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UA37/44 My Speech to the English Majors & Teachers

Gordon Wilson

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October 4, 1963

The meeting of the Leiper English Club last night, where I spoke on the origin of Longfellow's "Evangeline," was a very delightful one. Some fifty majors and a dozen or so faculty members formed an appreciative audience. Willson Wood recorded my speech, for he said that he wanted a sample of my speaking while "I am still in my prime," in his own words. I prepared the speech to be read long before he mentioned this, for I had certain things to say and wanted to say them as I had prepared them. It is such a temptation to ride off in all directions when a person is old; it seems even to be a disease among some younger people. The most tedious person I ever knew was a very personable young man who was still in the twenties, but, when he started to tell something, ^{he} brought in unnecessary details that made him appear to be an octogenarian. Frankly, I have always liked to read a speech, in spite of my endless talking. But I know that for most audiences still this is unpopular.

Miss Richards suggested to me privately that, before I presented the Gordon Wilson Award and made my regular speech, I would say something about the Leiper English Club. I was glad of a chance to tell about being at its very first meeting and of the nature of our early members. For example, our first president, Romie P. Marshall, has become a very distinguished Methodist preacher and editor of Methodist publications. This club started off "in high," for it had a dozen members who were already well-known and on the way to distinction; and, since Mr. Leiper was always a martinet in anything he attempted, there was no wasting of time in nonsense. Some of our very earliest programs still stand out, for they were high-class and downright literary.

And that leads me up to what prompted this day's entry in the diary. For years on end Miss Frances Richards has been in charge

of the English Club and has poured time, and energy, and money into its annual accomplishments. Across the years I doubt whether any club anywhere has kept up the superior standing any better. It would sound like a muster roll of heroes to name just the officers of the club through the years. Nearly every prominent English major has served in some capacity. As is already too evident, this year completes Miss Richards's formal service at Western. Like St. Paul, she has "fought a good fight, kept the faith," and never ceased to proclaim the good tidings of great joy of learning. Her versatility has always amazed me, for she really enjoys her work in journalism as much as her more formal study of Shakespeare. Trained first as a scholar in history, she has never forgotten the value and enrichment that history can and must bring to literature. Reared in a very solid, prosperous family, she is and has always been the most democratic person I have ever known. It will be impossible to replace her, for she, as Willson Wood has often said, is some three or four people in one; certainly some of her work can be done well by others, just as any work around here can be done, but it will never again be possible or advisable for any one person to do so many kinds of work and to do them well. In many ways her time, and mine, demanded a very varied life, with dozens of interests. Specialization as such had hardly developed in some spheres, and she as well as I had wide interests, anyway. Fortunately, in the whole field of English teaching there is a growing demand for widely-educated teachers right now; a mere specialist with little outside interest is somewhat scorned. As one of the great scholars wrote me when I asked him about the feasibility of writing my doctor's dissertation on Alexander Wilson, real scholarship seeks to place a man in his time, to study his backgrounds and his "foregrounds," that is, his influence or the further development of his type of achievement. Miss Richards measures up to this demand.