



## PATTEN WILSON (1869-1934)

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*Patten Wilson. Photograph, c. 1930, Private Collection.*

Patten Wilson was born on March 23, 1869, the son of a clergyman who ran a private school at Cleobury Mortimer in Shropshire. His talent as an artist seems to have come to him by inheritance from his father, “a schoolmaster, very facile with his pencil, deft in the use of tools” (Williamson 19). His brother was the architect and designer Henry Wilson (1864-1934), who taught metalwork at the Royal College of Art and at the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London and had an extensive business as a sculptor and metalworker. Henry was also Master of the Art Workers Guild in 1917 and president of the Arts and Crafts Exhibition Society, 1915-22. Patten Wilson’s other brother Edgar was a successful shipping manager.

At about the age of 19, Patten Wilson went to Kidderminster School of Art, but he found the training there unsatisfactory, so he returned home after a few months to pursue a course of self-education, in particular copying the work of Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528). In addition to this study, which taught him steadiness of hand and economy in the use of lines (Sparrow 189), he made a great many studies of animals and plants. These he treated as a designer, with a view to translating them into patterns that might be used for textiles and wallpapers. Despite his stylized approach, he was inspired by the natural world; “Amongst his favourite haunts [were] the gardens of the Zoological Society and the horse shows of the country” (Williamson 19). His early designs were

spirited and full of invention (Sparrow 190), and his decision to enter the field of the decorative arts showed that he was, perhaps through his brother, engaged with the “new art” movement.

Patten Wilson had a restless nature and took a number of jobs, including that of secretary to the managing director of the Liverpool gymnasium; he even considered becoming a teacher of gymnastics. In his spare time he continued his artistic studies and his earliest published drawings appeared in *Recreation*. He then moved to London to try his luck as a practical designer. He spent a year as an assistant with a wallpaper firm, taking an active part in the production of the first commercial stencilled friezes made in England. Through this work he gained a practical understanding of the application of colour. By making outlines freehand with a brush, he also developed a spontaneity in drawing, which stood him in good stead when he became an illustrator.

His other decorative efforts included working in enamel and painting church frescos at Hanworth in Norfolk and at Llanfairfechan in Wales (Williamson 18). After a further year at this work, he again became restless and set himself up as a freelance designer while continuing his athletic pursuits through polo and other sports. Walter Sparrow commented in *The Studio* (192) that some of Wilson’s patterns made at this time had traits in common with the wallpapers of Heywood Sumner (1853-1940). Meanwhile, in the evenings, Wilson studied life drawing at the Westminster School of Art, under Fred Brown (1851-1941), who went on to be head of the Slade School of Fine Art. At Westminster he was also influenced by the Cornish artist William Mouat Loudan (1868-1925).

In 1894 Wilson was introduced by Richard le Gallienne (1866-1947) to the publisher John Lane (1854-1925), who gave the young artist a commission to design and illustrate *Miracle Plays* by Katherine Tynan Hinkson. This set him on the path of black-and-white illustration and he acquitted himself so well that when *The Yellow Book* was launched he was invited to be a contributor. His first contribution appeared in January 1895, Volume 4, and was titled “Rustem Firing the First Shot.” This was a scene from the story of Rustem and Sohrab, inspired not by the poem in which Matthew Arnold tells how Rustum killed his own son unwittingly in single combat, but by reading a prose translation of the original epic poem by Firdausi Tusi (935-1020). His second contribution appeared in Volume 5: an illustration of another scene from the same

story, it was enigmatically titled “A Drawing.” He contributed 2 more illustrations to Rustem and Sohrab in later volumes. In all he had 13 drawings published in the magazine, the most striking of them being “A Phantasy” in Volume 11. After Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) was banned from The Bodley Head in April 1895, Lane hired Wilson to design the remainder of the Keynotes Series and to act as technical advisor for the later numbers of *The Yellow Book*. Between 1895 and 1897 Wilson also provided title-page and binding designs for a number of other volumes published by The Bodley Head. He contributed an Arthurian illustration to *The Builder* magazine in 1896 and several illustrations to *The Architectural Review* two years later.

In 1898 Wilson got an excellent opportunity to show his talent as a book artist when he was commissioned by Longmans to provide illustrations for a volume of Coleridge’s poetry. He also illustrated *King John* in their “Swan Shakespeare” series. In 1901 he was asked by J. M. Dent to make 20 illustrations for *The Gospel Story of Jesus Christ*. He illustrated three other books for this publisher, the most important of which was *A Child’s History of England* by Charles Dickens, for which he made 100 illustrations. From about 1905, probably in response to market forces, he seems to have abandoned line illustration in favour of colour and half-tone, and to have moved into the fields of natural history and the retellings of myths and legends. In the main, this work is much less interesting than his earlier designs, with some of the natural history images being purely technical drawings, highly competent, but with no imaginative content. He was employed by publisher George Harrap in 1912 to illustrate *Best Stories to Tell to Children* by Sara Cone Bryant, which gave him greater imaginative scope; these coloured illustrations fall far short of the best of his line work. He also found occasional employment as a graphic designer, for example designing an unemployment stamp and a 7d. National Insurance stamp for the Ministry of Labour (Manton 137).

In April 1900, Wilson married Alice Harding at the fashionable London church of St George’s, Hannover Square. They lived in various parts of London, including Battersea, Camberwell, Wandsworth, and Fulham. The couple had two children, Aldred (1903-1974) and Joan (1911-1973). He was later divorced and married his second wife Ethel Florence Facey in Lewisham in 1921. After his initial success working for John Lane, he found his commissions as an illustrator or designer sporadic and insufficient to sustain himself and his family, eventually depending on contributions from his more successful

brothers to survive (Manton 181). He died in Chelsea, London on January 22, 1934 and was buried in Cleobury Mortimer, Shropshire.

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Geoffrey Beare is a freelance writer and researcher in the history of book illustration. He is chairman of the Imaginative Book Illustration Society and a trustee of the William Heath Robinson Trust. He is author of *The Art of William Heath Robinson* (Dulwich Picture Gallery, 2003), and has published a biography of Alice B. Woodward. His most recent research, on the children's stories and illustrations of Edith Farmiloe, was published in *Studies in Illustration* (45: 2010).

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