

Marie C. McDonald
TAHG Year III

Woodrow and Edith A Love Story

This book review is about the book *When the Cheering Stopped: the Last Years of Woodrow Wilson* by Gene Smith.

The story starts with a brief background of President Woodrow Wilson, his ascendancy to the Presidency of the United States and the death of his first wife, Ellen. The author paints a vivid picture of a man of many letters and great passion. His despair after his wife's death placed a burden beyond his comprehension. Additionally, he met Edith Bolling Galt quite by happenstance but from that moment he knew his fate would take a different path.

Woodrow Wilson, Johns Hopkins Doctorate, President of Princeton University, Rhodes Scholar, published author, Governor of New Jersey and now the President of the United States in the year 1913. During his first term this Conservative Democrat took a very progressive role and pushed three major initiatives through Congress within a very short time. Under Wilson the tariff was lowered as part of the Federal Income Tax program. The Federal Reserve system was established to allow for emergency funds for the government and the Federal Trade Commission was established to regulate sound business practices. Additionally, during his first term he avoided the war in Europe. His second term would not have the same stellar results.

Woodrow Wilson met Edith Bolling Galt was quickly smitten with her. Through frequent visits and chaperoned "dates" Wilson fell in love with the widow and asked her to marry him. Caught off guard and believing a marriage was too soon after the death of his first wife she declined. He continued to pursue her. Again, he asked her to marry him, this time she agreed. Feeling that this union would be politically incorrect, his aides set a plan into motion to recall an illicit relationship he had several years before while vacationing in Bermuda. The news was released to the press and, to avoid any humiliation to Edith he wrote to her saying he would understand if she wanted to renege on their engagement. After receiving his letter "She wrote:

Dearest...

I will stand by you – not for duty, not for pity, not for honour – but for love – trusting, protecting, comprehending love...

I am so tired that I could put my head down on the desk and go to sleep – but nothing could bring me real rest until I had pledged to you my love and my allegiance.

Your own,

Edith (p 22)

Edith Bolling Galt Wilson is frequently presented as a sinister character in American History. She is viewed as “The First Woman President”, as a woman who commandeered the power of the Presidency and negated the U.S. Constitution by her actions.

After her marriage to President Wilson, Edith’s primary responsibility was to act as the official hostess for the White House. When the U.S. entered the war there was little hostessing to do. Mrs. Wilson immersed herself in her husband’s life and even travelled with him on his trips to Europe for the Peace Talks. (She even watched the signing of the Peace Treaty from a secret alcove). He was never extremely healthy and she made it her priority to help him avoid stress and to keep regular schedules and stay healthy. As the letter to her future husband (above) it is apparent that she would keep her vows to trust and protect the man she loved, no matter what the cost. Edith Wilson never gave up on her word.

The union of Thomas Woodrow Wilson and Edith Bolling Galt Wilson is a very powerful and misunderstood love story.

In *When the Cheering Stopped*, the author, Gene Smith paints a very compassionate picture of a very sensitive woman who “bubble wrapped” her husband to protect him (as she had promised in her letter years before) and to trust his vision for a world safe for democracy and to protect the people of the United States from the actions of his political enemies. As the years evolved, Mrs. Wilson will have developed a long list of political enemies of her husband. She will protect her husband by banishing these men from her husband’s view.

In 1917 Woodrow Wilson would commit U.S. Troops to the war in Europe. This would be the war to end all wars and would make the world safe for democracy. Woodrow Wilson would be on the front line of engineering a new world order as Germany surrendered 18 months after the U.S. entered the war. Germany’s terms of surrender included the original frameworks of Wilson Fourteen Points. These frameworks, true to Wilson’s nature, would not punish the adversaries, but rather develop a League of Nations which would allow all the countries of the world to sit together and work for an international peace, each nation equal to the others. This League would be his legacy (and his demise).

In November of 1918 the Armistice was signed, ending the war. President and Mrs. Wilson travelled to Europe to begin the restructuring of Europe. Wilson and his Fourteen Points were touted as saviors of the human race. Edith would comment during the early days of this trip that her husband looked so vital and healthy. That would change quickly. Thirteen of the points would reestablish the way European powers did business. Wilson was approached by African Nations and Asian nations asking for reprieves from the European colonial system [one of the original reasons for World War I]. The people of Europe welcomed him as a demi-god. Parades were held and huge crowds cheered him. “Above the road, over the troops, and the shouting Bretons and cheering children waving American flags, hung huge

printed signs: HAIL THE CHAMPION OF THE RIGHTS OF MAN, HONOR TO THE APOSTLE OF INTERNATIONAL JUSTICE, HONOR AND WELCOME TO THE FOUNDER OF THE SOCIETY OF NATIONS..." "The Mayor made a speech saying destiny brought the American leader to release the people of Europe from their tortures." (p 37) "No one ever heard such cheers...It seemed the Arc de Triomphe would fall before the cascade of sound." (p 39) While the crowds cheered Clemenceau and Lloyd-George made it eminently clear that Wilson was a new comer and they would not let him rewrite the way they did business and that the final result of the Treaty of Versailles would be to PUNISH Germany for their actions and for dragging all of them into this war.

While he was touted in Europe there was trouble brewing back in the states. The Republicans had just become a majority in Congress. They clamored that Woodrow Wilson had not included them in the peace talks and reminded the nation that he did not have the RIGHT to speak on their behalf. Additionally they planted the seed in the American psyche that the League would open a Pandora's Box of European troubles. The League would allow American troops to be dragged into un-American problems and American treasuries could be depleted to solve European economic issues. "Alien councils could will U.S. into wars, embargo our commerce,..."(p 54) "...seeking to hand over American destiny to the secret councils of Europe, or the black races, or the Pope, or greedy, conscienceless England." (p55) "Parallel to the European cheers, Americans wrote to him...Come home and reduce the high cost of living...suffragettes...demands that women deserve the vote...." The President worked constantly but said, "God knows I wish I could give them all they hope for, but only He Himself could do that."(p 46) Edith hung on his every word and supported every initiative. Wilson would return home and left his friend Edward House to work out the fine tuning of the Treaty.

As Wilson returned home it was made very clear to him that he had a fight on his hands to get his beloved League passed. His health had deteriorated as he pushed himself at the Peach Talks. Edith and Wilson's personal physician Dr. Grayson insisted that he not go on this journey, but he retorted, "In the crucial test of the trenches they did not turn back – and I cannot turn back now. I cannot put my personal safety, my health, in the balance against my duty. I must go." (p59) With that, Edith and Grayson required that he rest for a few weeks and get his strength back before he undertakes such a challenge. Both of them played golf with him and helped him relax before starting on the cross-country train trip to sell the League to the American people. Both of them were by his side every mile of the trip. At the beginning of the trip there was polite applause at the whistle stops. There were no throngs or deafening cheers as he had enjoyed on the Continent. As the trip progressed his voice became increasingly hoarse. He suffered from ever escalating headaches. The people closest to him began to notice a twitch in his face. The train schedule was amended to allow for a one night hotel stay and later a one night stop to allow the passengers to sleep without the sounds and motions of the moving train. All of this was done at the request of Edith and Grayson to help the President

to get his strength back. Edith watched him sleep at night and continually worried about his diminishing health.

In Washington, Senator Henry Cabot Lodge continued his campaign to defeat the League by sending emissaries to speak parallel to the whistle stops with opposing views and inflammatory rhetoric. Women's suffrage, Police strikes, labor disturbances, anarchists were hot topics of the day. These crowds clamored for the President to address homegrown issues and not be so concerned about Europe. The war was over, we should insulate ourselves again.

The crowds grew bigger as the train trip continued. The President grew increasingly passionate...and debilitated. In Pueblo, Colorado he stumbled over his words for the first time. Grayson and Edith noticed it immediately. The terror that crossed the First Lady's face did not go unnoticed by the press. Later the train was halted in the countryside. After dining, Dr. Grayson, Edith Wilson and the President took a walk along a country road. Even a farmer on the road mentioned to Grayson that the man with him looked mighty sick! The three discussed the necessity to cancel the rest of the trip and return to Washington quickly. Wilson said he had to go on. That night he called for Edith in the night saying he was very sick. Edith called Grayson. They sat with him through the night and left the room to change their clothes. When Grayson returned the President was up and dressed and had shaved! He was ready for the day. The words of the President were garbled and unintelligible. Edith and Grayson told the President of what they were seeing in him and Grayson told the President that it was no longer up for discussion, he must return home. He had to cancel the rest of the trip and return to the White House to recoup his strength and health. It wasn't until Edith spoke that convinced him to give up the trip. She said it was the hardest thing she had ever done. She sat with him as he wept. "She sat with her weeping husband and she thought, I will have to wear a mask – not only to the public but to the one I love best in the world. For he must never know how ill he is and I must carry on." (p85) Upon their return the President's condition worsened. He fell while in the bathroom. Edith called Grayson to help get him into bed. They also called Ike Hoover, the White House head usher to help put the President back to bed. It was made clear that no one else should be told of this situation. Grayson reported to the press for several days that "the President is a very sick man."

Secretary of State Lansing learned of the President's illness and he suggested a change in the chain of command. Joseph Timulty, the President's friend and Secretary said that no one would be ousting the President, he just needed to rest. "Dr. Grayson would never certify to the President's disability". (p 99) Later, when nothing was getting done Lansing would call all the members of the Cabinet to meet and get some work done. When Edith Wilson relayed this

information to the President a few weeks later, Lansing would be reprimanded for usurping power he had no right to. Lansing said it was fine for him to call a meeting Department Heads

to determine the state of affairs. The President disagreed, Lansing apologized and after that Wilson held a few Cabinet meetings gathered around his sick bed. Edith was always in the rooms and always recording everything that was said. She believed that she understood the President and knew how he felt about all the issues, and she would see that his wishes were carried out.

Through all of the symptoms and rumors and the horrors of the President's condition and shoutings from Congress, Mrs. Wilson sat by his side. She nursed his every request. When medical attempts failed she lovingly applied hot packs and massaged his aching limbs, and held his hand throughout the days and nights. He always smiled when she entered the room and she reserved every smile for him. She read him the news for ten minutes every day. Some days he did not have the strength for the whole ten minutes. Problems arose across the country but nothing was heard from the White House. Other officials tried to arbitrate and regulate in the President's absence, but little to nothing was done. Responses about Woodrow Wilson's condition continued to be bland. Edith would put a pen in his hand to sign any necessary papers, i.e. his veto of the Volstead Act. Mrs. Wilson was frequently accused of forging her husband's signature. Congress grumbled about the inaction and lack of information coming from the White House. Senator Albert Fall of New Mexico stated "We have a Petticoat Government. Mrs. Wilson is President." (p126) she was referred to in other circles as the Presidentress.

Edith did meet with visiting dignitaries and having tea with them. She and Dr. Grayson stayed in the room with the President when only an audience with the President would do.

Little correspondence was answered and no actions were taken as the days progressed. Nothing got to the President without first being passed through the First Lady. She determined what would be deserving of his limited attention. She tried gently to help Wilson accept the fact that the League would not be accepted by the country. He refused to accept any alterations to his plan. He asked her not to "desert me". The League did go down to defeat.

Eventually Edith received members of Congress in her sitting room next to the President's sick room. She passed the President's verbal instructions on to them. When the responses were questioned, "The First Lady would upon occasion excuse herself, go alone into the President's room for a few minutes (closing the door behind her) and return with new details on what she said the President said." (p126)

On occasion the First Lady would respond that some matters would have to wait until the President was well. "In later years it was said that the First Lady was the first woman President of the United States and that, ruling with an iron hand, she disposed of House and

Timulty (Woodrow Wilson's most trusted friends and advisors) because they stood in the way of her power, but it was not so. She did not try to change anything and amend the ways business was done in the past; she made no startling changes beyond the change that faces those who dealt with the White House. It was rather that the White House staggered along as best it could while she ignored all the minor things and many larger ones. What mattered the most to Edith was that the President was protected from irritation...from everybody; from the world. As it turned out, Edith Bolling Wilson's operation was a success. The patient lived." (p128)

For Christmas, Douglas Fairbanks sent Wilson a movie projector. The President viewed a film almost every evening. Many noted that the First lady never took her eyes off of him. She read to him every night after the film. She would then work late into the night. One evening after reading a paper she even mentioned to a staff member that she didn't know how much more criticism she could take. "The White House even criticized her openly by calling upon Mrs. Wilson's heritage from Pocahontas' family tree by commenting that they were working for an Indian." (p140) She began to only smile when she was around him. The strain affected everyone. Her personal secretary had a nervous breakdown and left the position. Daughter Margaret also broke down and went south to recover.

To avert continued abuse and criticism Edith arranged for the President to take open air rides around Washington, to be more visible. As earlier stated she also choreographed Cabinet meetings in the President's sick room and arranged her patient in flattering light when he met with some visiting dignitaries.

Wilson's final defeat came as he listened to the election of 1921 results. Warren G. Harding was elected and Wilson's party was out. To avert the sadness Wilson would view the newsreels of his triumphant visits to the cities of Europe. After the election Edith went house hunting in Washington D. C. Wilson began to write a book. On the first page he dedicates it to E.B.W. It would be the first and last page he ever wrote of this book. As he was leaving the Presidency he was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. The Wilson's moved to S Street, Washington on the day of Harding's inauguration. She continued to read his mail to him, feed him when he needed help and ate her own lunch as he napped. She entertained infrequently for short amounts of time and spent the rest of her time with him. Her friends commented that she was happier now than she had ever been in the White House...she was even reported to whistle like a happy little boy all the time.

On the anniversary of the Armistice the Wilson's attended the burial of the Unknown Soldier. The crowds cheered for Wilson when he was recognized in the parade. "You have our affection" they yelled. (p 203) Wilson's tears rolled down his face and on to his black coat. He reached for her hand which was wet with her tears. She was crying like she did as a little girl! They returned to S Street and life went on. Edith knew that her husband would never get better but she continued to smile for him and him alone.

"He was dying by degrees...but she loved him as few women have ever loved a man and alone she carried him forward." (p210)

Edith herself was getting sick giving him twenty four hour care and still tolerating the constant criticism about her role in the White House. She spent a week at the home of a friend while Dr. Grayson kept vigil with the patient. She returned to S Street with new vigor and a new set of eyes. She saw the love of her life was dying. She gathered her courage for the impending outcome.

On February 2, 1924 President Wilson began to slip away. His daughters were called from around the world because the end was nearing. The nation began to mourn for him. For the men that Edith felt had betrayed her husband she disinvited them from the funeral, (Henry Cabot Lodge), ignored their request to see him one more time before he died, (Timulty) or just ignored their existence, (Edward House). Mrs. Wilson stayed by her husband's side, savoring every moment she could. Though blind and deaf, the President always knew when she was there and he always smiled for her. His last word before slipping away was "EDITH" (p241)

Throughout the life they shared in the White House, in Europe, in health and in sickness their passion for each other was obvious to all who knew them. She stayed in the S Street home until she passed away, on her beloved husband's birthday.

Smith, Gene. When the Cheering Stopped; the last years of Woodrow Wilson. New York: William Monroe and Company. 1964.