

Thornton Wilder and design in the arras

The Enthusiast: A Life of Thornton Wilder. Gilbert A. Harrison. 403 pages. Ticknor and Fields. \$19.95.

"There is much talk of a design in the arras. Some are certain they see it. Some see what they have been told to see. Some remember that they saw it once but have lost it. Some find strength in the conviction that there is nothing to see. Some." Thornton Wilder spent his life looking for a design in the arras, and three times won the Pulitzer for his resounding conviction that a pattern existed — for "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" (1928), "Our Town" (1938) and "The Skin of Our Teeth" (1943). Gilbert Harrison, in this witty, searching biography, delineates Wilder's life-long meditations on balance and joy in the universe: "There's history in every speck of dust," he admonished. "The Romans were right here — centuries ago. Think of that! Come on now, don't go to sleep. Take deep breaths. You've only got 70 years. Keep turning your head in all directions. Don't blink."

And he didn't. Born in 1897, Wilder grew up between the opposing poles of a strict, teetotal Protestant father and his lively, poetic, cultured mother. The Wilder family traveled incessantly during his early years — his father was consul general to Hong Kong, his mother took him to Europe. He learned languages, read voraciously, and was a successful playwright while still at Oberlin. To counteract that influence, his father sent him to work on a farm every summer "doing things that will give him sense, though he will never follow them in full." Boswell's "Life of Johnson," the "Odyssey," "Religio Medici" and Ibsen went with him to the farm.

In 1921 he took a position as housemaster and French instructor at Lawrenceville, "dispensing awe and order like fragrance" among the boys. "People said to me *Never teach school. It will deaden you.*" But he loved teaching, and "at lights-out the strange, big, protective shielding, locking the doors against dark principalities, and the great, lamp-eyed whales that walk ashore in New Jersey." His

own writing was done after hours, when his papers were graded. He lost his faith, and wondered if "the religious emotion was like diphtheria, where one may be a carrier even when one no longer has it."

Publication of "The Bridge of San Luis Rey" changed his life overnight. By 1927, his writing earned enough to allow him to pursue life as he wanted it: traveling continually, writing films and plays and as many as 20 letters a day. There are glimpses of a more opulent time: When Wilder refused to charge for a script conference, Sol Lessor, a motion picture producer, sent him a cellophane-wrapped convertible. And there are glimpses of a Wilder not revealed by his works: Major Wilder, who volunteered for the army intelligence and prepared air plans to help the Allies pinpoint bombing targets in Europe.

He was convivial and generous, and his friendships were legion. Harrison writes cleanly and clearly of the peripatetic years that in lesser hands would become literary laundry lists: In one brief European visit, Wilder called on Stein and Toklas in Paris, dined with Cocteau, had tea with Marie Laurencin, and channel-hopped to London for dinner with Claire Boothe Luce and Ruth Draper.

"He wanted," says Harrison, "to chart mankind's wrong turnings, dead ends, pain and absurdities, while simultaneously underlining the fact of human endurance." When Sabina says, "Pass up your chairs, everybody, save the human race"; when Emily cries out "Oh, earth, you are too beautiful for anybody to realize you!" both are affirming what Wilder believed to the end. Late in his life, he wrote a despairing nephew, "Maybe your upbringing misinformed you about the structure of the human race. Neither rottenness nor the quasi-angelic position are true. For me this 'evil nightmare' is a new journey into self-knowledge with possibilities of great fruitfulness." And so is Harrison's book a new journey, and an immensely fruitful one, into the mind and heart of a man well worth recollecting.

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