



# WRITING *the* BIG BOOK

THE CREATION OF A.A.

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## Ebby Thacher's Visit

A prime example of Wilson's creative mythmaking can be seen in his version of an encounter considered to be one of the pivotal moments in A.A. history: the hallowed story of Ebby Thacher's visit to his Brooklyn home in late November 1934. Bill sat on one side of the kitchen table drinking gin while his recently sober friend, Ebby, sat opposite him. Bill told the story of this meeting repeatedly throughout his sober life,<sup>4</sup> but the most famous version of it appears in "Bill's Story," the first chapter he wrote for the book *Alcoholics Anonymous*:

Near the end of that bleak November, I sat drinking in my kitchen. With a certain satisfaction I reflected there was enough gin concealed about the house to carry me through that night and the next day. My wife was at work. I wondered whether I dared hide a full bottle of gin near the head of our bed. I would need it before daylight.

My musing was interrupted by the telephone. The cheery voice of an old school friend asked if he might come over. *He was sober*. It was years since I could remember his coming to New York in that condition. I was amazed. Rumor had it that he had been committed for alcoholic insanity. I wondered how he had escaped. Of course he would have dinner, and then I could drink openly with him. Unmindful of his welfare, I thought only of recapturing the spirit of other days. There was that time we had chartered an airplane to complete a jag! His coming was an oasis in this dreary desert of futility. The very thing—an oasis! Drinkers are like that.

The door opened and he stood there, fresh-skinned and glowing. There was something about his eyes. He was inexplicably different. What had happened?

I pushed a drink across the table. He refused it. Disappointed but curious, I wondered what had got into the fellow. He wasn't himself.

"Come, what's all this about?" I queried.

He looked straight at me. Simply, but smilingly, he said, "I've got religion."

I was aghast. So that was it—last summer an alcoholic crackpot; now, I suspected, a little cracked about religion. He had that starry-eyed look. Yes, the old boy was on fire all right. But bless his heart, let him rant! Besides, my gin would last longer than his preaching.

But he did no ranting. In a matter of fact way he told how two men had appeared in court, persuading the judge to suspend his commitment. They had told of a simple religious idea and a practical program of action. That was two months ago and the result was self-evident. It worked!

He had come to pass his experience along to me if I cared to have it. I was shocked, but interested. Certainly I was interested. I had to be, for I was hopeless.<sup>5</sup>

Literally millions of alcoholics have read this story and been inspired by its message of hope and the possibility that they too might recover. It is one of the most famous encounters in the history of Alcoholics Anonymous, a seminal, founding moment of the Fellowship.

But Ebby Thacher, the man who supposedly sat on the other side of the kitchen table, told a completely different version of that story; one so far removed from Bill Wilson's account that it is hard to believe they were talking about the same event:

So I called him up one night and I didn't get Bill, but I got Lois, his wife, and told her what had happened to me ... Well, anyway, Lois said why don't you come over to dinner some night and then she mentioned a date and I said: "Fine."

So, that night I went over, at half past five, I guess, in the evening, and I rang the bell at 182 Clinton Street, the only person home was an old colored man named Green\* whom I had known for years, he had been with the family, Lois's family that is, and he said: "They're both out, both Mrs. Wilson and Mr. Wilson are out, but come on in."

So, pretty soon Bill appeared and he'd been drinking but he wasn't too bad, and said "Hello" and this, that and the other thing and he's kind of taking me around. Then he made an excuse, he had to go out and get some ice cream, something else for supper and, of course, I knew what he was going after, I understand, I've done it so many times myself.

So, then Lois came in. Now there was another girl invited; there was a girl invited because she lived upstairs—they'd made the place into an apartment. So we all sat down at dinner. And Bill's got it a little garbled in the book about it being across the kitchen table, but it don't make any difference, the idea is there. Now we got dinner and then we all moved upstairs—in those houses back there in the East most of the living rooms are on the second floor—so we moved up to the second floor and after a little hemming and hawing, Lois said: "Well, let's hear about yourself." So, I started in and I guess they got me wound up and I guess I talked until pretty near 1 o'clock in the morning.

And I remember Bill said: "I'll walk to the subway with you." And I knew that he wasn't going to go for a drink, because he had a bottle in the house anyway. And on the way over he put his arms around my shoulder just before I went in the subway and said "I don't know what you've got, kid, but you've got something and I want to get it."

Well, he didn't stop drinking right away, any more than I had stopped drinking back there that summer when the Oxford Group boys came to see me,<sup>3</sup> but the idea was in there and the idea happened to get in Bill's head.<sup>4</sup>

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Ebby told his version of that evening in Brooklyn on several different occasions, always acknowledging that "the story you read in the Big Book is a little different." He once glibly explained those differences by noting that, after all, he happened to be sober that night, while Bill Wilson was drunk,<sup>5</sup> pointing out that there were "some details of that talk that Bill doesn't remember."<sup>6</sup>

Bill didn't answer the phone? Lois knew about Ebby's recovery before he arrived? Was the whole evening a set-up by Lois? No one, other than Mr. Green, was home when Ebby got there? No kitchen table? No private one alcoholic talking to another alcoholic conversation? They all had dinner together and then went upstairs into the living room? Lois and the girl who lived upstairs were there too? Bill, with his typical bravado, expressing an interest in Ebby's solution, but ever so casually and only in private while they were walking back to the subway in the early hours of the morning? It's not the same story at all. Not even close.

So, what really did happen that afternoon (or was it that evening?) in Brooklyn in late November of 1934? With two such contradictory reports, it would be helpful to have a contemporary account to verify one version or the other, but the closest thing we have to that is a round-robin letter that Lois Wilson wrote to three of her oldest friends on July 20, 1935—a full eight months after Ebby's visit. In that letter, Lois proudly announces that "Bill has stopped drinking thru the Oxford Group" and then explains that "last December Ebby Thatcher [sic] appeared sober for the first time in years and with a very strange story to tell about a religion called the Oxford Group which had cured him just as he was about to be committed to an insane asylum."<sup>7</sup> While this confirms the importance of Ebby's visit, Lois provides no details whatsoever other than to say it occurred in December, which actually contradicts Bill's claim that Ebby appeared "Near the end of that bleak November"—adding yet another layer of confusion to the story.<sup>8</sup>

With no other direct evidence to rely on, Ebby's version of the story is far more credible than Bill's for several reasons. First of all, he presents a coherent, linear narrative—beginning with Lois answering the phone and ending with his walk to the subway with Bill—and he supports that story with a wealth of specific, colorful details. If this is a story Ebby Thatcher made up just to counter the more familiar version, it was an amazingly creative effort. Also, the fact that he told this story publicly when he knew he was being recorded, along with his open acknowledgment that it was significantly different from what Bill always said, surely carries significant weight when evaluating the integrity of his memories of that night. Thatcher's story, after all, has the ring of messy truth to it while Wilson's presentation sounds like the polished parable that it is.

None of this is meant to ignore the fact that Ebby Thatcher had a hard time staying sober and that he was not always the most

reliable witness. His later recollections of his time with the Oxford Group and his comments on early A.A. meetings and activities are occasionally 'back dated' so that they more closely reflect later developments within the program.<sup>2</sup> Still, the reasons for those lapses are evident and understandable—as noted earlier, memory frequently remembers what the present wants to hear—while the creation of a wildly fallacious story about that fateful meeting with Bill Wilson serves no useful purpose whatsoever.

Ebby Thatcher's version is clearly more believable than Bill Wilson's and that, of course, begs the question: Why would Bill have strayed so far from the facts when he told his version of the story?

The short answer is that Wilson was taking one of his experiences and recasting it into a story with a message, a message that would in no way be complicated or confused by the messy details of what actually happened. The point of Bill's much simpler, more direct, and comprehensible story is to dramatically present one of the most basic, foundational beliefs of Alcoholics Anonymous, namely "that one alcoholic could affect another as no nonalcoholic could."<sup>3</sup> His story about Ebby's visit does this admirably: just the two of them are sitting at a kitchen table and their entire conversation is devoted to how his friend has successfully taken control of his drinking and has now come to pass his message of hope on to another suffering alcoholic. It was one drunk talking to another drunk, the only way that the message of recovery could have ever been delivered so effectively, so successfully. In fact, it was this very one-on-one conversation that became the first step of Bill's own journey on the road to recovery.

Wilson's version of the story is a parable, a mythic truth deeply embedded in his story of A.A.'s origins, emphasizing the fact that it all started with one alcoholic talking to another alcoholic, personally delivering the message of potential sobriety. Bill told the story this way because it made the point that he wanted to make. In such cases, the actual facts are distinctly secondary to properly packaging and selling the concepts. Wilson had no problem justifying the creation of this much simplified story because doing so served his higher purpose.

Even as he offered his alternate version, Ebby acknowledged that higher purpose, noting that the differences between his memory of that night and Bill's later recollections didn't really "make any difference" because "the idea is there" and "the principle of the thing is about the same."<sup>4</sup> And, indeed, as far as Bill Wilson was concerned, it was the idea and the principle of the thing that were far more important than any jumbled collection of actual facts.

Wilson's story had drama and impact, delivering an unmistakable message of hope. Thatcher's did not.