

Wilfred Brown

At the Crossroads of
Human Experience



Stephen
Duncan
Johnston

Foreword



We all have people in our lives who influence us; our memories of them become part of us in a very special way and don't seem to fade as we grow older.

Wilfred, or Bill as his friends called him, was such an influence.

I first met him very early in my career. An experienced performer, respected and admired by everyone, he had the gift of encouraging his colleagues to do better than their best when he was around, not just musically but by the manner in which he approached both his work and life in general. He was kindness itself to us all. There was a spiritual quality about him which permeated everything he did. He considered himself a servant of his art, something I tried to emulate all my working life.

Stephen Duncan Johnston's affectionate biography does Bill a great service; he paints a picture of a person which shows the many sides of his character and the different facets of an extraordinary man who was not just a wonderful artist, but someone whose life-story can still touch the heart and inspire. He brought integrity to everything he did and it was always a privilege to work with Bill – an even greater one to find that his qualities as an artist went hand in hand with those of the human being.

Dame Janet Baker

Wilfred Brown 1921 – 1971



The title of this biography, *At the Crossroads of Human Experience*, is a phrase taken from an essay by Wilfred Brown on his duties as a singer. First published privately in 1957 in the house magazine of the Saint Martin's Singers, this essay had appeared just six years after the announcement to his wife Mollie, on his thirtieth birthday, that he wanted to devote himself to singing.

Wilfred had realised, after relatively few years into his career as a professional singer, that he had reached a location on his journey from where a variety of influences sufficient to inform a lifetime's work in performance was to be found. Having arrived at an understanding of the interconnection of those influences and their transformative power, his articulation of these ideas especially in BBC Radio broadcasts, though often expressed obliquely, made him arguably as powerful a writer as singer, for the radical conclusions he discovered would reverberate beyond the world of music. The consequences would be profound.

List of Illustrations

1. Mid-1920s – Wilfred, Kathleen, mother Kate and father William	9
2. May 1936 – Wilfred, the Christ’s Hospital schoolboy and father William Brown	12
3. Late 1930s – Portrait of Wilfred, the Christ’s Hospital schoolboy	20
4. August 1942 – John Stevens, sister Kathleen Jacobs, Kate and Wilfred Brown.....	26
5. Germany 1947 – Wilfred (third from left).....	38
6. August 1947 – Wilfred and Mollie about to set off on honeymoon	45
7. Late 1940s – William and Kate Brown outside the Friends Meeting House cottage, Horsham	50
8. 5th December 1952 – Owen Brannigan, Kathleen Kay, Edmund Plumbly, Isobel Baillie, Wilfred after <i>Elijah</i> in Horsham	77
9. c.1958 – Wilfred, Mollie, Will, Matthew and Lucy	117
10. Worcester 1963 – Wilfred, Iris Bourne, Anne Dowdall, John Carol Case, Helen Watts.....	162
11. c.1960 – Wilfred the bird-charmer	181
12. c. May 1967 – Wilfred and John Williams	203

Contents

Foreword	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
Introduction	v
List of illustrations	vi
Chapter One:	
The journey begun (1921-1940)	1
Family and home – Collyer’s School, Horsham – The autobiography – Christ’s Hospital – Ornithology – Life in school – Music – Early Cambridge days	
Chapter Two:	
Companions for the journey – First trials and obstacles (1940-1947).....	27
Mollie – Studies suspended – War work with the FRS and its legacy – First professional work, opera and the Saint Martin’s Singers – Formative influences – The Trinity College of Music – Relief work on the Continent and POW camps – Return to Cambridge, marriage and teaching	
Chapter Three:	
The abyss avoided (1947-1953)	48
University College School – Defining repertoire – Indications of Wilfred’s creativity – Departure from U.C.S. and first performances for the BBC – Bedales and Petersfield – The accompanist Margaret McNamee – Further significant developments – Gerald Finzi, Eric Greene and the decision – Martindale Sidwell, Paul Steinitz and Gerald Finzi – The agents Ibbs and Tillett – Income and finances – First appearances	
Chapter Four:	
The road (1954-1957)	78
Introduction to Festivals and Consort work – New work at the BBC – Singing in Schools – Communication, authenticity and singing in the original language – A qualified disappointment – Membership of The Deller Consort and further developments in Wilfred’s recordings – Opera: a false move? – Greater acquaintance with Gerald Finzi and Vaughan Williams – The young recitalist – The budding Evangelist – Gentleman and Player – More Passions and occasional vocal imperfections	

Chapter Five:

The crossroads – The point of interconnection (1958-1959) 118

The maturing singer – ‘To stand in all weathers at the crossroads of human experience’ – Selflessness or lack of self – Legal matters – The Three Choirs Festival – St Bees Festival of Music – Petersfield and other Festivals – A particular dedication – Recitals and programming – Spreading his wings – The calmness of wisdom

Chapter Six:

Experience and its rewards (1960-1963) 140

Waiting on the world – Social and spiritual engagement – A return to Christ’s Hospital and on – Later work with The Deller Consort – Other Baroque repertoire – The recording years – Old and new recital partners: John Williams and Manfred Heutling – Final engagements with The Deller Consort – Jupiter, Turret and Stone – The *Dies Natalis* recording project; portents and the initial reaction – Some initial reasons for the success of the recording and its standing – Some qualities of the performance – The concept of transformation – Rilke’s ‘Apollo moment’ and the moment of transformation

Chapter Seven:

Recognition but intimations of mortality (1964-1967) 185

Five particular examples of recognition – The round continued – Intimations of mortality – ‘The King’s Fiasco’ and beyond – The consolation of home, family and holidays – Taking stock and the way forward

Chapter Eight:

The end approached (1968-69) 204

Carrying on? – The last commercial recording – The final engagements? – Later recordings – Later BBC broadcasts – Generosity of teaching and personal commitment – Writing, wit, humour and a serious, secretive side – Surprised by Beauty

Chapter Nine:

The journey concluded? (1970-1971) 228

Later BBC broadcasts – The ultimate steps of the way – The last appearance – The end, and after – The journey still unfinished?

Notes 241

Bibliography 273

Discography 276

Appendix 279

Index 301

Chapter One:

The journey begun (1921-1940)

Family and Home

Wilfred received a splendid though modest and quite unprivileged start to his journey. Born Wilfred Henry Brown into a warm, supportive Christian family on 5th April 1921 in Horsham, Sussex, a son to William George Brown (born 1893) and Kate Matilda Brown, née Pritchett (born 1889), he was to be their only child, but a brother for Kathleen, a daughter from Kate's first marriage. As a young teenager Wilfred's mother Kate had been able to remain an extra two years at Elementary School gaining greater command of English and arithmetic than most of her social peers, before entering service at fourteen in the household of a local Vicar, where she was to be very happy. She quickly worked her way up from scullery maid and general household assistant to under-cook. Later in life Kate Brown set down her memories in an illuminating, well-written account of her first position. In it she gives thanks for the secure grounding it provided both for her professional life in service and for her later life.

I look back even now to those days and feel grateful for all the things I learned in that Christian household. ¹⁾ *

Learning much from his mother, Wilfred also drew much influence from his father's side of the family, as his later wife Mollie recounted.

His great-grandfather had been a shepherd boy on the Sussex Downs and his grandfather a signalman on the Southern Railway. His father was a Guard, and so it was a railway family. The railwaymen did not get a very good deal and his father was always out for betterment of conditions because he saw poverty and knew what it was like, [yet] his father was a wonderfully helpful man and was always doing good. This was the example Bill had. ²⁾

William Brown also had a way with words, as is testified by well-crafted poems, some quite long, retained by his family. Probably from one of his parents Wilfred

* Numbers in the text refer to the Notes section beginning on Page 241.

acquired a facility as a sketcher, exemplified by a persuasive juvenile drawing of his father when at a Quaker meeting. There was some creativity in the family.

Wilfred's parents had met shortly after the end of the First World War at the home of James Swinburne, where they were both employed; he as gardener and she as under-cook. Both had recently been widowed. Kate had lost her husband of two years in 1918 in the trenches during the German spring offensive, leaving her daughter Kathleen, born in 1917, without a father. Their surname was Jacobs. Before the war Kate's husband had been a baker in the East End of London, whom Kate had met as she grew up in Leytonstone. Wilfred's father William had lost his first wife and child in 1917 at the beginning of the great influenza pandemic, which in its course over two years was to infect one-fifth of the world's population, proving most deadly to adults between the ages of twenty and forty.

Now, although a young widowed mother, Kate realised that she was doubly fortunate. Despite the fact that destitution had threatened, she had been able to find employment in the kitchens of the Swinburne's household. There she found great generosity, for in addition to receiving work and accommodation Swinburne insisted that young Kathleen should be brought up in the nursery of the household with his own younger children.

Kate's good fortune continued. She had joined a household with a French chef who taught her to become a more than accomplished cook, a skill which was to assist in an important development, as it helped her some years later to become Warden at the Quaker Meeting House in Horsham. Kate and William were able after two years' acquaintance to marry and set up their independent household in the town at number 36, Oakhill Road, despite the low pay William would receive in his new position as Guard on the Southern Railway in Horsham. In this post William was following in the footsteps of his own father. As Wilfred's wife Mollie has testified, Kate was a caring housewife and mother who, for example, would always rise with her husband William, however early, to prepare and pack his lunch before he left for work on the Railway, where he was soon promoted to Signaller.

With tragedy so raw in the recent past for both of Wilfred's parents, it must have been a godsend when their marriage was blessed with the birth of a boy, Wilfred, a brother for Kathleen. As all could soon see, it was a loving family for Wilfred, for Kathleen too, even if it was hard for her to adjust to a much less privileged home away from the relative opulence of Swinburne's nursery, for Kathleen was now the daughter of two working parents struggling to provide for their new family in a council house on the outskirts of Horsham. According to Wilfred's wife Mollie, Kathleen did not really take to her stepfather, despite the fact that he was a kind and caring man. With Kate's full agreement they regularly took in lodgers, even those who had just appeared at the door, who were then treated as members of the family. Kathleen soon came to dote on the young Wilfred. She delighted in teaching

him to read and write, with such success that it is recounted that by the age of three Wilfred was reading *The Times*!

Like Wilfred, Kathleen proved to be a talented musician, an accomplished and skilful pianist with good sight-reading skills. She was soon in demand and accompanied Wilfred in his early performances around Horsham, as of course at home. For his part, while still a babe in his pram, Wilfred would demonstrate through much loud screaming a prodigious pair of lungs, which according to one neighbour who heard him regularly was likely to lead through such decibels to damage of one sort or another. Wilfred's mother Kate thought quite the opposite.

Neither Kate, William nor their children were birth-right Quakers.³⁾ Although Kate had been baptised into the Anglican Church, Wilfred was never christened but instead was dedicated during worship in the local Congregational community, one of the unhierarchical, non-conformist and self-determining churches which along with the Quakers had sprung up in England in the early seventeenth century. As a five year-old Wilfred started attending Sunday School at the Baptist church. So far as the family's membership of the Society of Friends was concerned, William was the first to be accepted as a Quaker when on 8th January 1930 he was admitted to membership. Kate followed on 11th March 1931, and their children Kathleen and Wilfred on 12th October 1938. Wilfred was seventeen and a half at that date, though as a letter has revealed he had been a convinced Quaker for years, since the family had for several prior years been Attenders at Quaker worship in Horsham.⁴⁾ Sometime later Kate applied for and obtained the position of Warden at the Friends Meeting House in Horsham which brought with it accommodation in the Warden's Annexe.⁵⁾ It is believed that the accommodation in the Annexe was used only occasionally for overnight stays.

Paradoxical though it may seem, given the predominant silence of prayer meetings, the move to attend Quaker meetings seems to have stimulated music-making in the household, as Wilfred's sister Kathleen explained.

*As we had come from a Baptist background we missed the hymns. Music at home was a way of counterbalancing this. So we would sing hymns around the little organ, and then the piano after that. There was also other music-making. Two friends would come and join us so we had something of a social evening. At that age, Bill was rather small and probably in bed at the time, so he would lie in bed listening to the music-making going on.*⁶⁾

Wilfred was a bright boy, possibly precocious, as was soon recognised by his teachers at East Parade Elementary School.⁷⁾ After discussion Wilfred's parents made the decision to apply for a place for their son at Grammar School in Horsham, at Collyer's School,⁸⁾ entry to which was by competitive examination. One can imagine that Wilfred's mother would have needed little persuasion of the virtues

Notes

Chapter One: The journey begun (1921-1940)

- ¹⁾ Kate Brown, Wilfred's mother wrote this fluent, elegant account of her early years for an article in a local newspaper. Dated 1972, it provides an evocative view of life in Edwardian London, as the following extracts reveal.

My first job

I started work when I was fourteen. I was one of the fortunate children who did not have to pass the labour examination in order that I could leave school and earn my living at the age of twelve. Mother wanted me to be a lady's maid but things turned out very differently for me, as our Vicar's wife needed a daily girl and I seemed a likely candidate ...

... The great day arrived and I was welcomed by my first mistress. I started at 9 a.m. and did not think much of the pile of washing up I had to do on arrival. ... The Vicarage was a large Victorian house. It really was a lovely place with a well-kept lawn surrounded by trees. Some of the rooms were occupied by young clergymen straight from College, prior to taking up an appointment.

One of my jobs was helping the Vicar deal with callers who came for bread and grocery tickets. It was supposed to be demoralising to give poor people money as it was a popular belief they spent it on drink. It was chiefly men on such low wages who could not feed the many children they had, this being usual in those days. Even tramps who called had to do small jobs of work to qualify for help. There was Parish Relief for the destitute. How thankful we should all be for the many Welfare Services now provided for both old and young.

... The Vicar's wife really did live up to all you would expect of one in such a position and I remember her most of all for the Soup Kitchen which she supervised every week. It was no wonder that crowds rolled up with their bedroom jugs to get something so good and appetising for one penny a quart. It was always made from the same recipe, with plenty of meat, vegetables, split peas and mint. ... I look back even now to those days and feel grateful for all the things I learned in that Christian household.

... The Vicar's wife used to lend a bag full of all the garments needed for the arrival of a new baby and the mother. These maternity bags were returned to us after a few weeks and it was our job to overhaul and repair the contents. I do not think young mothers nowadays would welcome this charity but it was much appreciated when families were large and wages low. People were very honest and the bags and contents duly returned.

My wages were one shilling and sixpence a week plus my food during the day. I did not go on Sundays as I was expected to attend Church and Sunday School. The day was strictly observed in the Vicarage and only the minimum duties performed. The Parish was a poor one and the Clergy were overworked in consequence. They were always ready to listen to anyone in trouble and do what they could to help. There were very few other sources of comfort and the Vicar was truly the shepherd of his flock. I have often been back to my Church and had a walk round the Vicarage garden, thinking of my young and happy days.

Note: The Church has been pulled down and a new one is to be built.

- 2) Quotation, by kind permission of the BBC, from a programme entitled *The gift doth me inflame – A portrait of Wilfred Brown* compiled and presented by Andrew Green in a BBC Radio Broadcast on 2nd March 1991.
- 3) Confirmed by Surrey History Centre where relevant Quaker records are kept.
- 4) Confirmed in a letter of 5th September 1939.
- 5) Precisely when Kate Brown was appointed Warden or when the family moved into the Warden's Annexe cannot be established.
- 6) Quotation from *The gift doth me inflame – A portrait of Wilfred Brown*.
- 7) East Parade Board School, later renamed Council School, had an average attendance in 1932 of 190 boys and 109 infants. [Information on East Parade Board School taken from <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=18358>]
- 8) Collyer's School, Horsham had been established in 1532 by the estate of Richard Collyer.
- 9) Wilfred took the examination for Collyer's School aged nine. It consisted of four papers; Mental Arithmetic (from 9.30 to 9.45 a.m.), Arithmetic proper (from 9.55 to 10.55 a.m.) and after a fifteen-minute break two exams in English; the first from 11.10 to 11.55 a.m., and the second, a composition, from 12.05 to 12.55 p.m.
- 10) The scrapbook which Wilfred started with documents from his 1931 Scholarship exams contained, further, athletic score sheets, instructions received for him by his parents together with his academic reports. Much more numerous are (later) programmes for concerts and chapel services.
- 11) Winter 1931 Report. See WB's scrapbook.
- 12) Spring and Summer 1932 Reports. See WB's scrapbook.
- 13) Letter 1st March 1933 from The Headmaster of Collyer's, P.A. Thorp. See WB's scrapbook.
- 14) Wilfred retained the individual exam papers in his scrapbook. The English test was a) a story (e.g. of a lion which had escaped from the zoo), b) a vocabulary test with gaps in sentences to be filled, c) an account of three figures taken from

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Also see <http://www.simonknott.co.uk/tommuckley/008festivals.htm> for the story of the genesis of Petersfield Festival

<https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/publications/prisoner-of-war-camps/prisoner-of-war-camps.pdf>

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1958

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1959

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1960

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