

Sekliw Gnirednaw: Wilkes Wanderings

A Tale of Smuggish Satisfaction'

Preface

by Dr Stephen Carthew

This tale was probably written in 1921 or 1922, either during, or soon after his time with Shackleton on *The Quest* and before he went to Russia to film the famine relief work of and for the Quakers.

The title: 'Sekliw Gnirednaw', 'Wilkes Wanderings' spelled backwards, has a secondary title: 'A Tale of Smuggish Satisfaction.' The piece is about 9,000 words.

This tale is couched in the second person. At thirty-three years of age, Wilkins reflects on himself as a child and a teenager, tracking his own personal development and recounting stories about his parents, his girlfriends, his wanderings in the circus he joined and more. Writing as if a friend of 'Wilks' – 'many years his senior', the Wilkins the author finds his subject – his younger self, a 'constant revelation'.

The stand-apart positioning of the second person, reveals a detached assessment of himself as he moved through difficult phases of childhood. It includes a number of dramatic moments during his teenage years – including two attempts at suicided. The tale is most helpful in understanding that the young Wilkins took some time to discover his sense of purpose, and an awakening to his destiny – which was evolving at the time he wrote this 'tale of smuggish satisfaction.' Wilkins was no superman who landed near Mount Bryan, this document reveals major challenges. It is useful to note that the word 'smug' in those days was as much more positive than its present day meaning: 'self-contented', 'self-aware', and 'not lacking in self-esteem' might be a fairer more positive interpretation of the word, than 'self-satisfied', 'superior' or 'conceited'. Describing this story as 'a tale of smuggish satisfaction', a term used on a few occasions, also suggests a somewhat tongue-in-cheek tone to some of the stories, and his philosophy as it developed in childhood and his teenage years. Although my particular focus in the commentary, is Wilkins's philosophic development, this unusual, quirky, enigmatic piece of autobiographic and autoethnographic writing includes some wonderful stories worth reading as personal yarns in their own right.

While a somewhat shy introvert, Wilkins never displayed false modesty when writing or speaking about himself, however he disliked other people flattering him publicly. It is interesting to note that he was quite prepared to detail his better qualities as well as his own foibles.

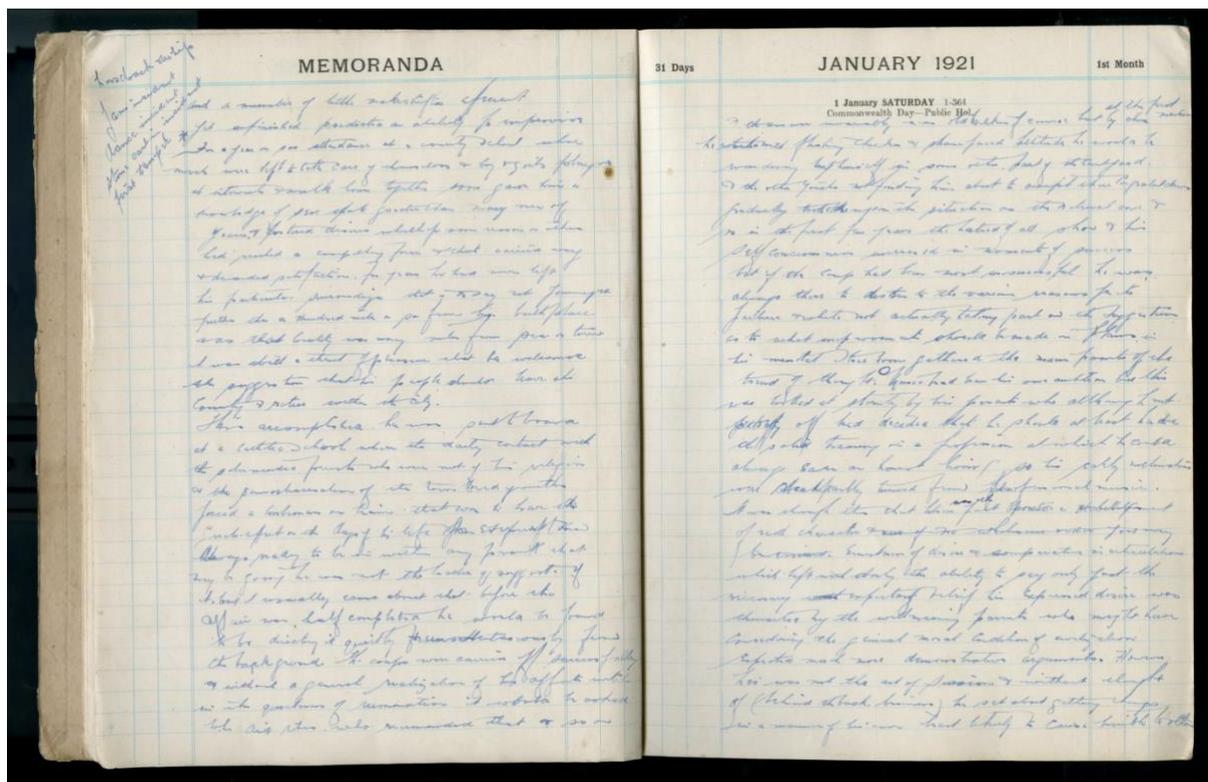
This tale is probably the first substantial piece of autobiographical writing Wilkins undertook. That he never returned to this draft is indicated by the blank gaps in some of the sentences, which were clearly designed to be filled in later.

Acknowledgments

A big thank you firstly to Laura Kissel, the Polar Curator for the Byrd Polar and Climate Research Center Archival Program (Polar Archives). Laura has been able to have many diaries digitised. This agreement of OSU digitising the diaries, and Wilkins Foundation volunteers transcribing them, has born much fruit already – this tale is arguably the ripest so far. The pages have been digitised at the highest quality – reading and zooming in to a few words, must be nearly as good as looking at the page with a magnifying glass.

Special thanks to Philip van Dueren for his many hours transcribing this tale and putting it into a semblance of order. We have spent a couple of days working together to decipher more words.

Wilkins quite obviously never expected anyone other than himself to read his tale, is far south of easy reading. He might well be embarrassed that we have resurrected this piece – but we have – and this is what happens when one keeps their private diaries. So special thanks to Wilkins for writing about his young friend Wilks. Here is a page of the original:



I have not included the links to the individual pages but have included one single page so you have an idea of what the text looks like – and the challenge facing the transcribers. Anyone wishing to have a go at making sense of the indecipherable and missing words, please email Philip van Dueren, and he will provide a link to the files. We are always looking for more WTWs (Wilkins Transcription Warriors). Hope you enjoy the stories.

Phillip's email is pvandueren@gmail.com phone: 0402 765 707

Note to readers

All the words of Wilkins are in black italicised text; **the red text are simply likely guesses at almost unintelligible words. A complete surrender is marked by ????, with each '?' being designed to represent a letter of the unknown word).** The violet text are our few comments on the text. The few footnotes are there for the interest of readers. We have created **Bolded headings** we composed to break up the text, and for ease of finding both subjects and the stories related to specific themes. We have also bolded some text of special interest to the philosophic focus of the commentary – and likely to be useful as quotes. We have corrected the occasional spelling mistakes Wilkins made. Where '[]' appears, Wilkins has a left a space, perhaps with the intent of returning to the text to include the right word. On occasions we have put a word in there that we think makes sense.

We have done some work on the punctuation – but please remember that this is the first draft in the project of turning this text into a relatively readable and reasonably reliable representation of Wilkins's original tale about his friend 'Wilks'. I have taken a few minor liberties to make the text more somewhat more readable. Wilkins used the plus sign '+' to join ideas together in the original handwriting to join ideas together. There is virtually no punctuation in the original text; this is the reason there are so many extremely long sentences; many of them peppered with joiners like 'and' and 'but' and, 'although' – with a plethora of commas and semi-colons to try and make sense of what we encountered on these terrifying scribbled pages. As Simon Nasht comments in his book *The Last Explorer: A graphologist (one who analyses handwriting) described Wilkins's writing as 'intuitive'. One can't help think that his writing was much like himself. The quirky reversed letter-and-word heading suitably sets the stage for a fascinating piece of writing.*

Sekliw Gnirednaw [Wanderings Wilkes]

A Tale of Smuggish Satisfaction

The ungainly youth

He was an awkward ungainly youth when I first met him; long for his age, and with clothes that fitted only where they touched. He was the butt of the few other boys whom he occasionally saw in the district; for his parents insisted on his wearing, even at the age of eleven, those dark brown trousers known as three-quarters. To me though, many years his senior, he was a constant revelation, and the many thoughts he hatched, and his actions, were a series of revolutions that increased proportionately -- as the fabled snow ball.

This idea that the teenage Wilks was a revelation to the thirty-three-year-old Wilkins is fascinating – and yet understandable. Looking back on himself as a snowball gathering experiences and understanding of himself for a yet unclear destiny is useful in grasping a human dimension of the man.

Extraordinary Beginning

His had been an extraordinary beginning; old for his age even in the tenderest years, an attribute due no doubt to the fact that his parents were well past the middle age when he was born, and he himself the thirteenth child. An early education, due to force of circumstances and drought ridden areas, brought him to the advanced stage of reasoning at the age of eleven, and by the time he reached thirteen, the dabbling in the psychological books of Haeckel had soured his too precocious mind.¹

The souring of his precious mind is a Wilkins tongue-in-cheek line. However serious or import were the issues Wilkins addressed in his life, he never took himself too seriously – a trait which endeared to all those who had a sense of humour.

Au fe with men and women much older than himself or the capacity for listening without comment gained for him the reputation of a slow child among strangers but the men with whom he was associated knew much better for they saw the application of his knowledge in the happening of his early life. His pony, dogs and toys were always well looked after, and a number of little makeshifts [probably billy carts], efficient yet unfinished, predicted an ability to improvise.

For a year or so, attendance at a county school where morals were left to take care of themselves, and boys and girls played at intervals and walked home together some gave him a knowledge of sex far greater than many men of years and fostered desires, which, for some reason or other, had reached a compelling force, and that carried way, and demanded satisfaction.

*For years he had **never left his particular surroundings**; that is to say not journeyed further than a hundred mile or so from his birthplace and as that locality was many miles from sea or town it was with a thrust of pleasure that he welcomed the suggestion that his people should leave the county and return within the city.*

This does not mean he had never been to Adelaide, but it does suggest that for a period of years he never left the Mid-North –probably around the turn of the Twentieth Century when surviving the Federation Drought was the consuming all the family energy. He writes about this period at length in *Under the North Pole*.²

This accomplished, he was sent to board at a Catholic school where the daily contact with the sober-minded priests who were not of his religion and the ?????????? of the town bred youths forced a ?????????? on him that was to have great effect on the days of his life and forever after I know.

Which school it was is unknown at this point. The last two-words ‘I know’, are enigmatic. Something import happened, but it is too tenuous a proposition to assume what – especially as

¹ The German biologist and artist Ernst Heinrich Philipp August Haeckel (1834–1919) was a key figure during the early years of the “First Darwinian revolution”, a time period when the foundation for the development of our modern evolutionary view of the biosphere was laid. Haeckel, who discovered and described hundreds of species, coined key terms, such as ecology ... <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s12064-019-00276-4>

² Wilkins, H 1931, *Under the North Pole: The Wilkins Ellsworth Submarine Expedition*, Brewer, Warren and Putnam, pp. 75–82. This text can be read online at:

https://archive.org/stream/undernorthpolewi00wilk/undernorthpolewi00wilk_djvu.txt

two key words in the paragraph are indecipherable.

The quiet efficient prankster of the school

*Always ready to be in within any prank that may be going, he was not the leader or suggester of it, but it usually came about that before the affair was half-completed, he would be found to be directing it quietly and **unconscientiously** from the background. The coups were carried off successfully and without a general realisation of his efforts; until in the quietness of rumination, it would be asked who did this, who recommended that, and so on; and there invariably, was old Wilks of course; but at the first mention, he, with flushing cheeks and shame-faced **????????**, would be wandering by himself in some other part of the courtyard; and the other youths, not finding him about to accept their congratulations, gradually looked upon the situation as the natural one; and so in the first few years the hatred of all show; and his self-consciousness increased in moments of success, but if the coup had been most unsuccessful, he was always there to listen to the various reasons for its failure, and while not actually taking part in the suggestion as to what improvements should be made in flaws, in his mental store soon gathered the main points of the trend of thought.*

Music: The nearest chord of sympathy

*It was through music that he felt the nearest chord of sympathy, and it was through this medium that he at last determined to gain happiness. He was allowed to have musical instruments and to practice to his heart's content; and he soon gained a measure of success with organ, flute and violin. His **lust** was to improvise, following the inclination of his spirit, but he soon found that to gain technique he must follow the courses found by years of study to be the most efficient.*

*To take those courses meant the expenditure of more money than he himself possessed, and when he asked his parents for the opportunity to study music, they at once refused, except as an ordinary accomplishment. None of their money would go to make him a professional entertainer, which would have been **necessary** if he followed his desires, for he had not sufficient money to keep himself in the ordinary necessities of life without an earning capacity.*

*As compensation, he was allowed to choose any other profession, and for what his parents would foot the bill. **Just why he chose electrical engineering it is hard to say, but the mysticism connected with that power certainly attracted him.** He therefore attended classes pertaining to this **?????** and gained more or less success at the periodical examinations.*

Wilkins put himself through enough music lessons to become a 'more or less' useful musician. He took a small pump organ with him on the *Nautilus*.

Studying Music and parents disapproval

Music had been his one ambition, but this was looked at sternly by his parents who, although not well off, had decided that he should at least have a solid training in a profession at which

he could always earn an honest living; so his early inclinations were steadfastly turned from his personal music. It was through this that there was the first operatic development of real character, and ~~one of no wholesome order you may be assured.~~

Earnestness of desire, and comparative inarticulation which left *him* with only the ability to say only just the necessary expectant belief; his expressed desire was thwarted by the well-meaning parents who might have, considering the general moral condition of *????* expected much more demonstrative arguments. **However, his was not the art of suasion and without thought of (behind the back business) he set about getting things in a manner of his own least likely to cause trouble to others. This compelling to adjust matters for himself, without regard for others' feelings, soon had a marked effect on the character of a strong-willed undemonstrative boy; and before very long his respect of fellow men was lessened, and a long lone course was set upon.**

A chance meeting at an evening gathering at which appeared a singing master resulted in expressed appreciation of his voice which by this time had broken and settled down to a light concert tenor in due course. This led to an invitation to compete for the leads singing scholarship at the State Conservatorium. This, mentioned to his parents, met with instant disapproval for they said *[music]* would lead him into *society of* fast living theatrically inclined people whom, *[the parents]* think, ignorant as most, believed to be but children of the devil. Again, with quiet assurance depending on his own self, without thought of deliberately concealment for its sake, but to have his desire and spare what his parents thought to be their good name, he assumed another one, his grandma's maiden surname and with his pocket money savings, started quarter lessons, so as to compete for the scholarship. The time drew near, and **all sense of self-consciousness left him for in his natural inconspicuous earnestness, his whole energies went towards obtaining his desire. Never brilliant, but more than ordinarily efficient, he convinced the judges that his was the best effort and the prize was his.**

He was gratified that this should be so, but to his even temperament it was only as he expected. And *???* be for **he had no thought but that to do just all he could, and the competitive nature of the trial did not interest him.** Having won his examination, to him there was no need to mention it to his parents. He wanted no rejoicings or congratulations. He to himself was sufficient, in that respect without deliberate selfishness. **The course went on, and he steadily won his way to the top of the class, without a tremor of delight for actual prevailing – but with smug satisfaction.**

The idea that 'He to himself was sufficient' is what makes for his smug satisfaction.

The first girlfriend

It was at these classes that he met the first girl that really interested him, and she unfortunately as did he, came from a *consumptive/consumption riddled* family. Their meetings were almost nightly and their happiness *???* complete, for they let their feeling take them where they inclined. If either materially felt the necessity of restraint and *???* calm [of] their morally trained convictions, each thought that they had but a few years to live and therefore their lives would not hinder or affect other people. Again, it was

not an act of selfishness completely but more a matter of disinterestedness. To him she was the model of what all girls should be. Good to look at, intellectual, musical and above all thoroughly womanly; and in his ignorance of women he thought her faithful.

Fatal illness in the girlfriend's family and suicide plans

It was the turning point of his life when one day at their favourite meeting place she was not present, but her sister came with a sorrowful face. The dreaded TB had taken **????** from her family, her father and mother had passed away, her brothers and her cousin, and younger members of her family, all in their twenty-first year, and he in his nineteenth; and her time would not be long in coming. **These deaths should not pail away their happiness, for to each it was just a passing stage; they would run their race as long as natural circumstances allowed, and when one went, the other would follow quickly either by disease, or if that appeared to be too long, in its ravishing, then by their own hands.**

Many times they had discussed the problem of how it should be done. As, with a dread of conspicuous show, **they** chose drowning from a seaside pile so that no trace of the body should be found. To her, no consideration was needed of others left, for it was an only sister who, too in the grip of the disease, would not last long. Tho with a team of relatives, for whom he really did not care, but for whom in his love for farmers he had to protect, had to devise some other scheme; and with his slight knowledge of poisoning gained in chemistry lectures, had decided on that method.

In the course of his daily classes, he had access to many deadly poisons, and the one most suited to his purpose was potassium cyanide which, while quiet in its effect, and left positive signs of self-administration, could be used in a manner that would let it appear to be accidentally taken. For months, their marked happiness went smoothly; on the showing of evident signs of the disease, while he persistently remained robust and healthy, but this [**her deterioration**], did not surprise them for the class [**of TB**] from which her family suffered was of a lingering nature, and that that his family died was of the galloping kind, and six weeks to two months from the first symptoms generally saw the sufferer near the end.

The note the sister left

Leaving a note to say that his sweetheart had run away and married another man more than thirty years of age, and whom she had only met on three separate occasions. Curiously enough the reputation of this man was well known, and it was not altogether of savoury odours. Rumour had it that he had been a widower, and had purposely drowned his wife in a boating accident. He **was** known to be a loose man about town, and the shock that Wilks got when he heard that this girl had been persuaded by the man, was one that he now recovered from. For a day or so he moped about in vague semi-consciousness, and then when his mind began to clear he thought of ways to bring about the result that he had determined to do, should the dread disease take his loved one from him.

Suicide plans

His singing master often recommended him to seeing a throat specialist with the object of seeing whether an operation would not have the effect of strengthening his voice, for, although his voice was particularly tuneful and sure, and he had the lungs, it was not of sufficient strength to enable him to take oratorical parts in large buildings.

This gave him an idea. He would see the specialist, and if an operation was to be performed he would take potassium cyanide immediately before going under chloroform and so pass away unsuspectingly, the Dr. necessarily having to grant the death certificate. These actions were carried out in detail, but the effect was not as intended. The operation was recommended, and had to take place on a certain date at 11am. As he sank in the operating chair, he swallowed some potassium cyanide coated in that class of sweet known as Bulgarian rock, which successfully covered up the smell and taste.

*It was with calm deliberation that he took the pills and without a tremor inhaled the chloroform, fully under the impression that these would be his last few conscious moments on the earth. The operation was performed successfully from the surgeon's point of view, but it was with a queer feeling of astonishment that Wilks **saw** himself regaining consciousness. A few moments after regaining his senses he fell to vomiting furiously, and the nurse in attendance not noticing anything unusual in this, the incident passed off unnoticed.*

Death of his first love

*Because feeling terribly weak and almost at a state of collapse, he, due to restrained action of the heart, slowly recovered; and to him **as he lay in his bed, there came the thought that he had dared to try and interfere with the workings of fate, and he felt assured for the first time of the control of some greater power.** This time the feeling lasted only for a few weeks for when he came out of hospital, he was met by the girl he had loved who had now been cast off by the man she had so hastily married. She was fully repentant and pleaded to be taken back to his good graces. He however, had had his faith in women shattered and refused to listen to her. In a month or so she pined away and fell an easy victim to the disease which had its grip on her family. He was now restored to perfect health. He was not allowed to carry on with singing exercises, and so his interest in life was slight.*

Second suicide attempt

*He was troubled with remorse at the thought that he had not forgiven **Cotilda**, and determined once again to carry out the plans they had made together. This time he felt sure that fate would not trick him; his facility to procure the cyanide poison led him to try that means again. This time the preparation required more caution and longer to prepare. He set up a small electro-gilding plant in his home workshop, in which the deadly poison is fixed, and professed it to be his hobby. He interested himself in the electro plating of Baltis and **made** petalled flowers long enough to ward suspicion at finding active poisons on his bench. Then, one evening after a visit to his brother who was working at a neighbouring suburb, which required his boarding there, he informed his parents that he was going to spend a few hours in his plating room. During the evening he had purchased some of the same sweets as he used before – Bulgarian rock which is not unlike the potassium cyanide in its solid form – and conspicuously took the package with him to his laboratory.*

*At midnight after preparing everything to appear that he had been carrying his flask of plating **he placed** it with the package of sweets beside some loose cyanide. He swallowed some of the poison, and laid down to die in an **????????** as if he had fallen. **Soon after, with a feeling of smug satisfaction having outwitted fate, he felt himself losing consciousness and soon all was utter darkness. The next conscious moments were when he awoke to find his brother bending over him holding water to his mouth.***

Fate won't allow him to die

*Again, with painful realisation, he felt that fate had fooled and played with him and he **wept in sorrowful anger**. However, the physical feeling soon claimed his attention. He found that he had been vomiting again – mostly evil smelling stuff – and although shivering with slight convulsions, managed to explain to his brother that it must have been accidental what he knew to be deliberate action. His brother, who quite unexpectedly had missed his last train and had come home again to sleep, agreed not to say anything about the incident to his parents, and his ghostly appearance next morning was put down by his parents to a disturbed night through the brothers return. In three or four days he was fit and well again **grieved at his failure to end his earthly existence, but was more fully convinced that the Lord of Fate watched over him, and that his time of service on this earth was determined by some other power than his**. Thus, at the age of nineteen, he found himself with his faith in women shattered, a depressed feeling of constant control after a certain point, and a desire to try it himself by wandering in strange surroundings.*

Decision to join a circus

*Just about this time he had finished his four years course of electrical engineering, and it remained only to sit for the final exam to obtain his degree. Chance however, offered him an opportunity to travel some weeks before this event took place, and **without asking anyone's advice, he decided not to sit for his final exam, but to take the opportunity offered to move from place to place and seek distraction in the strangeness of new conditions.***

The opportunity offered was one that did not meet with the approval of his friends or parents; but wilful as of old, he neglected their opinions and soon took up the job of electrician to a travelling cheapjack carnival. His duty consisted of the superintendence of the electric lighting plant, which was in those days of sufficient novelty in Australia to attract much attention in the country districts; and he was looked upon as the learned professional of the party.

It is likely that this circus was Bruce's Carnival; the manager wrote a reference for Wilkins – and in the copperplate handwriting which all TWRs: the Wilkins Transcription Warriors wish Wilkins had developed.

Bruce's Carnival

Adelaide,

4th April 1909

This is to certify that G.H Wilkins has been employed under me for a period of seven months. His antics, which included the management of a complete Portable Electric

Plant (12 H.P.), generating light for the Cinematograph, Stage and Arc Lamp purposes were carried out to my entire satisfaction. I have always found him to be sober, honest, reliable and straightforward. I can fully recommend him to anyone requiring his services.

*Albert E. Williams
Metagraphist³
Manager, Bruce's Carnival*

The cheapjack carnival strike

*This carnival was comprised of a large marquee in which an entertainment consisting of a concert party of five singers, marionettes, a magician, a pianist and a moving picture outfit; and the whole was, apart from its money-making property, an advertisement for a form of shoddy tailors. His encounter with this company met with great disapproval of his parents and friends and led to his partial ostracisation. But this held no [] for Wilks. He rather enjoyed the administration, and his observance of his new surroundings brought distractions from his *wanted/wonton* self-analysis. It so happened, that on the second Sunday out on tour the concert company went on strike for higher pay, and would not perform at the *second* concert held in the evening. The owner of the concern, who happened to be there, told Wilks of the happenings and expected from that, the people would be disappointed at not having some singing, and then allow the public to know that he was having trouble with his empty marquee.*

*Money matters would be a very bad advertisement for this business, and interfere with the success of the town. He had therefore decided to *take all the ????????* entertainers, by announcing that night from the platform that he was going to dispend with the services of the concert party, and introduce a new entertainer, a famous illusionist on the following night. The illusionist, a friend of his he knew to be out of employment and within a day's rail journey.*

Wilkins the Vocalist

Young Wilks, thinking more of the owner's pleasure of enjoying a new experience, volunteered to take the part of the concert party for the evening and sing the four illustrated songs that constituted the vocal part of the entertainment. The surprise of the striking party, who had wandered into the marquee to witness the proprietor when the singer failed to appear as per programme, can be imagined, when the title of the song they would have sung appeared on the screen; and a beautiful, clear, yet well-trained, hardly strong enough lead voice, took up the opening chords – the singer singing in darkness. They did not know his identity and the audience not sensing anything unusual, gave the vocalist the applause they thought deserved; and two encores of the chorus were demanded in spite of the demonstration of the astonished concert party.

After the song, the proprietor took the platform – and taking the advice, also his confidence told of the striker's plot – and so he announced his intention of disposing of the concert party

³ A metagraphist is a kind of hypewriter. They follow the art of metagraphy and hypergraphy respectively. Both lost arts are synonymous with the skill of transliteration: representing letters or words in the characters of another alphabet or script. In any case, Albert Williams certainly had great writing.

promising greater amusement with the illusionist and equal satisfaction from the vocalist to whom they had just listened. A storm of applause greeted them; ovation followed by calls for the singer to appear, this he refused to do, but three encores after each of the other songs were hardly enough to satisfy the appreciative audience. After the show, the identity of the singer was made known.

Wilkins the strikebreaker

*Both concert party and Wilks first came to know the anger and scorn of a slighted female. The men of the concert party were sullenly rude, but the two women were furious and lashed the smugly satisfied amateur with all the stinging violence of a women's tongue. **Their comments and fury had little effect on Wilks's equanimity, but the whole scene was of a most educative nature to his receptive mind.***

The colloquial synonyms for a strike-breaker were colourful: 'scab', 'blackleg', 'knobstick', 'rat' and 'goon-thug' to name a few. But it is likely that these terms were just the start of the abuse he copped that evening.

Enter Hatherley the magician⁴

The magician duly arrived in time for the next evening performance; being a much travelled and observant – now self-educated above the ordinary – a fast friendship soon was struck up between him and Wilks, which lasted throughout the tour. It was found impossible for him to continue choosing vocal numbers and superintending the lighting outfit at the same time, so Hatherley the magician proposed engaging local singers, and giving prizes to the most successful who would be acclaimed by vote.

This proved an excellent idea from many points of view. It was requested that the would-be entertainers visit the marquee during the day and rehearse their turns. As many as possible would be included in the programme of the evening and the one securing the most votes would be engaged to perform for the rest of the stay in the town.

Ethnographic observations of the talent quest participants

These rehearsals gave Wilks and Hatherley, who was the appointed concert director, some rather amusing half hours. Girls of many types and degrees of culture, visited the marquee some accompanied by their mother, some surreptitiously, and some boldly amorous for both men were not bad to look upon from a women's point of view and anyone associated with theatricals have, and will always have, a glamour attached for a certain class of females.

The story of the wannabe actress

Many were the ??? of town introduced ??? songs, comic songs, dramatic recitations, improvisations, and the inevitable song-and-dance artists in pairs and singles. One of the taller aspirants, full of romantic ideas, and with affected mannerisms worthy of the most

⁴ That Hatherley existed can be seen on Trove: GIGANTIC SUCCESS OF GEORGE HATHERLEY., Line 2.40.0. Prince of Ventriloquists and Premier **Magician**. Line 2.40.1. PRICES-Front Seats, 1/; Back, 6d. <https://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/article/5161179>

imaginative vocalist, appeared one day with her mother as a chaperone; but who, poor thing, saw no further than the glory of her daughter. The daughter in turn saw in her parents nothing but the exemplification of those unfortunate necessities for existence. She had chosen live stage as her profession she said, and although some day she intended to play great character parts, she would be cast out to do a song-and-dance live for the benefit of the entertainment.

*Hatherley had met this type before, but even he was surprised to see that the song the girl had brought to sing as a preliminary to her dance was *The Holy City*⁵. Needless to say, her performance was the greatest success of the evening, and although she might have been astonished that the appreciation of the song-and-dance turn should be shown by so much laughter, she was carried to the seventh heaven of delight on the applause that followed.*

Observation and experiments regarding women

*It was during this time that Wilks, with his faith in women already badly shattered by this affair, grew to be more and more contemptuous of the professed faithfulness of women. **Women of all classes sought to bestow their favours on him freely, and is it to be wondered at, that he took advantage of their affections to carry out his investigations of the mental and moral conditions that govern actions.** It was while carrying out one of these experiments that he gained an experience that puzzled him at first, but proved consistently that there is some instinctive feeling in mankind that leads to self-preservation as the first law.*

A sample ‘case’ and giving locals a ‘shock’ – quite literally.

*He had been making *fun/free* with the jilted idol of a mining village, who accustomed to the worship of all and sundry, was not averse to a mild flirtation with a conspicuous stranger. Besides being pleasant company, she proved to be an interesting case, and Wilks was not averse to continuing the acquaintance.*

*The young men of the village, jealous of him, gathered each way around the brightly illuminated brass walled electrical plant and taunted the young engineer with his flirtatious actions. *?????* to enter into any verbal [joust] with them; he thought of a scheme whereby he could make them look rather foolish. Familiar enough with electric lighting as there was in the mines, the actual generating plant with its shaft turning engine and dynamo locking meters, clocks, resistors, and switchboards was a great attraction for the crowds who gathered to stand and gaze at it fascinatedly until the performance started.*

*One evening as the usual crowds of youths stayed about hanging on to the brass railing that surrounded the plant, their feet on a canvas floorcloth previously wetted by the engineer, There was a yell of rage, and fear, and a scalded youth flying in the air and *???? ?? ???* *????* while some stood howling fearfully, as they tried to exercise their strength to break away from the grip of the galvanic power that kept their hands fast on the railing.*

⁵ The Holy City is a religious Victorian ballad dating from 1892, with music by Michael Maybrick writing under the alias Stephen Adams, with lyrics by Frederic Weatherly. Its sheet music sales made it one of the most commercially successful songs in the UK and United States around the beginning of the 20th century.

Wilks had previously arranged his dynamo works so that by the manipulation of a switch key, pressure those *holding firm to* the brass railing and standing on the wetted floor-sheet would secure a heavy shock.

As usual, those of the crowd unharmed, laughed uproariously at their unfortunate companions, and this added fuel to the anger of their victims. They quickly *shared* a space around the plant unthreatened, but it was not until the majority of people were safe inside the marquee that they tried to carry out their revenge. Standing off some distance beyond the power of the light they heaved a shower after shower of stones at the engineer and his plant. Fortunately, none of the stones did any serious damage and soon a message to the police brought a couple of mounted officers and dispersed the gang.

Wilks fires shots at the pier

Wilks, satisfied with his success, had almost forgotten the incident as after the show he wandered down the rather lonely pier to a secret rendezvous with the *aforesaid* village beauty. But the gang had not forgotten, and knowing of the meeting place were lying in wait in the darkest and loneliest section of the pier. The night was rather stormy, and the waves were breaking heavily against the piles.

With a rush the crowd came for him with shouts of 'Here comes the engineer Johnny'. Let's toss him into the water. He, *???* rightly knowing their numbers, and his heart almost stood still with fright. But only for a moment were his *senses* scattered; but, without remembered directional thought, he found himself with his back to the rail shooting his revolver over the heads of the crowds. The sight of the revolver, followed by the shouts, terrified the crowd and the noises, attracting the attention of other loiterers on the pier, came running and shouting to the scene.

The band of youths broke and ran when they heard the shouting; and Wilks still flummoxed by the unexpected attack had hardly time to slip his revolver into his pocket before the first of the crowd appeared, seeking the maker of the noises. He was sufficiently recovered to say that he thought it was noises in the crowd of youths who had run away that had fired the shots for fun. He was glad for the coming darkness that hid his blanched face that prevented them from seeing the remnants of his agitation. His explanation was accepted, and he wandered off down the pier, keeping his appointment with the village flirt only a few minutes late.

His nonchalant way of getting on with the next thing soon after a dramatic episode marked the life of Wilkins. There are many examples of this. It is interesting to know of his teenage escapades.

Wilks early experiences with inebriated people

The next morning the company left that town and proceeded to another mining centre not very far away. This place was notorious for its drinking bars and bucket shops, **and it was here that Wilks first saw the breakdown of his fellow man.** He had seen men and women drink up many times, but had never come into close contact with them in that state, and

although always able and willing to take a glass of anything from his earliest youth, **he had never frequented hotel bars and lounges; that sort of thing had no attraction for him.** But at this place, he went with his tour friends one night after the show to see a drinking place known as the Blazing Stump.⁶

Here, in two rows adjoining at the back of the bar, were men and women almost without exception dreadfully drunk but mostly in the confidential comical state. They at first resented strongly the three newcomers who were strangers to their company, but when one of the strangers “put ‘em up” for all the crowd they gladly tipped their glasses to the strangers.

These people were not of a class that would watch the show, so they did not recognise any of the strangers, and after the effects of the first glass, walked off, and their memory of it failed them. They soon got seriously resentful of their presence especially, as the girls’ successful business, their **????** of the possibility of finding treasures in new pastures, had begun to take especial notice of the three strangers. A bullet-headed, besodden man was thumping at an old honky tonk piano, playing maudlin songs, but who, in presence of another butcher (a local name for the largest glass of beer) was sitting next to Johnson the pianist.

Johnson: A kindred spirit

Johnson was a rather wonderful musician and a student of mankind. Adorned with fair temperament, an accident early in his life had rendered him a cripple. Forced to a sedentary occupation he took up music and painting, and soon was bound to find occupation as a pianist to support his aged mother. He had a wonderful memory for popular songs and could improvise; and so his manipulation of the old piano soon brought forth showers of applause.

The beer and whisky flowed as various members of the group vied and wrangled with each other as to who should shout drinks for the musician and his friends. Hatherley, [the magician] then started to produce yards of ribbon from beneath the **????** dress of a beautiful **??? ???** girl much to her annoyance and her astonishment. Then flowers appeared from another ones hair, and soon the place was in uproar as he went round extracting various [items] **???** from the **???** and showers of all and sundry.

Wilkins Sings at the pub and makes them cry

The spirit of the crowd rose as the fun went on and the beer went down. Then Johnson skilfully brought the music round to a minor key and nodded to Wilks as he played the opening bars of ‘A Pack of Cards’.⁷ Wilks took up the air and in his sweet melodious voice told remorsefully the story of the song: How a gilded youth in a wild moment gave way to the temptation to cheat at cards and was said to fail – then mourned by a broken-hearted mother. His sympathetic voice soon had them in his power and the flood gates of emotion were opened at many an eye; and presently one or so, overcome with pity, fell to a wild epileptic fit. At once there was a frenzied uproar, women screaming, men shouting and

⁶ The Blazing Stump is in Wodonga has lifted its game: <https://blazingstumphotel.com.au/facilities/>

⁷ This likely to be a version of ‘Deck of Cards’.

yelling, glasses were thrown about ????????? with one striking the hanging lamp, the room was thrown to darkness.

The suffering man struggled and kicked frantically on the floor, while others tried to hold him down. In their struggles some others felt the ???? of their ???? and soon a free fight started. Chairs and stools went flying, and long before the hotel keeper arrived with a light, the place was a real shambles. Several who lay trampled on the floor were a little harmed, but in a deathly faint several men were bleeding freely from wounds inflicted, but Johnson, Hatherley and Wilks were astonished to find that they were the only persons that had felt each other huddling up together on the top of the old upright piano. All of them had escaped injury and they hastily slid out behind the innkeeper as he endeavoured to light the broken lamp.

There was another den in that town known as the 'Bucket of Blood', that they intended paying a visit, but the three friends believed to that they had seen enough of the evening, and they passed on to their stopping place. At this place the shed show was being held and the first night crowds of people ????? ?? entertainment long before the opening time the place was packed with an ??? expectant *feeling*. Now there had never been trouble with the lighting plant and trouble that night was least expected, and never before on the tour had they such a house.

Wilkins fixes an engine the quick and painful way

The proprietor of the circus was there in joyful spirits and everything promised splendidly when suddenly a clank clank clakety claimed the engine of the lighting plan which came to a sudden standstill and the whole place went to utter darkness. Fits and shouts from the crowd soon filled the air and the throngs surged for the outlets in half panic. In vain the stage director called them to attention saying that it would only be a few minutes before the gas light would be lit. The people little heeded him, and in their thronging barred the attendants way to the gas lamps that were always kept in reserve for emergencies ??? ???

The pandemonium grew and Wilks who had at once heard the engines, and as he heard their rattle he realised that it was something serious. **He had often wondered how he would behave in pressing circumstances, but not a self-centred thought possessed him**, as he speedily located the trouble to be a broken part. Now this in the ordinary course would have meant a two hour job, for it amounted to the draining of the crankcase of the almost boiling oil and careful fitting and manipulation of the new part. **But without hesitation Wilks thrust his hands in the scalding oil + recovered the broken part.** He almost shrieked with pain as he felt the blisters rising on his hands but with a *gritty focus* he laboured with the new part, and with broken blistered bleeding fingers, he tightened up the nuts and started up the engine.

Cheers for the electrical bloke

Meanwhile a crowd of self-appointed helpers had been examining all and sundry parts of the machine, suggesting this and that as the cause of the trouble; for Wilks with his single-mindedness had not troubled to explain the accident and the cause which he had so soon

located. He had not heard their proffered suggestions, and they in the darkness could not see the agonised expression in his face, but once the engine started and the light sprang into being as the dynamo gained the generator speed, they saw his raw and bleeding fingers and the **bloody broken** blisters completely covering the back of his hands up to the wrists. At once a murmur of admiration went through the crowd of men, most of whom could realise the awful suffering that he had endured. When one man more demonstrative than the rest sent up a cheer for the “electrical bloke”, it was taken up with echoing roundness, the scattered crowd.

Advertising

Naturally enquired ?????????? once more with the brightly illuminated text, and the sharp Wilks quickly saw at once an opportunity for advertisement in this incident. He mounted the stage and told in chilling words the heroism of the engineer and his stoic resolve for duty, and explained that the performance would go on then as usual and continue nightly.

Another engineer who was soon there, and on his way to medical treatment had assured Wilks that the lighting plant was once more reliable. Cheers and calls for engineer were in vain, for Wilks was speeding in a motor to the nearest chemist where his hands were saturated with picric acid and wrapped in cotton wool. It was more than a week before he could dress or bathe himself alone, but under his instructions the chauffeur of the car managed to keep the engine running. Wilks, nightly in attendance had to stand self-consciously the admire of young and old who thronged the brass rails and lighting set for a glimpse of the scalded hero. Before they interviewed the ticket office and saw the show Wilks carefully avoided conversation on the subject and blushed deeply at the sight of a much enhanced report of the affair which appeared in the local newspapers. This story went the rounds of the state and at each place visited afterwards he was the centre of *attention/attraction*.

[Xmas on the sands] This is probably a note to himself to write about a Christmas by the beach, either in Victor Harbour where he visited as a youth, Sydney beaches in 1911, or in Trinidad in 1912-13.

Childhood reminiscences of adventures

An independence of spirit manifested itself in him in the very early years; it condensed very strongly and at the age of five when it had already taken a positive turn. Life on a station with its associations with outdoor life and **horses** gave an opportunity for expansion of the spirit and in rather an adventurous manner.

A sister, much older and with whom he was a favourite, had offered him a ride from the home paddock got on a rather frisky horse while she walked ahead and held the reins. This was all very well for a moment or so, but young Wilks soon resented the restraining influence of the

hand on the rein, and asked to be allowed the management of the horse himself. This was refused but he insisted, and although **his love for this particular sister was greater than for any other person that he knew it did not deter him from applying the whip firmly across her hands to make her let go the reins.**

The flying whip startled the horse which took flight and galloped away with the wilful young miscreant hanging on to the reins and mane for life. In the slight steady gallop along the road he could manage to stay in the saddle, but the horse, suddenly swerving at a piece of paper in the fence, and the youngster slipped from the saddle and hung by a foot in the stirrup and both hands on the reins. His unseating frightened the horse still more and it careered madly round the paddock swinging in so close to the barbed wire fence **that the boy's face was scratched by the wire and the missing of the posts on either side was only a matter of inches. Had he struck the post there is no question but what the story would not have been written.**

The horse, exhausted, finally came to a standstill at the stable gate and the youthful rider hauled himself slowly on top and gleefully slid to the ground, **exhilarated by the threat of danger**, escaped and unalarmed by the trickles of blood from his cheek from a wound that although not serious has left a scar to this day. It was **this episode that no doubt strengthened his desire for the thrill of daring and the sensational, but it was many years before the opportunity came for anything like such a sensational experience.**

Wilkins on his Parents

As the years went on, his loneliness encouraged a clearness of thought and directness of speech unusual in many; but this directness often amounted to what in most instances would amount to rudeness for which he was to his mind quite wrongfully reprimanded. Reprimands were about the extent of his chastening, for I have heard from his parents that very early in life, even before he could talk, that admonishment and opposition only led to a greater, or at least a steadfast resistance or persistence in the act.

At an afternoon call to a neighbouring station he was asked by one of the daughters of that family if he would like a piece of bread and jam, and he in his direct earnestness, knowing full well that such exchanges could be had, replied, 'Yes please, I should like bread and jam very much, but I should like bread and jam and cream better' This simple answer was taken for precociousness, and he was told in the drawing room it was an example of infantile smartness, with the result that when leaving the house he was taken to task by his mother and severely talked to, much to his surprise and astonishment; and because no other answer to his query than that it was not to be done was forthcoming, he thought that he had been wrongfully admonished.

The reasoning mind of the young Wilkins

A craving for the knowledge of the cause and reason for things, soon led him into the habit of reasoning things out for himself and this led to the last attempt at flagrant chastening by his well-meaning parents.

*With a brother some years older than himself, he had been busy with the weekly chores and in some discussion or other, the older brother had refuted a statement of his by the direct statement of, 'You are a liar'. Young Wilks with quickly reasoned repartee replied, 'Well, if that is so and you are my brother, you must also be a liar'. As those words were uttered his mother came round the corner and overhearing the last three words of the sentence exclaimed, 'How dare you call your brother a liar you sinful young scamp, come here and I'll give you a sound thrashing' for **if there was one thing in particular that his fond mother endeavoured with good and far reaching result it was to prevent coarseness and vulgarity of speech.** He vainly protested that he did not actually called his brother a liar, and that the brother being of a less ??? type. Wilks did not offer to explain the situation, believing the punishment with which he was threatened was not deserved, and so he refused to go and receive it.*

So when his mother approached, he turned and ran. Believing it necessary to carry out threats and to assert authority when once it was brought to dispute, the mother called on the brother and sister to catch him; but he ran on and on until reaching a tall straight pine tree. He filled his pockets with stones and clambered to the top, far out of the reach of the longest whip at hand. Any attempt to climb the tree was met with a volley of stones and soon this was abandoned, and the chase given up.

*He missed supper that night and returned after dark when he knew that his father would be at hand hoping to be able to explain convincingly that he did not deserve the threatened punishment. When he reached home his brother had explained the circumstances and the **punishment** ???? for the supposed inequity was not to be entertained; but he was sternly talked to for daring to refute the authoritative command to go to his mother.*

Wilkins on anger

*For some years his discerning judgment had saved him from any display of anger, and it was considered that he had no temper; he himself was not conscious of the feeling until one day in **dry country** he was hunting rabbits, and by chance appeared to catch one alive in a short burrow under a rock. Now rabbits were in such plentiful numbers that he had killed hundreds with sticks and guns; and hot days had accounted for many, but it was infrequent that one was actually handled. The close contact with the trembling furry mass awakened the pity in his heart and he determined to carry it in his arms sheltered from the **sun** until the dogs were far away, when he would let it go and let it take another chance – for one rabbit more or less at large mattered little.*

He had carried it quite far away, his heart swelling with pity and compassion for the frightened little animal, when unthinkingly he put his finger near its mouth, and it seized his finger in its sharp teeth and bit it to the bone. The pain was so intense that he dashed the animal to the ground and jumped on it in fury until it was a shapeless mass. All senses seem to have taken flight; he was possessed by a raving brutal temper. It lasted but a few moments, and then on his knees with his finger streaming blood he shed tears of pity and asked the rabbit to forgive him.

In moments the anger had disappeared and he was absorbed by ??? pity for a moment. Soon however, his level-minded judgment gained the upper hand and held him apart from the thing he was – and he reviewed the happening. It was his first experience with anger and it so possessed him that he was ashamed and afraid, in fact it was his first knowledge of real fear. He then determined that he should never again give way to anger. How far the incident had an effect on his life you will see if you care to read these passages.

This sentence indicates that at the time of writing Wilkins intended to extend the piece considerably.

Parental row on common sense, morals and temptation

Always seeking information, and ready to apply it to his small fund of common sense, he was not prepared to accept many things without reasonable explanation. His parents, eminently respectable and moral, had the temerity of mentioning sexual and moralist matters common to most English families; and although trying to guard and protect the youthful morals by circumvention, there was never a practical and straightforward explanation of pointing out of temptations. This probably led to the first defiant refusal to obey the parental authorisation; nothing in particular was to be gained by it.

At the age of thirteen, much too young really to have anything to do with such affairs (but he was always years older than his years), he was invited to attend a dance in company with the nearest neighbours of whom there were three girls in the family, each older than himself. He had danced many times at his parents and the neighbour's houses without comment from his people. But this was the first public dance that he had expressed a desire to go to. His parents flatly refused and he asked why. The only answer forthcoming was that it was not right for boys and girls to go to public dances; and soon detailed questioning solicited no more detailed explanation.

A plain statement unbacked by any reasoning never held any weight in his opinion, and he therefore calmly ignored the decision of his parents and dressed himself for the dance. There were more orders which he failed to notice and without actual physical hindrance nothing would stop him. His parents wisely refrained in most cases from undignified attempt at physical violence but finally said, 'We have ordered you, advised you, and implored you not to do this thing. Now if you still persist and go, you shall take the consequences on your own head'. His reply was, 'Unless you can tell me just why I should not go and what harm there is in my or anybody else going, then I will go; but I am willing to stay at home if there is any sound reason why I should do so'. But still the traditional silence concerning moral affairs prevented the parents from a fuller explanation and he went joyfully to the dance, not feeling glory in defeat of his parents, but with a smug satisfaction at having been able to follow the directional influence of his judgment.

Wilkins had been reading the philosophy of Thomas Paine's, *The Age of Reason*, and its influence as related to the religiously doctrines and dictates of the Methodism of his parents, can be detected in his answers to them.

See Chapters 1: ‘The authors profession of faith’, and Chapter II: ‘Of Missions and Revelations.’ A few of Paine’s specific statements are useful in understanding the growing philosophy of Wilkins – and his decision to for a *teen age of reason*:

‘I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.’

‘I believe in the equality of man, and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, and endeavouring to make our fellow creatures happy.’

‘I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church.’⁸

The dance, vindication of his stance

The dance hall was twelve miles away and he met the neighbours’ girls near home and tying his riding horse beside theirs he drove them to the dance, and after sunrise the next morning when the dance was over he drove them back again. During the evening he had not seen anything to justify his parents fear, as a matter of fact neither was there anything, for at those country dances where everyone knew everyone, and all were under common surveillance, it was not likely that there should be any demonstration of immorality. There were in fact many more opportunities in the quietness of a casual meeting or at a Sunday school picnic where couples were likely to wander off separately unobserved.

Estrangement and sympathy

Nothing more was said at his home of this affair, but for weeks afterwards there was that estrangement between parents and son brought about on one side by the feeling of superior judgment, and the other by the knowledge of lost sympathy and control. On his part that mattered little, he did not need their sympathy, but the parents must have been sore troubled.

Wilks however, as all human beings, needed sympathy from someone, and perhaps was then inclined towards seeking spiritual aid more than ever before or since.

Religious education

*His religious education had followed rather smooth conventional lines. A visit to Sunday school in the afternoon followed by a church service conducted once a month by a paid minister, and three times a month by a local preacher. In the Sunday school, after praying and singing, a few chapters were read verse by verse by the scholars, and then the **students in the chapters discussed by the teacher**, who in most cases was neither well educated or intelligent. Then each member of the class would read from memory a number of verses from*

⁸ Paine, Thomas 2004 [1896], *The Age of Reason: Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*, Edited by Moncure Daniel Conway, Dover Publications, Mineola, New York, pp. 21–22]. For online copy see https://oll.libertyfund.org/title/conway-the-writings-of-thomas-paine-vol-iv-1791-1804#lf0548-04_label_029

any part of the title selected by himself for which he received so many marks; each mark representing a monetary value which was expended in book prizes at the anniversary.

His prize money was augmented by 1/- for each recitation said at the anniversary, and Wilks being naturally gifted, made a good temporary saving for several years and earned highest marks for verses and recitations. This naturally brought him into conspicuous notice of the congregation, a condition which was not altogether to his liking, for he hated conspicuousness; but not so deeply that his love for books allowed it to interfere with his desire to earn them by his efforts. **The texts of 1000 verses recited on a Sunday morning, repeated in the afternoon and forgotten next day, assured him of at least a dozen books a year.**

Wilkins on his evolving spirituality and faith in God.

This delving into biblical lore soon brought him face to face with the many contradictory and unclear statements in the Bible, and his sharp reasoning mind declined to accept anything on faith. It was not that he did not believe in a God, but more that he did not believe in mankind, or agree with his [mankinds] effort to chronicle God's thoughts in languages of their own. The practiced Christian faith had no charm or consolation for him, demonstrated as it was with such hypocrisy. Neither could satisfaction be obtained from reading contradictory and meaningless phrases.

Again, the influence of Thomas Paine's philosophy, as espoused *The Age of Reason* can be seen in the writing of Wilkins.

That there was a God he had no doubt, and many many times on bended knees he prayed and prayed inarticulately for sympathy and guidance without conspicuous response. These failures, far from embittering his heart towards his creator aided to convince him how far removed and insignificant he was; and heightened his contempt for those who thought they were the specially selected recipients of this grace.

The battle of weighing possibilities

Perhaps a little less reasoning and contradictions in following primal imaginings would have resulted in the building of an entirely different character in Wilks. As a matter of fact, **there was always the instinct, if one may call it such, to follow these first thoughts; but some stronger desire to weigh all the possibilities held sway, and thus the battle progressed. Some days would find him weeping bitterly in loneliness and disappointment, the outcome of his reasoning apparently proved approximately correct. There was that smug satisfaction that demonised his life.**

Much of response to his spiritual longings he attributed not to the fault of the all-powerful, but to his own lack of knowledge and power of concentration; and more than often he was tempted to give up all concern of earthly *existence and* physical things, and by isolation centre his efforts in gaining communication with the ethereal.

