



WRITING
the
BIG BOOK

THE CREATION OF A.A.

WILLIAM H. SCHABERG

case, for instance, concerning A.A.'s early partnership with the Oxford Group* and, especially, the tenacity with which the Akron members clung to the Group right up until the end of 1939 (and even beyond that). Another embarrassing story that raised serious problems for the Fellowship was the central role played by Hank Parkhurst—Bill Wilson's right-hand man from 1936 to 1939—because Parkhurst drank shortly after the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was published. Whenever possible, mention of Hank and his contributions to the program were judiciously dropped from the stories told about those early years.

These four persistent tendencies toward creative reporting—uncluttered storytelling, willful mythmaking, deliberate self-deprecation, and the omission of uncomfortable facts—coupled with his notoriously bad memory for dates** mean that we should not blithely take anything Bill Wilson said at face value. To accept his stories and statements without the most rigorous kind of cross-examination would be the height of historical folly.

At the same time, this is not to say that everything he said was somehow less than truthful. Bill frequently relates facts and events that are completely uncontaminated by these more creative tendencies. But, given how often Wilson's version of events is contradicted by other sources, it is always wise to weigh his pronouncements against the testimony of others and, most important, to evaluate them in relation to the available contemporary records.

This caveat about Bill Wilson's reliability, however, in no way diminishes his towering stature in the history of twentieth century spirituality or in any way compromises the truly remarkable things he accomplished during his lifetime. Bill was a man of vision—a grand, universal, uplifting, deeply spiritual, life-saving vision—and the fact that he elected to tell uncluttered, instructive parables rather than historically accurate stories can hardly be held against him. Had he not done so, it is possible he would never have been successful in transforming his profound vision of widespread recovery into such a vibrant, spiritually enriching international reality—something that he most certainly did before his death in January 1971.

Ebby Thatcher'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 Thatcher'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

4

* The Oxford Group was a twentieth century religious Fellowship (in the USA, largely Episcopalian) that tried to practice "First Century Christianity." More details about the Oxford Group will be supplied later.

** Ernest Kurtz, for instance, in his justly admired *Not-God: A History of Alcoholics Anonymous*, frequently wrestles with Wilson's inaccuracies as he tries to understand what actually happened and several of his endnotes make explicit references to "Wilson's atrocious memory for dates" and to his general lack of precision with the facts. See especially n. 18 and 24 on pp. 329 and 330 respectively.

opposite him. Bill told the story of this meeting repeatedly throughout his sober life,* 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 trackpot; now, I suspected, a little cracked about religion. He had that stary-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. (5)

5

* The story of Bill's early recovery was the only one any group ever wanted to hear when he was invited to speak. But, with each retelling, Wilson became increasingly bored with the endless repetition and he began to refer to it sarcastically as "the bedtime story." He would have been much happier just to skip over this bit of ancient history and move on to much more current and important topics in A.A. (See Hartigan, Bill W., p. 136 and also Unforgettable Bill W and the "bedtime story,"

<http://www.barefootsworld.net/aabillwreadersdigest.html> [retrieved April 24, 2013].)

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

6

* Mr. Green had been with Lois's family for years (he took care of the horse and carriage for Lois's father) and now lived in the cellar at 182 Clinton Street.

None of this is meant to ignore the fact that Ebby Thacher 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.* 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 Thacher'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."¹⁰ 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."¹¹ 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. Thacher's did not.

* To supply just one example, Ebby said that "those early [Oxford Group] meetings we attended were basically the same as the A.A. meetings of today." (Fitzpatrick, Dr. Bob & Bill W. Speak, p. 24)