927 edition including Dr F.B. Jevons of Durham University, the Dean of Durham Bishop Weldon, poet and author Mr St. John Adcock, the actor and author of 'The Walls of Jericho' and 'The Great Well' Alfred Sutro, and Labour Party leader (and MP for the Durham constituency of Seaham from 1929) Ramsay MacDonald. Sutro was apparently so impressed with the first edition of the magazine that he had offered a prize for the best essay on happiness. The appearance of two almost identical stories announcing the appearance of the students' magazine in the *Durham Chronicle* in the first three months of 1927 revealed Wilson's increasing skills at securing publicity for his work. This ability ensured that Wilson's work and thoughts were well documented in the pages of the local press. Indeed, in some weeks during the late nineteen thirties, reports on different aspects of Wilson's activities appeared on two or three different pages of the same edition of the *Durham County Advertiser* and *Durham Chronicle*.

Securing notable personalities to write for his magazine was merely one aspect of Wilson's activities during this period. He also corresponded with international literary figures. In March 1927 and then in September 1928 James Joyce mentioned Wilson in his correspondence. Wilson

had offered Joyce a 'right royal welcome' if he were to visit Willington and address the WEA literature class. For his part Joyce was reluctant to reply as Wilson had sent him a gift and he could not decide 'whether it is a cartridge coach or a case for cigars and cigarettes. It is rather embarrassing' [Goldman (1982) 455–6]. It is uncertain if Joyce did reply but he did not take up Wilson's invitation.

Wilson's interest in Joyce suggested that perhaps his literary horizons were expanding into modernism and away from the more traditional influences in his own poetry. But Joyce was an important literary figure, and perhaps Wilson was not too discriminating in who he invited to Willington as long as they were famous. Wilson's most obvious success in his efforts to entice literary figures to speak at his classes came when Aldous Huxley went on a three-day minilecture tour to Willington and Billingham in October 1930, speaking on 'Poetry and Science'.

Huxley later wrote an article on the experience saying that he liked Wilson and his group but that they were of another world. Wilson responded to Huxley saying that this was 'nonsense' and that there was no 'Chinese wall' of class between them: there was only one aristocracy, 'that of the mind' and that this was 'open to all' [*Durham County Advertiser*, 23 October 1936]. But getting Huxley to visit was a rare coup for Wilson.

However, there was possibly a rather distasteful element to Wilson's correspondence with literary figures. Anthony Rota's father, a bookseller, told him that Wilson used to 'get the miners in his evening classes to make contributions to small presents (an ounce of tobacco – that sort of thing), which Wilson would then send to fashionable authors with appropriately sycophantic letters. In exchange he used to ask the writers to send him autographs, which Wilson would endeavour to sell' [Goldman to Till, 1981]. Anthony Rota had seen many of these letters including one from the poet Edmund Blunden. Dated March 1929, in it Blunden thanked Wilson for his praise and added that none of his work deserved the 'concentrated study' of his class of miners. Almost all of the letters from famous literary figures to Wilson that Rota had seen were very short: 'In other words I think most people got his measure very quickly' [ibid]. Rota's claim seems partly supported by Wilson's published correspondence with literary figures. Wilson sent D.H. Lawrence several letters, a postcard, a nickel cigarette case, poems and two calendars. The seven surviving Lawrence letters to Wilson were courteous in tone, but were not characteristic of Lawrence's 'normal private correspondence', as he made no effort to

establish a relationship with Wilson (in contrast to other comparable correspondents) [Ellis and De Zordo (1993) 620]. The tone of poet A.E. Housman's fairly voluminous correspondence with Wilson over many years was similar. Wilson repeatedly asked Housman to come to talk at his WEA class with the repeated rebuffs apparently not deterring him. 'You pursue me with very flattering attentions', Housman told Wilson in January 1927 [Housman and Burnett, (2007) 6]. Wilson sent Housman copies of poems he liked written by various authors and asked Housman to sign copies of 'A Shropshire Lad' and other works, which Housman agreed to do, as long as there were not too many copies. Wilson's persistence did not seem to anger Housman, however; on the contrary, over time he appeared to regard Wilson's indefatigability with a degree of amusement.

Wilson continued giving literature classes during his increasingly combative political career in the nineteen thirties. In the months of October and November 1936, for example, his classes studied the British poets William Cowpen, Robert Browning, William Wordsworth and socialist William Morris, and he also found time to lecture on David Livingstone. By this time Wilson was also lecturing in the coalfield on his 'famous literary acquaintances'. Amongst these were, of course, Huxley and Lawrence. Huxley, according to Wilson, was a 'real friend' of the miners and the 'bottom dog' (a characteristic that hardly applied to another of Wilson's 'dear and loyal personal' friends, Bishop Weldon, Dean of Durham). Wilson also claimed friendships with Jerome K. Jerome, Walter de la Mare, John Galsworthy, Henry Arthur Jones (playwright, novelist and critic) and Sir Harry Johnstone (author, explorer, artist, botanist and anthropologist). Wilson said he had visited Sir Sydney Colvin (one-time keeper of the books and prints of the British Museum), Sir Sydney Lee (biographer to the Royal household and Shakespeare scholar) and Sir Anthony Hope Hawkins (author of the *Prisoner of Zenda*) [*Durham Chronicle*, 18 June 1937].

Perhaps as an effect of experiences during the Great War, Wilson made the political journey from the Liberals to the Labour Party in the inter-war period. His post-war poems criticised the supposed homeland 'fit for heroes', but, curiously, this did not appear to dampen his enthusiasm for Lloyd George. Wilson's rapid departure from the Labour Party – he was expelled in the early nineteen thirties due to his opposition to the card vote system – suggests that his politics retained a considerable degree of liberal individualism. Wilson then established his own organisation,

Willington Socialist Society, in December 1933, which he used as a platform to launch a career in local politics. Figures for the Socialist Society's membership were never publicised, but a hardcore of around a dozen members regularly attended its meetings. Success soon came with Wilson's election to Crook and Willington Urban District Council (UDC) in March 1934. In October 1935, Wilson was selected as Willington Socialist Society's Prospective Parliamentary Candidate for the Spennymoor constituency in the imminent general election. An unemployed miner who fought in France for four years formally moved Wilson's adoption and another Durham miner seconded it. Apparently, the Conservatives had wanted Wilson to be their candidate in the constituency, but he refused. Instead, Wilson told the Socialist Society that they could win Spennymoor for 'pure, unadulterated, uncompromising, four-square socialism' [*Durham Chronicle*, 1 November 1935]. Wilson claimed that he had been willing to sell his collection of first edition books in order to raise the £150 election deposit. This had become unnecessary as people from all over the constituency, including many unemployed miners, had donated money to his campaign and he was now certain of raising the full deposit. Many others had 'inspired' Wilson by freely offering their help during the campaign. However, Wilson had been exaggerating as only a few days after this buoyant meeting he withdrew his candidature, having failed to hand in the deposit in time.

However, this setback did not appear to dent Wilson's enthusiasm for the fight. Championing individual cases of poverty, he came into increasing conflict with members of his former party, which controlled most of the machinery of local government in Durham in the nineteen thirties. In November 1936, for example, he caused uproar at a meeting of Durham Area Guardians whilst arguing the case for a family to receive relief. That same month, he clashed with the controlling Labour group of Willington UDC during a debate on new council housing. Wilson proposed that any new housing should be built by 'direct labour' and he claimed to have evidence that this measure would save the council a great deal of money. Unfortunately, Wilson's proposal did not even get a seconder. Undeterred and clearly convinced that his argument was strong, Wilson then called for an open public meeting on the topic. Housing was an issue on which Wilson had been protesting for some years. In October 1936, he deplored the substandard local housing that had given Willington the unenviable claim to having the highest level of diphtheria in the country. (The area had fourteen cases of diphtheria per 1000 of the

population compared with the national average of three cases per 1000) [*Durham County Advertiser*, 30 October 1936].

Wilson and his Socialist Society's main operating base was the 'Rest House' in Willington. In August 1937, at a social event celebrating the work of the 'Rest House', Wilson claimed that its members practised the 'essence of Christian social service' [*Durham Chronicle*, 13 August 1937]. In the previous year, over 800 elderly men and women irrespective of their creed or politics had been entertained there. It had also held parties for 500 children of the unemployed and orphans at Christmas and in the summer. A series of lectures at the 'Rest House' were to cover topics as diverse as 'Aspects of Arabia' and 'Early English Prose Writers' (the latter presumably being delivered by Wilson himself).

Elected to Durham County Council in April 1936, Wilson began issuing regular monthly reports on county council and UDC business that were highly critical of Labour's record in Durham and particularly of the behaviour of Labour 'cliques'. In March 1937, however, Wilson lost his seat on Durham County Council to Labour. Standing as an 'Independent Labour' candidate, Wilson came second at the poll, securing 1130 votes, 276 less than the Labour victor.

Still, he fared better at the Crook and Willington UDC elections three weeks later. Wilson received 550 votes as a Willington Socialist Society candidate and came second in the poll in a three-seat ward. Two Labour candidates were elected with him, and a third, along with a second Socialist Society candidate, were unsuccessful. A third Socialist Society candidate came bottom of the poll in Willington South ward.

Re-established in his Willington power base, Wilson remained a constant irritant to the controlling Labour group on Willington UDC in the late nineteen thirties. In February 1937, for example, he was at the centre of a heated disagreement in the council over financial assessments. In March he complained in a letter to the press about the expenses incurred of the 'doings and misdoings' of Labour councils, some of which had far too many paid officials: 'too many broths', wrote Wilson, 'spoil the cook' [*Durham Chronicle*, 19 March 1937]. In August he alleged that redundant council officials were getting paid for doing nothing. In October Wilson was embroiled in more controversy, this time over allegations he made about a 'united front' in Consett UDC. This was because two council jobs had recently been filled by relatives of sitting councillors (one Labour and one 'Moderate', i.e. Conservative). A Consett Labour official took

up Wilson's challenge to a public debate on the case and a meeting was arranged. However, Wilson did not show for the debate and the Labour Party had to foot the bill for the abortive meeting.

Wilson's onslaught against the local Labour administration continued unabated in 1938. In February he argued for the need of a local medical officer and attacked local councillors who, for reasons of economy, opposed him. In a letter to the press in April, Wilson complained about Labour methods on Willington UDC: 'They [Labour] preach social justice, but never make any attempt to put it into practice'. There was little or no money for 'toilers under their jurisdiction', especially if they were not of the same political party, and some were even victimised for refusing to pay the trade union political levy to the Labour Party, he alleged. 'These methods', wrote Wilson, 'may be adopted in Russia, but I will fight against their introduction in English local government' [*Durham Chronicle*, 15 April 1938]. In the same month Wilson delivered his monthly council report to what was claimed as 'one of the biggest gatherings in the history of the town'. In a seventy-minute long speech, he told a 'vast audience' that it was not getting value for money from the council [*Durham Chronicle*, 15 April 1938]. An important area of contention was air-raid precautions. Wilson called for the council to act on the subject, and that all jobs emerging from any scheme should go to war veterans, instead of friends of the Labour administration. (So detailed and favourable to Wilson was this report that it is likely that, along with many others that appeared in the local press in this period, it was written by Wilson himself and simply reproduced verbatim). A meeting of Willington Socialist Society hammered the message home. Joseph Coppin called Labour Party councillors a 'howling mob', whilst Wilson announced his readiness to have a public debate with them at any time on the topic of 'How the workers are let down by local leaders' [ibid].

While Wilson was defining himself as a 'socialist' by the early nineteen thirties, it is difficult to be clear what he meant by the term. In his short-lived 1935 general election campaign, Wilson averred that socialism had 'been degraded by a herd of careerists, opportunists, self-seekers, and position hunters, whose only concern has been the creating of cushy jobs for their own family cliques in each locality throughout the division'. Yet the press report of that speech mentioned only one concrete policy, and this was not especially 'socialist'. As an ex-serviceman who had left a lot of dead friends on the battlefields of France, Wilson said he would have a cessation of political controversy

on Armistice Day 'in honour of them' [*Durham Chronicle*, 1 November 1935]. The Socialist Society was clearly egalitarian in the sense that it was 'open to all' and did not demand a subscription fee. But, again, what can be gleaned from Wilson's addresses to the Society did not appear particularly 'socialist'. For example, at a Socialist Society meeting in April 1937, Wilson commented on the 'hopeless mess' County Durham was in, 'with its poverty, slums, foul housing, high rents low wages of workers'. Yet this was merely a launch pad for an attack on the Labour administration, and Wilson gave no indication of what his alternative programme was [*Durham Chronicle*, 2 April 1937]. At another Socialist Society meeting Wilson spoke on 'The need of a vigilant society' that ensured public representatives were constantly reminded that they were the servants of people rather than their masters. Again, there was nothing markedly socialist in this. Wilson condemned the 'scourge of poverty and unemployment', but advocated nothing more than State support for the poor [*Durham Chronicle*, 8 October 1937]. When he lectured on William Morris in October 1936, it was Morris' poetry rather than his politics that preoccupied Wilson. Only once in this period was there a hint that Wilson's socialism included an economic critique of capitalism. In October 1936, at a meeting of the unemployed in Willington, Wilson said that the best charity was a 'higher industrial order'. But precisely what this meant remained unclear in the highly detailed press report (probably self-penned) on his speech [*Durham County Advertiser*, 9 October 1936].

Certain themes from Wilson's earlier political outlook remained. First, a committed Christian belief continued to inform his politics. For example, in September 1938, Wilson spoke on the topic 'If Christ came to Durham'. According to Wilson, Christ would be 'horrified' by the conditions in parts of County Durham and the social system and many Christians would 'be cast from him' [*Durham Chronicle*, 9 September 1938]. God, said Wilson in 1936, loved poor people and 'for that reason he created so many of them' [*Durham County Advertiser*, 18 December 1936]. Firmly held Christian beliefs were, for Wilson, essential to the correct functioning of the political system. He endorsed the view of the eighteenth-century bishop Thomas Newton who held that a loss of religion leads to a loss of government and that a fear of God was an essential prerequisite for those who held power. Wilson told his study group that education, too, should be 'penetrated by the Christian ideal' [*Durham County Advertiser*, 20 November 1936]. Christian

imagery informed a great deal of Wilson's rhetoric. The example of the Good Samaritan informed Wilson's class for 'relief' for the unemployed. Wilson's continued outspoken royalism indicated that his socialism had little in common with that espoused by parties and individuals to the left of the Labour Party. In November 1936, he called Edward VIII 'undoubtedly the greatest ambassador for democracy and peace in Europe'. No one, declared Wilson, had 'hit out so consistently against unemployment and poverty' and the government needed to 'raise the poor', taking the advice of the king [*Durham County Advertiser*, 27 November 1936].

Others of Wilson's Liberal heroes from his youth remained so. In July 1937 Wilson performed the unveiling ceremony of a portrait of ex-DMA leader John Wilson in the 'Rest House', Willington. John Wilson was, for Charles Wilson, the 'greatest' of all the DMA leaders. Political party labels did not matter, as John Wilson was a 'good Christian fighter' for the miners [*Durham Chronicle*, 2 July 1937]. Continued high regard for Lloyd George manifested itself in support for his projects. By early June 1937, Wilson was honorary secretary of a recently established branch of Lloyd George's organisation, the Council of Action for Peace and Reconstruction (CAPR), in Willington. The branch already claimed 53 active financial members. Wilson maintained that the MPs who accepted CAPR policy, though of 'varied political faiths' were 'among the most progressive in Westminster' [*Durham Chronicle*, 4 June 1937]. Meeting at the Willington 'Rest House', the CAPR branch appeared to contain the self-same individuals as the Socialist Society, which itself seemed curiously inactive during June 1937.

The apparent metamorphosis of the Willington Socialist Society into Willington CAPR branch was not permanent. Indeed, the CAPR branch was very short-lived, lasting only the month of June 1937. The Socialist Society subsequently became active again and Willington CAPR branch mysteriously vanished. This perhaps indicates that Wilson was himself a political opportunist and something of a dilettante. He certainly did not appear to have shown any interest in the CAPR before summer 1937, and this despite the organisation's relative significance during the 1935 general election. The CAPR was possibly an experiment to amass a greater following in the village by organising within a national group established by a well-known national political figure. It seemed that, despite claims of a decent sized membership, this greater following did not really materialise. Furthermore, Wilson could well have realised that the CAPR demanded subordinance to officials higher than himself. The Socialist Society, on the other hand, was

really Wilson's child and he was in charge. But Wilson still retained a high regard for Lloyd George, publicly congratulating him in January 1938 on the occasion of his golden wedding. Proclaiming himself 'a socialist' and Lloyd George a Liberal, Wilson was clear on their differing party labels. However, for Wilson, Lloyd George remained the only person in all political parties 'who has attempted by Parliamentary measures to introduce into the lives of the mass of people a little of the principles of Christian socialism' (such as Old Age Pensions and National Insurance) [*Durham Chronicle*, 28 January 1938].

Wilson not only disregarded the party labels of his icons, he viewed a lack of party loyalty as a virtue. In a lecture to the Socialist Society in November 1936 on 'Good Citizenship', Wilson averred that the good citizen 'must be possessed of the nerve to break with party and cast party allegiance to the winds, in obedience to the leading of a pratiotism [sic] wider than party'. All should be ready 'to face the fact that even a cherished party may cease to furnish the fittest expression of political convictions' [*Durham County Advertiser*, 6 November 1936]. He also warned that a wide franchise offered an enlarged arena for 'charlantry'. Yet Wilson appeared not to have heeded his own warning when his political opportunism led him to throw in his lot with fellow north-easterner John Brown and his creation, the British Democratic Party (BDP). The BDP was established in spring 1938, its main objectives ostensibly being the destruction of fascism and communism (north-east Communists quickly began to claim that its aim was merely to bring about fascism).

Wilson appeared to be the only local councillor of any persuasion attracted to the BDP. He performed a supporting role to Brown in BDP meetings almost from the outset and remained active in the organisation for several months. This allowed him to travel further afield than he was used to and to speak about issues that had interested him his entire adult life. In August 1938, for example, he spoke at Wallsend on the north bank of the Tyne, advocating a new agricultural policy that would base food production on the home market by settling 500 000 families on the land. He gave similar addresses to BDP meetings in Newcastle and his home village in September. Involvement in the BDP also encouraged Wilson to sustain his attacks on the Labour Party. In September 1938 he was due to debate with a Labour Party representative but, being unable to agree on a venue, the two antagonists spoke simultaneously at venues one hundred yards apart with two different audiences. Wilson then issued another challenge to

debate the subject 'How the workers are betrayed by the Labour fascist parasites', and another Labour Party member took it up [*North Mail*, 19 September 1938]. Yet Wilson did not always operate explicitly under the BDP banner. In November 1938, for example, he organised a demonstration against Crook and Willington council at their decision not to let him use a public hall for ARP training and first aid. The press report mentioned Wilson's two dozen followers, but not the BDP. Wilson certainly lasted longer in the BDP than he had in the CAPR. Brown had given him an important role in the party, that of secretary and northern counties organiser. Yet, as the BDP was short-lived, so Wilson's involvement could only be likewise.

Wilson remained an independent Willington councillor for twenty-one years until his retirement in 1955. But his most obvious successes had come early in his life and this potential was not sustained. Having his first book published at the age of twenty-three remained his major achievement. A copy of *Light and Liberty* that had been held in Willington Rest Home (and is now in Durham Record Office) was signed and dedicated by Wilson on four separate occasions, in 1920, 1933, 1934 and 1947. In 1933, he wrote on it 'nineteen years have passed but nothing much has changed'. Moreover, there was also no 'volume two' of his collected poems. The last poetry he published came in the immediate post-war period.

Denied a literary career, a difficult path even for those with a middle-class education and contacts, Wilson had also chosen not to return to the pit after demobilisation. His motives are unknown, but he must surely have been capable of once again rising through the ranks and eventually securing a checkweighman post in a Durham pit. Presumably not prepared to wait for his opportunity, Wilson left the pit to foster working-class education. When he later became involved in local politics, he made life difficult for himself by spending most of his time attacking local Labour Party cliques. Wilson was able to establish his own organisation with a small band of dedicated followers who would happily listen to his lectures. But his isolated position meant he could play no real part in the decision-making process at local and county level. Spending most of his time attacking the only party that could really help him advance in local government, clearly Wilson was no ordinary 'political careerist'. Yet he was prepared to take up others' causes when the opportunity arose, only to drop them again when the desired benefits did not materialise. This he did very briefly with the CAPR in 1937 and then the BDP, for slightly longer, in 1938. Wilson was a complex character. He adopted a fawning attitude to royalty and political and literary figures of national

standing. But he was also unafraid to criticise consistently and scathingly local political elites, despite the personal frustration this inevitably brought. Something of a demagogue, Wilson's political judgement was not aided by his followers. For example, at the third anniversary dinner of the Socialist Society in December 1936, Michael Cunningham, one of Wilson's most dedicated supporters, called his leader 'the greatest apostle for justice for the workers that the north country had produced during the past thirty years. He was loved by the poor for whom he dedicated so much of his time' [*Durham County Advertiser*, 18 December 1936]. Statements like that surely nourished the self-delusional element of Wilson's character.

Wilson was an unusual but not unique local politician. A similar figure, for example, was J.W. Holyoak, an 'independent socialist' councillor in Sunderland in the nineteen thirties. While regarding himself as the 'greatest socialist in Sunderland', Holyoak was 'British first and socialist second' [*Sunderland Echo*, 13 October 1936]. He, too, was a vehement critic of the Labour Party administration, on this particular occasion of the pacifists in Labour ranks who had refused to provide an official welcome to *HMS Cairo*. A 'proved individualist', Holyoak was not as politically successful as Wilson, as he was defeated in the municipal elections in November 1936.

Partly a story of ambition frustrated, Wilson's activities must have benefited other members of his class. Guy Kendall, the school headmaster who wrote the introduction to Wilson's 1920 book of poems, remarked that Wilson's work might help to 'remove the reproach sometimes made in working-class circles that literature is "middle-class culture"' [Wilson (1920?) 3]. Wilson's methods were underhand if Rota's claims of getting miners to pay for presents to literary figures were accurate. But he did at least bring these figures and their work, via his WEA classes, into contact with those who might otherwise never have had the opportunity. Furthermore, in the case of Aldous Huxley, Wilson actually secured the physical presence of the writer, quite an achievement. Indeed, in the case of Huxley, Wilson's impact may have been even more profound. Wilson had taken Huxley on a tour of the Durham coalfield and down a mine. Seeing this poverty and hardship at close quarters spawned Huxley's interest in planning that was later to inspire his most famous novel, the dystopian *Brave New World* [Bradshaw (1995) 151–2]. Furthermore, it was correspondence with Wilson that stimulated D.H. Lawrence's 'interest in reaching a working-class public' [Ellis (1998) 702 footnote 27].

In the nineteen eighties, some of Wilson's contemporaries still remembered him. Fellow

Brancepeth miner (at No.1 pit) John Traynor recalled that Wilson had been widely respected and was 'a good canvasser of his case'. Traynor had liked Wilson, despite his 'name dropping' [Traynor to Till, 1981]. Another contemporary, J.W. Marr, remembered Wilson as 'a socialist with the views of the welfare of the poor class at heart', who 'put the working people before himself'. Marr thought that Wilson deserved a lot of credit for his energetic involvement in the WEA [Marr to Till, 1981). North-east working-class writer Sid Chaplin recalled Wilson had a 'loyal following' in his locality. 'Always' in the news, Wilson was a 'rebel', a 'lone populist kind of politician renowned for his fiery utterances against contemporary labour councillors' [Chaplin to Till, 1981]. Wilson was significant for another reason. His political attitude, essentially that of unchanging Lib-Labism, exemplified a minority current that remained amongst the Durham miners after 1918. This outlook played some role in the 1931 general election, when the Labour Party lost seven mining seats in the Durham coalfield.

Wilson spent the last five years of his life in a care home in Crook. His house was vacated in haste and, sadly, most of his papers were simply burnt, unread. He died at the hospital a bachelor, aged seventy-seven, on 27 March 1968. After a funeral at St Stephen's church, he was interred in the cemetery at Wheatbottom, Crook. Attendees of a Crook and Willington council meeting stood in silence as a tribute to him.

Writings: 'Reward' and 'After Reading "Reward" by Right Hon. Charles Trevelyan, MP (single card, no publisher, n.d.); *Light and Liberty* (Durham, 1914); 'On Sick Leave', 'Warriors Three' *and Other Poems* (1915); 'When Duty Calls' *and Other Poems* (1915); 'The Unseen Guest' *and Other Poems* (1915); *Time Will Tell* (1916); *The Poetical Works of Charles Wilson, The Pitman Poet*, Vol. l (1916); *Sain-Go-Ell and other Songs* (n.d. 1920?); *Two Songs of Remembrance* (n.d. 1920?).

Sources: (1) MSS: Arnold Goldman letter to Roger Till (enclosing a letter from Anthony Rota), 27 July 1981 (Durham Record Office, D/X 828/22); John Traynor letter to Roger Till, 21 January 1981 (Durham Record Office, D/X 828/14); J.W. Marr letter to Roger Till, 19 February 1981 (Durham Record Office, D/X 828/17); Sid Chaplin letter to Roger Till, 20 January 1981 (Durham Record Office, D/X 828/13). **(2) Newspapers:** *Durham Advertiser*; *Durham Chronicle*; *Durham County Advertiser*; *Newcastle Journal*; *North Mail*; *Shields Gazette*; *Sunderland Echo*. **(3) Books and articles:** W.R. Garside, *The Durham Miners, 1919–1960*

(1971); D. Douglass, *Pit Life in County Durham. Rank and File Movements and Workers' Control* (Oxford, 1972); D. Douglass, *The Miners of North Durham* (Doncaster, 1975); Robin Smith, 'Obituary Article: Sir William Lawther', *Bulletin of the North-east Group for the Study of Labour History*, 10 (1976); M. Callcott, 'The Nature and Extent of Political Change in the Inter-war Years: the Example of County Durham, *Northern History*, 16 (1980) 215–37; G. Walker, *George Harvey: The Conflict Between the Ideology of Industrial Unionism and the Practice of its Principles in the Durham Coal field* (MA Thesis, Ruskin College, 1982); Arnold Goldman, 'How to Not Find Joyce Letters', *James Joyce Quarterly*, 19, 4 (1982) 455–9; Gary Pattison, 'Anarchist Influences in the Durham Coalfield Before 1914', *The Raven,* 11 (1990) 239–43; James T. Boulton and Margaret H. Boulton with Gerald M. Lacy, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence Vol. 6: March 1927–November 1928* (Cambridge, 1991); N. Emery, *The Coal Miners of Durham* (Stroud, 1992); Keith Sagar and James T. Boulton, *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence Vol. 7: November 1928–February 1930* (Cambidge, 1993); David Ellis, Ornella De Zordo, *D.H. Lawrence: critical assessments* (Helm Information, 1993); H. Beynon and T. Austrin, *Masters and Servants. Class and Patronage in the Making of a Labour Organisation. The Durham Miners and the English Political Tradition* (1994); David Bradshaw, 'Huxley's Slump: Planning, Eugenics, and the "Ultimate Need" of Stability', in John Batchelor (ed.), *The Art of Literary Biography* (Oxford, 1995) 151–72; Lewis H. Mates, 'From Revolutionary to Reactionary: the Life of Will Lawther' (M.A. Thesis, Newcastle University, 1996); R.A. Church and Q. Outram, *Strikes and Solidarity. Coalfield Conflict in Britain 1889–1966* (Cambridge, 1998); David Ellis, *D.H. Lawrence. Dying Game 1922–1930* (Cambridge, 1998); N. Emery, *Banners of the Durham Coalfield* (Stroud, 1998); Lewis H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936–1939' (Ph.D. Thesis, Newcastle University, 2002); A.E. Houseman and Archie Burnett, *The Letters of A.E. Houseman* (Oxford, 2007). **(4) Obituary:** *Auckland Chronicle*, 11 April 1968.

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