The Contribution of D. K. Wilgus to Ballad and Folksong Scholarship

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D. K. Wilgus was a staunch member of the Kommission für Volksdichtung for many years. Donald Knight Wilgus died on Christmas morning, 1989, in Los Angeles, where he had served as professor of English and Anglo-American folk song at the University of California, Los Angeles, from 1963 till his retirement on June 30, 1989. His participation in the conferences of the Ballad Commission spanned more than twenty years, from its first meetings in the mid-1960s to the late 1980s. For this reason alone, it is fitting that an assessment of his work should appear in this volume. This look at his scholarly contribution to ballad and folk-song studies melds the perspectives of two former students and a longtime colleague, all working in the field of folk song and balladry. What follows is not an encomium but rather, as D. K. himself would have wished, a professional evaluation of his work by some who knew it intimately.

The facts of Wilgus’s life are straightforward: He was born in 1918 in West Mansfield, Ohio, and graduated from East High School, Columbus, in 1935. He attended Ohio State University, graduating with a B.A. (1941), M.A. (1947), and Ph.D. (1954), the last under the direction of Francis Lee Utley. He served as an administrator at Purdue University during 1941–42 and then with the U. S. Army from 1942 to 1945. While finishing his doctorate, he taught English at Ohio State, leaving there in 1950 for Western Kentucky State University, where he was associate professor from 1950 to 1961, then professor of English from 1961 to 1963. During this period, he founded of the Kentucky Folklore Record (1955), acting as editor until 1961. He was named a fellow of the Guggenheim Foundation for 1957–58, and in 1963 he left for UCLA, where he was formally a joint member of the departments of music and English.

During his period at Kentucky State, he undertook fieldwork in Cumberland River County with his student, Lynwood Montell, resulting in the article, “Clure and Joe Williams: Legend and Blues Ballad,” which was later published in the Journal of American Folklore (1968) and established the blues ballad as a distinctive subgenre in North American tradition. He explored this topic further in an extensive article coauthored with Eleanor Long, his second wife (Wilgus and Long 1985). Wilgus also did fieldwork in Ireland in the 1970s, recording (with
Tom Munnelly) the Traveller John Reilly, who sang for them “The Well Below the Valley,” a version of the rarely found ballad, “The Maid and the Palmer” (Child 21; see Munnelly 1972). Wilgus had by that time founded the Folklore and Mythology Program at UCLA in 1965, serving as its chair for seventeen years. He also built an archive of eleven thousand commercial recordings and more than fifty thousand manuscript items. Elected a fellow of the American Folklore Society in 1960, he served on its Executive Board from 1964–69 and was elected president in 1971–72. His presidential address, entitled “The Text Is the Thing,” was a lively response to the current fashion in the field for performance studies (1973). He was also president of the California Folklore Society, and, from 1970 to 1975, he assumed the editorship of its journal, *Western Folklore*. There he also published his Archer Taylor Memorial Lecture on connections between the Irish *aisling* [vision poem] and Anglo-American balladry (1985).

Wilgus’s major achievement in the field of folk-song studies, however, was his *Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898*, published in 1959. This magisterial account of folk-song scholarship in Britain and North America since the death of Francis James Child is a stirring narrative of fractious disputes and clashes among scholars with radically different theories on the origin and nature of folk song. Besides this authoritative critical study, Wilgus was a productive scholar and published several other books, including an edition of Josiah Combs’s *Folk-Songs of the Southern United States* (Combs 1967), more than four dozen scholarly articles, countless papers and reviews—especially record reviews, for he was record-review editor for the *Journal of American Folklore* from 1959 to 1973. Because of his encyclopedic knowledge of the country and bluegrass traditions, he was one of the first to propose that hillbilly music be studied like any other folk genre (1971).

Although the last twenty-seven years of his life were closely tied to the growth of folklore and mythology studies at UCLA, it was as a ballad scholar and regular member of the Kommission that Wilgus will be remembered. He attended its meetings from the first one in Freiburg (1966) almost every year until his death. Through all these years, he was concerned with devising an ambitious classification scheme—as distinguished from a cataloguing “arrangement,” as he once described it—for English-language ballad texts, a task which was the raison d’être for the Kommission’s founding in the first place. Indeed, his knowledge of the basic topics of Anglo-American balladry was unrivaled, except possibly for that of his hero, Phillips Barry, from whom he took both his methodological inspiration and the idea of “ballad themes.” As a balancing factor to the difficult and far-reaching goal of classifying ballads by theme, he
studied single topics, such as the “Lord Leitrim” or “Titanic” ballad complexes and, in a more general way, the Irish ballad corpus as a whole. In this last he saw vital connections with North American balladry, and his analyses always had a strong historical bent, one he was careful to disassociate from historical/geographical studies of ballad origin and diffusion.

“The Text Is the Thing”
“The Text Is the Thing” is the title which made D. K. Wilgus famous in many circles, but that fame is in many ways both unfortunate and unearned. Wilgus—and we—would be better served to recall the true center of his work, which is not to view some “mere” text as being the “only thing” but rather, take the songs as a whole: their singers, their performances, their contexts, and yes, also their texts. Of course, Wilgus received his formal training in English (it was at the time New Criticism was blossoming), and the area where he did the majority of his publishing was the study of song texts, narratives, and international parallels.

Wilgus was one of the first college-campus performers of folk music, and it was he who reminded generations of students to respect the folk who sang the songs. His master’s thesis was the first academic treatment of American hillbilly music, showing its indebtedness to traditional folk song, and today we recognize that it was Wilgus, above all, who legitimized the study of popular hillbilly and country-and-western music for folklorists. In this pursuit (dare we call it a crusade?), it was Wilgus who brought the art of the record review—as opposed to a book review—and liner notes to legitimacy and then stature. Wilgus was an avid collector of folk music, and as such he was groundbreaking in his inclusiveness, seeking out not only venerable pieces canonized by Professor Child but attempting to record what the folk were actually playing and singing, as well as how they were doing it.

We can recall, for instance, his insistence that many “fragments” (as they are often labeled in published collections) are created by the collector, who only records a portion of the piece. Others are, of course, just the last shreds of memory, but many are only “short” pieces, fragments to the scholar but not to the performer. Labeling such a short piece a fragment does violence to the collected piece and the performer. If it was Bertrand Bronson who taught us that the folk ballad is song, D. K. Wilgus taught us that the ballad was sung by this individual and that friend. One case in point is his pioneering study, years in the making, of Andrew Jenkins, a performer who can be categorized as both professional and folk (Wilgus 1981: 109–28).
Wilgus was always on the cutting edge of scholarship, for it was his insistence on looking at the whole tradition which brought new insights; in discussions of ballad classification, he pointed out that many *aislingi* cite a narrative without recounting it. He coined the term “blues ballad” to refer to a ballad sung in blues style—without stable text and often without a stable narrative (both improvised each time)—but nevertheless balladesque since the events in the ballad “celebrating” them are stable and known to both singer and audience. Such insights are not born from a “simple” concentration on text.

In exhorting us to take the “text” as the “thing,” Wilgus was asking that we concentrate on the artifacts within their performance and traditional contexts, rather than lose sight of them. He was exhorting us to inspect the data, engage it, and not ignore it. This idea was typical for Wilgus, who was a model of humility when it came to confronting the material or recognizing the hard work of others. He worked hard, and he demanded that his students do the same. If one advanced an idea not thought through, Wilgus could offer dozens of examples to question it. Above all, Wilgus’s emphasis on the text is basically an expression of his fundamental and radical honesty: to the performer, the study of folklore methodology, the music, and the text.

Ballad Classification

Of particular interest is Wilgus’s role in ballad classification, the scholarly task which gave rise to the Kommission für Volksdichtung. When ballad scholars gathered in Freiburg in 1966 to develop a ballad index which would stimulate ballad research within a pan-European context, Wilgus was there. He was dissatisfied with the “Freiburg proposal,” though, because he thought its arrangement of whole ballads in a largely predetermined (or “procrustean,” as he termed it) list hid more ballad relationships than it revealed. His proposal, developed in conjunction with Eleanor Long and promulgated at numerous ballad conferences, was to classify the ballads analytically according to the themes in their plots. Thus was born the valuable notion of “narrative theme,” a concept which informed Wilgus’s work thereafter, eventually called “thematic units” (Wilgus 1970a, 1979b, 1986b; Wilgus and Long 1985).

It was Wilgus’s contention that the ballads themselves should provide the key to any classification system, and so he worked inductively on the project from the ground up. He always searched for common narrative themes (or plot ideas) which occurred in more than one ballad text. Such themes should serve to bring ballads together. Unlike the Freiburg proposal’s “whole ballad method,”
Wilgus’s concentration on small themes allowed songs that had similar sections to be combined on that basis while recognizing at the same time that other portions of the songs could be radically different. By being able to classify song parts, then, Wilgus’s idea began to do justice to ballad “contamination,” crossing, hybridization, or even “reworkings.” That “adaptability” was the true giant step forward and is what separates Wilgus’s classification work from previous collections, lists, and static arrangements. In fact, it was the only way to work with the manifold relationships between “broadside” and “traditional” (let alone “bluesy” and “fragmented”) textual treatments of a single “ballad idea.”

Wilgus adopted this approach by wrestling with the texts, as his 1972 presidential address to the American Folklore Society encouraged us to do, and certainly his struggle was not limited to text alone. Of all his services to the Kommission für Volksdichtung, we should perhaps list first his coining the term “narrative unit,” but we should also emphasize his honesty and aggressively investigative approach toward well nigh all aspects of ballad singing. Naturally he does not stand alone in having such an approach, but he has nonetheless been a beacon to several generations of scholars. To reduce Wilgus to the status of a “textualist” would be a major disservice to folklore study. Wilgus himself would have eschewed such reductions.

Idealism and Realism

D. K. Wilgus contributed seminally to the study of hillbilly music and Irish-American song. He was convinced that individual song histories and a diachronic focus are central to the future of folk-song study. This diachronic approach was inevitably combined, in his view, with a comparative approach, particularly in analyzing the textual traditions of a single song. Summing up his position in a 1983 paper, he pinpointed the need for a balanced analysis of text and context:

The comparativist is not one who denies the validity of other approaches and indeed can and should utilize any results that contribute to the understanding of the ballad as a product of humankind, just as the contextualist needs comparative evidence to prevent errors in interpretation. Although the comparative approach was designed to deal with far-flung items about which there existed too little contextual data, it can and has been applied successfully to more restricted traditions and has made use of contextual data available from current fieldwork. (1986b: 23)
The careful analysis of song texts, comparatively and diachronically, was not only vital to Wilgus’s methods but also central to the idea of “Anglo-American” folk-song study as a whole. Although he believed that data on singers, context, the transmission process, and cultural meanings had relevance, for him they were secondary to the ballad idea, narrative themes, or texts as objects worthy of study in and for themselves. This does not contradict what has been said, for attention to singer, performance and context was part of that “textual” centrality, not separate from it. A focus on themes in particular could provide the basis for ballad classification in the form of a type index. In general, he espoused a rationalistic or “hardheaded” approach to scholarship—“the dispassionate, objective, and historical investigation of the phenomena of folk song as a self-contained study,” and by this he meant primarily the study of texts (1964: 36).

Admiration for Phillips Barry led Wilgus to declare that Barry had gone to the heart of the matter in balladry by identifying “themes” or “manifestations of folk ideas” by which to list ballads, thus extending the boundaries of ballad histories beyond textual filiation (1986b: 6–8). Wilgus was undoubtedly following Barry’s view that “folksong is in reality an idea, of which we can get but the process of actualization, traceable as a history” (Barry 1911: 333). Barry constantly argued for a more holistic view of balladry than the “ballad aristocracy” offered by Child and his followers. Barry saw song formation as a dynamic process “by which a simple event in human experience, of subjective interest, narrated in simple language, set to a simple melody, is progressively objectivated” (Barry 1913: 5). From an appreciation of song content, Barry later moved toward a psychosocial analysis of folk song that included the creativity of singers, their families, and their communities (Barry 1936, 1937, 1961). In Barry’s mind, the real dominated the ideal, whereas with Wilgus, the duel between the real and the ideal was ongoing and dialectical.

Wilgus derived his position directly from Barry, but with Wilgus the balance between the study of texts and the enactment of tradition shifted markedly toward one of Barry’s early interests—verbal thematics in folk song—rather than his later concern with singers and performance. Although Wilgus maintained, as already noted, an interest in folk performers and composers such as Andy Jenkins, the issue of ballad themes, and what he termed a “convergence model,” animated his later comparative work. This model does not take a single text as its “original” of a ballad tradition, “but at most a narrative theme that has been manifested in structures otherwise unrelated except in the norms of the tradition in which structures are produced” (1986b: 19). Such a model includes the possibility that,
in a given geographical area, different structures with the same theme may lead to enough mutually related versions of a song that a scholar may be tempted to apply the other alternative, a “divergence model,” one that notes departures from a hypothetical original text. Anne Cohen’s treatment of the murdered-sweetheart tradition in relation to the Pearl Bryan ballads used this approach. Convergence stresses the theme as central to the evolution of a particular ballad tradition; yet determining what the theme is in many ballads often demands the dialectic of negotiation (Engle 1985).

Wilgus’s thinking, then, is representative of a fundamentally realistic or materialistic viewpoint in North American scholarship that has on occasion moved into the idealistic territory of ballad types and ballad themes. But even as he became associated, roughly in midcareer, with what has been dubbed the “rationalistic” or “rational” approach (at the time of a 1961 symposium juxtaposing literary, anthropological, and comparative approaches that were termed variously “eclectic,” “pragmatic,” or “rationalistic”), Wilgus pointed out that the lineage of his approach stretched at least from Joseph Ritson to G. Malcolm Laws, Jr. (1964: 30). One can argue that Wilgus, like the philosopher G. H. Mead, was a realist and rationalist because he believed in a world that is experienced and exists separately from cognition and perception. In his folk-song analyses, Wilgus held that experience confronts us with phenomena that lead to conflicting attitudes, problems that call for reconstructions and new meanings. He was, in short, an empiricist working within the American pragmatist tradition deriving essentially from William James, John Dewey, Charles Peirce, and Mead, although Wilgus is not usually associated with an explicitly Meadian “sociological” approach to folk-song analysis. Rather, his “common-sense” approach links him to this tradition (Abrahams 1985; see also Porter 1993).

Roger deV. Renwick Remembers Studying with D. K. Wilgus
While D. K. Wilgus’s published work, especially the definitive Anglo-American Folksong Scholarship Since 1898, and even unpublished research like his ballad index, was famous throughout folklore circles, he also exerted palpable influence on the discipline through the activities of people he taught. For over the three distinct decades of the sixties, seventies, and eighties, we find his name prominent in the acknowledgment sections of books by former students—books like The Maid and the Hangman; Poor Pearl! Poor Girl! and Warrior Women and Popular Balladry 1650–1850, whose high quality is widely recognized among Anglo-American folk-song cognoscenti (Long 1971; Cohen 1973; Dugaw
1989). Roger Renwick’s assertion, in *English Folk Poetry* (1980), that D. K. “more than anyone [was] responsible for whatever may be praiseworthy” in that volume is profoundly heartfelt. Roger relates his own experience:

His standards were extremely high, and a student had to earn his or her way into D. K.’s esteem and eventual mentorship: good intentions, an amiable personality, even the possession of substantial factual knowledge, were not enough. As a beginning graduate student taking D. K.’s Anglo-American folk-song course during my first quarter in the master’s program in folklore and mythology at UCLA, I experienced firsthand the difficulties of achieving a student-professor bonding, of becoming “one of D. K.’s students.” Having had the benefit of several years of off-and-on informal reading in folk-song scholarship before entering UCLA, I was in the unusual position for a new student of being already familiar with many versions of the very songs D. K. used in his lectures, and more than once found myself correcting my professor’s factual errors in on-the-spot examples—on the meter of “Chevy Chase,” on the traditional status of “The Maid and the Palmer.” But each time, D. K. seemed to become more irritated than admiring! While this reaction may have stemmed in part from a certain insecurity one often finds in folklorists, there is no doubt that D. K. also thought this new-to-the-program student was superficially “smart,” whereas to form a serious, long-term relationship with him, you had to be truly committed.

A breakthrough came when I found, quite by chance, the tune “Rose Connolly” in Bunting’s 1840 collection, *The Ancient Music of Ireland*, and immediately shared the discovery with D. K. I knew that he had long thought the murder ballad of the same title, so popular in the U.S. South, was in fact Irish in origin and not a “native” American ballad as G. Malcolm Laws, Jr., had characterized it. Here was the first piece of hard ethnographic evidence that D. K. might be correct! My excitement, which just about matched his, must have shown: for the first time, D. K. seemed to suspect that the neophyte might have a genuine folk-song scholar’s sensibility and be worthy of his mentorship. (And as we know, D. K.’s hypothesis was later validated when Tom Munnelly found a version in the
Irish Folklore Commission’s archival holdings that had been collected in Galway in 1929; see Wilgus 1979b.)

Once he’d decided on that pedagogical commitment to me, D. K. was unstinting in his attention. He soon made me his research assistant, a job which lasted eighteen months and which, for sheer self-satisfaction, I would state unequivocally, was unmatched by any I had before and remains unequaled since. As research assistant, I synopsized, coded, and entered folk-song texts into D. K.’s two major databases, the huge Anglo-American ballad index (organized by narrative themes) and the anglophone Irish one, with its simpler topical organization.

Just a few weeks after I started, D. K. charged me with a major task: extracting and arranging into appropriate subcategories all ballads from the Anglo-American database fitting the Freiburg catalogue system’s category X (fabliau ballads) for a presentation to the Ballad Commission at its 1970 meeting at Kloster Utstein, Norway (Wilgus 1970). I did what I thought was an excellent job, and the boss did indeed compliment me; but just before leaving for the conference, D. K. showed his research assistant the final list for his presentation, and while he’d kept all the material I had given him, he had increased the number of songs by at least a third. He used the opportunity to explain in detail to the fledgling folklorist (now indisputably “one of D. K.’s students”) some of his favorite scholarly principles, ones he constantly reinforced both inside and outside the classroom: the necessity of thoroughness in data gathering, the importance of inclusivity as opposed to exclusivity, the intrinsically intertextual nature of folk songs, and the privileged place induction should hold over deduction in developing valid ballad constructs and theories. All of these principles are embodied in what D. K. told me after I lamented that a study of “The Bold Fisherman” was leading into what were surely quite-unrelated song types, such as the murdered sweetheart: namely, that once you start looking at any one folk song, you will end up looking at them all.

And just as he’d employed a hands-on mentorship with his brand-new research assistant on the fabliau-ballads project, D. K. actively involved himself with all his students’ term projects, trying to get them to understand, appreciate, and practice these principles.
For example, he constantly made sure they had checked for versions in readily accessible but easily forgotten places, such as Child’s “Additions and Corrections,” or volumes four and five of the Frank C. Brown Collection of North Carolina Folklore, where the presence of many song texts, not found elsewhere, is disguised by the volumes’ deceptive titles: “The Music of the Ballads” and “The Music of the Folk Songs” (see Schinhan 1952–64). D. K. went much further and even photocopied texts not accessible to students, with college library help—for instance, texts from ephemeral songbooks and broadsides he had in his personal collection. Without being asked, he taped for students copies of acoustic versions from his extensive collection of phonograph records, even personally transcribing and typing up the words himself.

Long after I had finished my UCLA master’s degree in folklore and mythology, I tried to remain true to these principles of thoroughness, inclusivity, interrelatedness, and respect for what the texts had to say, even tried to emulate the hands-on method of making obscure versions accessible to students. Though many other teachers provided me with other worthy principles that I also tried to incorporate into my scholarly sensibilities, neither their personalities nor their maxims were ever as starkly omnipresent in my consciousness as D. K.’s. Truth to tell, I never wrote anything in my later years as a doctoral student at Penn and, later still, as a member of the professoriate without being very, very sensitive to whether it would meet D. K.’s standards. In fact, more than a decade after his death, I still don’t.

Relation to Contemporaries

D. K. Wilgus tenaciously followed his instincts in a field of folk-song scholarship that was shrinking in importance, declining in the prestige it had enjoyed in North American folkloristics since the turn of the twentieth century. The revival of the fifties and sixties had revitalized public as well as scholarly interest in folk song, but in the seventies, folkloristics took a new turn with performance studies (often oriented toward linguistics or communal enactment rather than singing) and an interest in the ethnography of everyday life (Porter 1986). Folk song is, after all, a specialized study that requires total devotion because of the large amount of data available to scholars in English-language folk song alone. It is
not a subject for part-timers or dilettantes. Here Wilgus shone within the American Folklore Society, not only for his devotion to his chosen subject but his unrivaled knowledge of Anglo-American folk-song traditions and their evolution. While contemporaries working in the same area espoused idealist positions, pet theories of ballad origins, or performance studies, Wilgus steadfastly maintained his position as the champion of comparative and historical case studies in folk song. Generally speaking, he steered clear of political discussions, and his affection for populist culture did not take him in the direction of ideological critique. But like any scholar worth his salt, he had his critics: for his down-to-earth view of historical ballad icons like Child, for instance, or his defence of classification as a contemporary principle in folklore studies (see Bell 1980; Porter 1980).

But for all that, he will be remembered for positive achievements: first, his masterly grasp of the field of Anglo-American folk song as a whole; second, his development of an ambitious classification system of ballads based on narrative themes; third, his work on the connections between Irish and North American folk-song textual traditions; fourth, his recognition of the value of hillbilly song tradition; fifth, his identifying the blues ballad as an important subgenre in American balladry; and last but not least, his inspired and unfailing support for his students and colleagues (even when he disagreed with them on matters of interpretation). These generous attributes sat easily with a discriminating, clever, restless mind and complex personality. As an individual, he was approachable and kind, but also shy and unaggressive; he had his demons, of course, and wrestled with them while at the same time finding the energy to run a lively university program, engage in exacting field studies, prepare his own and others’s publications, address conferences, assume official professional duties, or attend tiresome faculty meetings. His varied accomplishments mark him as a major scholar in the field of folklore and American cultural tradition, and his well-earned retirement was full of unfinished projects: an annotated index of Irish ballads, books on songs about “Lord Leitrim” and the Titanic, an ambitious study of Kentucky beliefs and superstitions. It is comforting to know that his widow, Eleanor Long, is working to bring these projects to fruition.

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