



ROBIN WILSON

Robert McLachlan Wilson

1916–2010

ROBERT McLACHLAN WILSON was born on 13 February 1916 in Gourrock, Renfrewshire. He was the first child of Hugh Jack McLachlan Wilson (1878–1948) and Janet Nicol Wilson (née Struthers: 1882–1965), who later had a younger son Allen (b.1922). Robert was always known as Robin (the name I shall use throughout this memoir), while in print he always styled himself R. McL. Wilson. McLachlan had been the surname of his paternal grandmother Mary Agnes Shanks McLachlan, while Robert was the name of his grandfather Robert John Wilson. Robin's mother Janet was a lady's maid and then seamstress, while his father Hugh was for twelve years a stonemason before making a career in insurance. The family lived in Greenock, where Robin attended Greenock Academy, until his father became a manager of the Royal Liver Friendly Society in Edinburgh. When the family moved to the capital, Robin attended the Royal High School, where he showed particular distinction in Greek, Latin and French, laying the foundations for his later mastery of both classical and modern languages. He became a member of St Anne's Church, Corstorphine.

Robin studied classics at the University of Edinburgh, graduating MA, with first-class honours, in 1939. (It was a distinguished year: of ten students in the class, five gained first-class degrees and three of these were later to become professors.) Robin then trained for ministry in the Church of Scotland at New College, Edinburgh, gaining his Bachelor of Divinity, with distinction in New Testament, in 1942. During these years he showed his academic excellence in this field by winning the Barty Memorial Prize for Hebrew and New Testament Greek, the C. B. Black Scholarship in New Testament Greek, the Brown Downie Scholarship, the Cunningham

Fellowship and the Aitken Fellowship. His teachers included William Manson, John Baillie, Norman Porteous, and A. M. Hunter.

Robin had become seriously deaf at the age of eleven, and so was exempted from war service. Thus he was free to pursue doctoral studies and for this purpose moved to Cambridge, where he was a member of St John's College. His research supervisor was Canon Wilfred L. Knox (one of the famous four Knox brothers, who were all brilliant in quite different ways). Robin's thesis, completed in 1945, was entitled 'Diaspora Judaism in its relation to its contemporary environment, with particular reference to the contribution of Judaism to the development of Gnosticism'. The topic had first been suggested to him by William Manson and was appropriately close to his supervisor's expertise. (One of Knox's major works, *St Paul and the Church of the Gentiles* (Cambridge, 1939), was in large part a significant study of diaspora Judaism as the principal context of the Pauline mission.)

At Cambridge, as well as gaining a Ph.D. Robin also gained a Blue in golf. In view of his later career at St Andrews, it is a little ironic that he captained the English Universities golf team when it was defeated at St Andrews by the Scottish Universities. Golf, which he had first played at school and with his father, was to be a life-long passion.

In 1945 Robin married Enid Bomford (1917–2003), who was a primary school teacher, the daughter of an English Methodist minister. They had met on holiday in the village of Kent's Bank in the Lake District (and later they would name their house in St Andrews 'Kent's Bank') and were married in Barton-on-Sea, near Bournemouth, the last place where Enid's father served as a minister. Robin and Enid were to have two children: Andrew (born 1946) and Peter (1949).

After gaining his Ph.D. in 1945, Robin returned to Scotland to exercise the ministry in the Church of Scotland for which his BD had prepared and qualified him, becoming for nine months an assistant minister at St Stephen's Church in Edinburgh, and then for eight years (1946–54) minister of Rankin Church, Strathaven, Lanarkshire. It has been suggested to me that it was in preaching and presiding at worship that Robin developed his distinctive way of speaking slowly and ponderously. According to one story, the small boys in the church used to have a competition to see how many times they could say the Lord's Prayer before Robin had finished saying it once.

Robin may reasonably have hoped in time for an academic appointment in one of the four Scottish divinity faculties. At the time these served almost exclusively for the education of ministers of the Kirk and it was

common for their academic staff to have spent time in parish ministry, during which they would likely also have had time for further study. Perhaps because no such academic post in Scotland was yet forthcoming, Robin applied in 1951 for the Chair in New Testament at Ormond College, Melbourne, Australia, though he was not successful. But in 1954 (by which time he had published three scholarly articles) he was appointed Lecturer in New Testament Language and Literature at St Mary's College (the Faculty of Divinity) in the University of St Andrews. In the same year, Matthew Black (also later a Fellow of the Academy) moved from New College, Edinburgh, to become Professor of Divinity and Biblical Criticism and Principal of St Mary's College. Wilson's expertise in Gnosticism and diaspora Judaism complemented Black's in Aramaic and Palestinian Judaism. They became a distinguished team for many years. Robin was promoted to Senior Lecturer in 1964, and in 1969 was given a Personal Chair in New Testament Language and Literature. When Matthew Black retired in 1978, Robin succeeded to the Chair of Biblical Criticism.

At around the time that Robin completed his doctorate, two brothers from the village of al-Qasr near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt made a discovery that was to prove momentous both for the study of early Christianity and for Robin Wilson's own scholarly career. They found a large storage jar containing thirteen leather-bound books (codices) that later came to be known as the Coptic Gnostic Library or the Nag Hammadi Library. Most of the forty-six distinct tractates written in the Coptic language in these codices in the late fourth or early fifth century are Gnostic writings of second- to fourth-century origin. Their importance, which has often been compared with that of the Dead Sea Scrolls, lay in the fact that, almost for the first time, they provided scholars with first-hand access to literature written by Gnostic authors. Until the publication of the Nag Hammadi texts the study of Gnosticism had had to rely very largely on the reports of church Fathers who described Gnostic beliefs in order to refute them, along with the rather unreliable evidence of later religious groups who were indebted to Gnosticism. Robin's Ph.D. thesis had been no exception.

The story of how the Nag Hammadi codices came to scholarly attention and were eventually published is a long and complicated one. Their existence and contents were first made known to the scholarly world in 1948 and 1949. Scholarly publication about the texts really only began in 1954, and only in 1956 was even one complete tractate published. Publication of the rest proceeded frustratingly slowly. (In some correspondence on this

matter between Robin Wilson and Rascher Verlag of Zurich in the 1960s, the publishers expressed annoyance at the dilatoriness of the academics.) Not until 1977, when the publication of the facsimile edition was completed and an English translation of all the tractates published, did the whole Nag Hammadi Library become generally accessible.

When Robin revised his thesis for publication (*The Gnostic Problem: a Study of the Relations between Hellenistic Judaism and the Gnostic Heresy*, London, 1958, reprinted 1964) he was able to give an account only of two of the Nag Hammadi tractates: *the Gospel of Truth*, an edition of which had appeared in 1956, and the *Apocryphon of John*, another copy of which had long been known to exist in a Berlin manuscript but was only published (with some information about the two copies in the Nag Hammadi codices) in 1955. But, as already an expert on Gnosticism, Robin was in an unusually favourable position to make use of the new discoveries as they became available. Indeed, he became the only British scholar of his generation who studied and published extensively on the Nag Hammadi Library. By 1955 he had already realised that the Coptic language was now essential for the study of Gnosticism and wrote to the distinguished German Coptologist Walter Till (who had edited the Berlin codex and was then in Manchester) for advice on learning the language. They kept up a correspondence about Coptic and the Nag Hammadi texts until Till's death in 1963.

Robin's own approach to Gnosticism began with his investigation of the possible Jewish origins of the movement. He found important sources of Gnostic ideas in syncretistic forms of diaspora Judaism, including the Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria, but there were also Christian and pagan philosophical elements in the eclectic mix that created second-century Gnosticism. Looking for Jewish origins of Gnosticism was unusual at that time, but it has subsequently been vindicated by the Nag Hammadi texts. In 1967 Robin was able to say that the Jewish contribution to Gnosticism was now beyond question and that the danger lay now in neglecting the Hellenistic elements.¹

Robin's work mediated between the two rather different approaches to Gnosticism that were traditional in German and British scholarship respectively. Whereas the British tended to see Gnosticism as a Christian heresy of the second century, the Germans took a much broader view of *die Gnosis*, seeing it as a vast movement in the history of ancient religion,

¹'Addenda et postscripta', in Ugo Bianchi (ed.), *Le Origini dello Gnosticismo: Colloquio di Messina 13-18, Aprile 1966* (Leiden, 1967), p. 693.

whose influence could be identified in many places, including the New Testament. In *The Gnostic Problem* Robin distinguished narrower and broader senses of the term. In the broader sense Gnosticism was ‘an atmosphere, not a system’, but in the more precise sense of a religious system it did not antedate the New Testament. In the writers of the New Testament or the opponents they refute there may be evidence of ideas related to Gnosticism but not of ‘fully-developed Gnosticism’. (Later he was to use the term Gnosis to distinguish the broader sense.)

We see here Robin’s characteristic concern for careful definition and his caution about drawing sweeping conclusions not warranted by the evidence. The vexed question of defining Gnosticism frequently occupied Robin in years to come, as it did other scholars in the field, along with the question of the existence of a pre-Christian Gnosticism, for which the Nag Hammadi documents provided a great deal of new and debatable material. It is now widely recognised that too facile a use of the term Gnosticism runs the risk of overlooking the real differences between the groups and writings that have been labelled Gnostic, but Robin was already urging caution in this respect as early as 1955.² One of his doctoral students, Alastair Logan, who was himself to contribute significantly to the study of Gnosticism, comments that Robin ‘was never carried away with the latest fad or fashion in research, even if his refusal to be dogmatic about any issue infuriated some’.

The most famous of the Nag Hammadi tractates is doubtless the *Gospel of Thomas*, which, as a so-called ‘fifth Gospel’, captured the public imagination as early as 1959 (when Robin himself wrote an article on it for the *Daily Telegraph*), following the publication of translations and studies of the work in German (1958), French and English (1959). Robin got to work on this text as soon as he was able and, working with remarkable speed, was able to submit his book on it to his publishers in April 1960. It was published the same year with the title *Studies in the Gospel of Thomas* (London, 1960). (American scholars Robert M. Grant and David Noel Freedman were also quick off the mark with their *The Secret Sayings of Jesus*, London, 1960.) The big question, which has still not been fully resolved, was whether this collection of sayings of Jesus preserved genuine sayings independently of the four canonical Gospels. Most New Testament scholars at first saw this Gospel as no more than a compilation made from the canonical Gospels, while those such as Gilles Quispel who argued that there could be independent traditions in *Thomas* were not

² ‘Gnostic origins’, *Vigiliae Christianae*, 9 (1955), 193–211.

taken seriously. Robin magisterially discussed all the research that had been done up to that point and carefully argued his own view of the individual sayings, uninhibited by the consensus among his colleagues in the New Testament field. (Quispel later commented that, from his perspective, Robin in this book ‘saved the honour of New Testament scholarship’.³) Robin concluded that in some cases the *Gospel of Thomas* probably preserves sayings of Jesus in a more original form than those to be found in the canonical Gospels, a view which has subsequently become common, though not universal.

Einar Thomassen of the University of Bergen, who studied for his doctorate with Robin and is himself an expert on Valentinian Gnosticism, comments that Robin’s

book on Thomas deserves even greater recognition than it has received. It is written in an almost self-effacingly modest style, arguing for and against various propositions in a manner which is more designed to allow the reader to make up his or her own mind than to highlight the author’s own position on the issue.

He contrasts this with the ‘more self-assertive style’ of more recent scholarship.⁴ The modesty is typical not only of Robin’s published work, which makes its impact much more by meticulous scholarship than by grandiose claims, but also of his personal style, which was characteristically unassuming.

Robin’s work on Thomas was soon followed by *The Gospel of Philip* (London, 1962), which included his own translation of this Nag Hammadi tractate from the Coptic as well as introduction and detailed commentary. In the 1960s and 1970s he also collaborated with European scholars (including Puech, Quispel and Till) on editions of the remaining tractates in Codex Jung (Codex I of the Nag Hammadi Library, which, alone of the codices, had found its way to the Jung Institute in Zurich), for which Robin provided or checked the English translations.

Kendrick Grobel, an American Nag Hammadi scholar, invited Robin to spend the first semester of 1965 as Visiting Professor at Vanderbilt Divinity School in Nashville, Tennessee. (Sadly, Grobel died while Robin and Enid were at Vanderbilt.) Enid accompanied Robin on this adventure and they spent three months of the six on a lecturing tour of several uni-

³ Gilles Quispel, ‘Judaism, Judaic Christianity and Gnosis’, in A. H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn (eds.), *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson* (Edinburgh, 1983), p. 46.

⁴ Einar Thomassen, ‘The contribution of Robert McL. Wilson to the study of gnosticism’, unpublished paper read to the celebration of Robin Wilson’s ninetieth birthday in St Mary’s College, St Andrews, in 2006.

versities and colleges in the United States and Canada, including the University of California at Berkeley, the University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia and St Andrews Presbyterian College in Laurinburg, North Carolina (owing to its link, in both denomination and nomenclature, with Robin's own institution). The lectures were on Gnosticism and the New Testament and they became *Gnosis and the New Testament* (Oxford, 1968). Surprisingly, Mowbrays, who had published his previous books, were not willing to take another book on Gnosticism, and so he approached Basil Blackwell of Oxford. It was published simultaneously in the USA by Fortress Press, Philadelphia. A French translation appeared in 1969 and a German translation in 1970. Robin's easy mastery of the field is amply evident in this book.

The use of 'Gnosis' rather than 'Gnosticism' in the title (following German practice) stems from the distinction he made between Gnosis as the 'wider and vaguer' phenomenon, which may have influenced the New Testament, and Gnosticism, the developed religious systems of the second century. He is cautious about the usefulness even of identifying Gnosis in the broad sense in New Testament writings, pointing out how often the ideas in question may be Jewish or Hellenistic philosophical notions that Gnostics later adopted. Only in the cases of 1 John and the Pastorals does he allow that there may be traces of 'Gnosticism proper'. This measured critique of the dominant position in German scholarship set a direction that was to be widely followed. As well as the possible influence of Gnosis in the New Testament, the book also dealt with the use of the New Testament by the Gnostic writers of Nag Hammadi tractates, of which however there were still only nine published and translated.

Following the Messina Colloquium on the Origins of Gnosticism in 1966 (in which Robin participated and where he recommended the use of his distinction between Gnosis and Gnosticism), Gnostic scholars, among whom James M. Robinson of Claremont was especially prominent, undertook a fresh initiative to energise a UNESCO plan for publishing a complete facsimile of the Nag Hammadi codices. At the same time Robinson organised a team of scholars working under the auspices of the Institute for Antiquity and Christianity at Claremont Graduate School to prepare a multivolume English language edition of the codices. Robin was the only British member of the international committee for the Nag Hammadi codices that planned the facsimile edition (it began to be published in 1972) and also the only British member of the editorial board of the Coptic Gnostic Library, the English translations that began to appear in the series Nag Hammadi Studies in 1975. Particularly valuable were

Robin's command of German and French and his meticulous eye for detail. His own contributions to the translation project were to prepare the preliminary versions of the *Acts of Peter and the Twelve Apostles*, completed by Douglas Parrott, and the *Gospel of Mary*, completed by George MacRae. He remained a member of the board until 1991.

Robin also undertook the provision of English translations of two major German sources on Gnosticism: the two-volume anthology of texts edited by Werner Foerster (published in German in 1969 and 1971) and Kurt Rudolph's magisterial study of Gnosticism, the best general book on the subject at that time (published in German in 1977, revised edition 1980). While Robin did major parts of these translations himself, he also recruited other translators, whose work he edited. In the case of Rudolph's book, one of these was his St Andrews colleague Peter Coxon, who remembers that this task 'developed into a convivial and lively collaboration between Leipzig and St Andrews, every stage of which progressed under Robin Wilson's scrupulous editorial eye'. The English translation of Foerster's collection (*Gnosis: a Selection of Gnostic Texts*, 2 volumes, Oxford, 1972 and 1974) was more than a translation of the German. It involved much reference back to the sources in their original languages. Robin's fastidious attention to detail, as well as his command of languages, was invaluable in an editor of such projects. The translation of Rudolph's book (*Gnosis: the Nature and History of Gnosticism*, Edinburgh, 1984) was reissued in a paperback edition in 1987 (New York). As well as recruiting translators, Robin liked to use his postgraduate students for help with editing and proofreading large projects such as these.

Robin's work of this kind was not confined to Gnosticism. He realised that the Nag Hammadi literature was also related to that very heterogeneous body of early Christian literature known as 'New Testament Apocrypha'. The well-known English edition of such works, edited by M. R. James in 1924, was now very out-dated compared with the latest edition of the corresponding German collection. This collection had originally been edited by Edgar Hennecke, but the much revised third edition (two volumes, 1959 and 1964) was overseen by Wilhelm Schneemelcher. In 1959 Robin began to plan an English version of 'Hennecke-Schneemelcher' and discussed it with the publishers Lutterworth. It was a particularly complex task (again much more than a mere translation from the German), for which he supervised a team of translators, as well as doing much of the work himself. The first English edition of *New Testament Apocrypha* (London, 1963 and 1965; reprinted 1973-4) became a standard work of reference, but Robin's concern with this work was not over. By the time

the German collection reached its sixth edition, much revised and expanded, not least by the inclusion of some Nag Hammadi texts (1989 and 1990), Robin realised that a correspondingly thorough revision of the English version was needed and once again supervised its production (Cambridge and Louisville, KY, 1991 and 1992). Another major project of translating and editing that he undertook was the English version of Ernst Haenchen's important German commentary on Acts (*The Acts of the Apostles*, Oxford and Philadelphia, PA, 1971), following a sorry tale of bad and incomplete efforts at translation that Haenchen refused to approve.

Robin's well-known meticulous attention to detail derived in part from the fact that he read everything thoroughly. In his numerous reviews he always listed minor errors and in writing to fellow scholars about their books he did the same. Authors and publishers took to asking him to read their work before it went to press, when the detection of errors was much more useful. When he sent me a copy of his last book he included a note explaining a minor bibliographical error he had noticed only after publication.⁵

Another direction in which his interest in the Nag Hammadi texts led Robin was into Coptic studies. In 1976, as a member of the international Nag Hammadi committee, he attended the first International Congress of Coptology in Cairo and then edited two volumes of papers given at the congress. In 1977 he was invited to assist the production of a multivolume *Coptic Encyclopedia* (published in eight volumes, New York, 1991) by organising the translation of articles written in German and French. He recruited three other translators (again including Peter Coxon) but, since he was the only one who knew even part of the field, he edited the translations and corresponded with the authors of the articles about the translations. When he deposited the file of his working papers and correspondence on this project in the university archives, he wrote a covering sheet explaining his part in the project. He wrote that he thought the material might be of interest 'as illustrating what (inter alia) a St Andrews professor did with some of his (allegedly!) abundant leisure'. Indeed, surveying Robin's prolific output of books, articles, and reviews, and considering the care with which he worked, it is hard to see how he could have had any leisure time. In fact, he certainly took time for golf and for entertaining at home. Moreover, he typically conducted himself in an unhurried manner, always readily accessible to students and happy to talk with colleagues.

⁵In the same book (Wilson's commentary on *Colossians and Philemon*, p. 376) I myself noted one, faintly amusing typo that had escaped Robin's eagle eye: 'Wedderbum' for 'Wedderburn'.

When he first took up his appointment at St Mary's, he and Enid and the two boys lived for a short period in Crail until the construction of their house at 10 Murrayfield Road, St Andrews, was completed. Robin was to stay in this house for the rest of his life. In the course of time the family had two cats, named Marco (because he was always exploring) and Philo (after the Jewish theologian-philosopher who featured frequently in Robin's work). Robin and Enid were known for the generous hospitality they extended to both colleagues and students. He was a long-term member of the New Golf Club of St Andrews,⁶ and was fortunate in sharing his passion for golf with both his colleagues in New Testament at St Mary's: Matthew Black and Ernest ('Paddy') Best (irreverently known to students at St Mary's as 'third Best'). Enid was Secretary of the St Andrews Ladies' Putting Club, and they both putted a lot on the 'Himalayas', as the club's putting course is called. After Robin's retirement and when Paddy Best returned to St Andrews in his retirement, they frequently played golf together.

Robin never forgot that at heart he was a minister of the church or that his job was to teach future ministers of the church. His inaugural lecture as Professor of Biblical Criticism was entitled 'The study, the pulpit and the pew'. He and Enid were faithful and committed members of St Leonard's Church, where he is said to have carried his learning with humility. People of all ages knew him simply as Robin. A year after his death a member of the church told me that he was so integral to the church it felt as though he were still there. He also faithfully attended meetings of the Kirk Session until late in his life, making relevant and succinct contributions. He served the General Assembly as Convenor of the Union and Re-adjustment Committee, a rather thankless task as, for the sake of managing the church's resources better, it required closing church buildings. Church members are rarely happy to see their own church closed so that they can be merged with another. But the painstaking negotiations involved required just the sort of careful attention that Robin's mind naturally gave to whatever he did.

In 1955 Robin was elected to membership of the International Society for New Testament Studies (*Studiorum Novi Testamenti Societas*), to which Matthew Black had belonged since the first of its annual general meetings in 1947. Also in 1955, the society's journal *New Testament Studies* was launched, with Matthew Black as its Editor. Robin, whose editorial

⁶The New Golf Club was given this name when it was founded in 1902: the 'Old Golf Club' was the Royal and Ancient.

skills must have already been evident, was soon assisting Black in this task. On Black's recommendation, the society's committee formalised his role, appointing him Associate Editor in 1967. He then succeeded Black as Editor in 1977, and at the same time also succeeded Black as Editor of the society's prestigious Monograph Series, which had begun publication in 1965. He was assisted by Margaret Thrall of Bangor as Associate Editor. The two publication series flourished under their guiding hand. At a meeting of the Editorial Board in 1981, it was suggested that members of the Board might play a larger part in assessing material submitted for publication, thus relieving the Editor and Associate Editor of some of the very heavy load they were carrying. But, declining the offer, Robin stressed that he would still feel the need to read everything himself. Among other things, he needed to check the correct use of the English language. Moreover, not all readers of manuscripts reported in sufficient detail. He remained Editor until 1983.

Presidents of the society serve for only one year, which includes one general meeting. Robin was elected President for 1981–2, in recognition both of his outstanding service to the society and of his eminence as a scholar in the field. It cannot have come as a surprise that his presidential address was on 'Nag Hammadi and the New Testament'.⁷ (It is a magisterial assessment of the issues, engaging, as his work always did, with the latest as well as the older contributions.) Over the years he and Enid together attended most of the annual meetings of the Society of New Testament Studies, held in various locations in Europe and occasionally elsewhere. Only late in life when he became more deaf and found conferences difficult did he cease to attend.

Other academic honours came to him. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1977, and was awarded the Academy's Burkitt Medal for Biblical Studies in 1990. He was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Divinity by the University of Aberdeen in 1981. When he retired in 1983, St Andrews University made him Emeritus Professor and he continued to take some part in university affairs. To mark his retirement, Alastair Logan, Robin's former doctoral student, and A. J. M. ('Sandy') Wedderburn, Robin's junior colleague in New Testament at St Mary's, edited a Festschrift for him: *The New Testament and Gnosis* (Edinburgh, 1983), a deliberate inversion of the title of his own book *Gnosis and the New Testament*. Those who contributed essays include almost all the leading scholars of

⁷Published in *New Testament Studies*, 28 (1982), 289–392.

Gnosticism, many of whom engage directly with Robin's work and proposals in their essays. It is interesting to note that that Matthew Black and C. K. Barrett of Durham were the only British contributors (neither an expert on Gnosticism). The rest were from Germany, France, the Netherlands, Italy, Canada and the USA. This is testimony that Robin was still a rare, as well as the leading British, scholar in this field. Quite a few of these Gnostic scholars had become friends whom he met frequently at conferences and with whom he continued to keep in touch throughout his life, latterly by email.

Robin's scholarly efforts in the later part of his career were by no means confined to the massive tasks of editing and translating described here. He continued to publish many articles on Gnosticism in journals and reference works. But he also worked on two New Testament commentaries. His commentary on *Hebrews* in the New Century Bible series was commissioned by Matthew Black, who edited the New Testament part of the series, and his commentary on Colossians and Philemon in the new International Critical Commentary series was commissioned by Charles Cranfield, who edited the New Testament volumes in that series.⁸ No doubt his particular expertise recommended him for writing on these particular parts of the New Testament: diaspora Judaism in the case of *Hebrews*, Gnosticism in the case of *Colossians*.

The commentary on *Hebrews* was published in 1987 (Basingstoke and Grand Rapids, MI). The style of the New Century Bible is to be accessible to the non-specialist reader, though it can hardly be said to be popularising. The commentary is on the English text of the Revised Standard Version without discussion of the Greek (though with students like his own in mind, Robin frequently gives references to the entries in the standard lexicon where information on the Greek words is to be found). Only later did he confess that for 'one accustomed to referring to his Greek New Testament rather than to the English version, the writing of such a commentary can be an exacting task!'⁹ Nevertheless he deals with sometimes quite esoteric material (almost unavoidable in a commentary on *Hebrews*) with his usual clarity. While he discusses the usual introductory questions (authorship, date, place of origin and destination, background of ideas), which are particularly hard to answer in this case, he takes the

⁸ The series was informally known as the New ICC, because it emulates and replaces the original ICC, which was never completed.

⁹ ICC, p. ix.

view that perhaps they do not make much difference to the understanding of the text, and his exegesis is independent of any particular answers to them. On affinities with Philo and Gnosticism, his particular expertise, he observes that the differences from Philo are as significant as the resemblances, while Gnostic influence must be judged ‘at most very slight’ (p. 26).

He accepted the invitation to write the ICC volume on *Colossians and Philemon* in 1973, but the fact that it did not appear until 2005 (London and New York) is not unusual in the context of that series. The style of commentary required for the ICC—detailed and rigorously scholarly treatment of the Greek text—made it a considerable undertaking, and many a scholar who signed up to write a volume in this series treated it as largely a project for his or her retirement. With Robin’s advancing age, the editors (Cranfield was later joined by Graham Stanton) must have had doubts whether he would finish it (it would not have been the first of the ICC volumes to be left unfinished at the author’s death) and I remember Robin himself telling me at one stage that he doubted whether he would. In the event, the commentary was finished and published when he was 89.

A characteristic of the commentary (which is also quite characteristic of his scholarship in general) is Robin’s refusal to offer a fresh overall thesis about Colossians (which he thought belongs in a monograph). Instead, he focuses on the detail of exegesis, while in the extensive introduction he surveys and weighs the various proposals on the big questions and reaches only cautious and undogmatic conclusions. On the complex question of authenticity (did Paul himself write this letter?) he finally comments:

Such tentative and hesitant conclusions will not, of course, satisfy those who must at all costs have a definite and clear-cut answer to every question, but there are times when it is important to recognize the limitations of our knowledge. We do not always have the evidence upon which to face a firm judgment. (p. 34)

He makes the same point about the equally disputed issue of the nature of the ‘errors’ current in the Colossian church: ‘sometimes the simple, clear-cut answer is only found by reading more into the text than is actually there’ (p. 233, and cf. 308).

The trend of scholarship has been away from postulating Gnostic influence and towards either some form of mystical-apocalyptic Judaism or (most recently at the time when Robin was writing) popular magical practices. Robin deploys his now well-known distinction between Gnosis and Gnosticism, maintaining, as we would expect, that the evidence cannot

support the presence of ‘full-blown Gnosticism’ of the second-century kind, but that ‘some form of incipient Gnosis’, ideas of a Gnostic nature without the radical dualism distinctive of later Gnosticism, may be current in the background to the letter. But just as he had long insisted that the roots of Gnosticism were not one but many (including both Jewish and pagan contributions), so he is loath to close the door to any of the recent suggestions about what he still calls the Colossian ‘heresy’ (but the quotation marks are his): ‘It may be that the hypotheses reviewed above are not altogether mutually exclusive, and that eventually more than one of these influences contributed to the final result’ (p. 58).

The ICC is not at all a homiletic commentary, being focused on the original meaning of the texts rather than their contemporary relevance, but in his Epilogue to the commentary on Colossians and at the end of his Introduction to Philemon Robin allowed himself some reflections on application to the contemporary scene in church and world (as he did not do in his commentary on Hebrews). For example, commenting on the issue of the church’s attitude to slavery in the ancient and later periods (obviously raised by the letter to Philemon), he reflects that the church’s ability to effect major changes in society may now be much as it was in Paul’s day:

It may be that the real task of the Church . . . is to seek to spread more widely in our own day that same spirit of Christian charity which was eventually to bring about the abolition of slavery. What matters here is not the promulgation of doctrinaire statements as to what ‘society’ (or some other body, but usually other than the speaker!) ought to be doing; it is what we ourselves are prepared to do, in obedience to Christ our Lord and Master, in our dealings with other people. There can be no evasion of responsibility. (p. 330)

Such an explicitly homiletical comment is unlikely to be found in an ICC volume by a scholar of a younger generation, but it witnesses to the fact that Robin continued to find the scriptural text he studied with such scholarly rigour also an inspiration for faith.

In 1999, at a time when Robin confessed he had given up hope of holding a grandchild in his arms, he and Enid shared the delight of the birth of their granddaughter Ellen. Enid died on Christmas Day, 2003. In the preface to his commentary on *Colossians and Philemon* (2005), which he dedicated to her memory, he wrote:

she was a good companion and supportive partner through all the years of our married life, and possessed a real flair for getting on with other people, no matter who they might be. Some verses in the last chapter of Proverbs are not relevant (Enid never had a staff of servants to do her bidding, nor did she ever

purchase a vineyard with the fruit of her labours!), but reading the passage again, as I have done often in recent months, I can only say that I was privileged to have a very capable wife, truly more precious than jewels. I am now beyond the stage of merely grieving, and look back on the years of our married life with proud thanksgiving.

In February 2006 a celebration, attended by former students and colleagues, was held in St Mary's College to mark his ninetieth birthday. Einar Thomassen reviewed his work on Gnosticism and the Nag Hammadi library. Bill Telford, long-term Secretary of the Society for New Testament Studies, chronicled the early days of the society and the role Robin played in them (which he had researched in the society's archive). I spoke about his work on the New Testament Apocrypha and on Colossians. Robin himself concluded the more serious business of the day with reminiscences of his career, and later, amid refreshments and birthday cake, David Parker, another distinguished former student, and Ron Piper, whose own career in New Testament at St Mary's had begun while Robin was Professor, shared memories of Robin as teacher and colleague, both fondly and entertainingly.

He remained intellectually active to the last. He kept abreast of developments in his field, including the appearance (made public in 2006 with absurdly sensational reports in the press) of another long-lost Gnostic work, *The Gospel of Judas*, and the spate of books about it that soon appeared. He reviewed at least one of these, and indeed continued to review books regularly up until he died. Rather unusually for someone of his generation, quite late in life he began using the internet and email, which was particularly useful to him as an alternative to the telephone when he was hard of hearing. He stayed in his own home, regularly visited by his two sons and their families. In June 2010, he suffered a stroke, fortunately while his son Andrew was with him. He died a week later in Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, on Sunday, 27 June aged 94.

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Note. There is a Bibliography of Robin Wilson's published works (including reviews) up to 1981, compiled by Ronald A. Piper, in A. H. B. Logan and A. J. M. Wedderburn (eds.) *The New Testament and Gnosis: Essays in Honour of Robert McL. Wilson* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp. 245–58. Unfortunately there is no such bibliography of his later work. There are seventeen boxes of his academic papers and correspondence, dating from the years 1955–84, in St Andrews University Library Special Collections

(MS 38376/1–19). I am grateful to Rachel Hart, Muniments Archivist and Deputy Head of Special Collections, for drawing these to my attention. I am much indebted to Andrew Wilson for information about his father and for letting me see a collection of family documents relating to him. Others who shared information and memories with me include Alastair Logan, Ronald Piper, Robin Salters and Bill Shaw.