



## John Albert Wilson

*Photo by Ursula Schneider*

In June, 1974, John and Mary Wilson left Hyde Park, Chicago, for retirement in New Jersey. Thus ended an intimate association of a man and an institution that covered fifty-one years from the time in the autumn of 1923, when the Oriental Institute was just four years old, that John arrived to study ancient Egypt with Breasted. John had been a staff member of the Institute and the University of Chicago all the way from "Secretary of Haskell Oriental Museum" as a graduate student in the summer of 1925, epigraphist on the Epigraphic Survey at Luxor in 1926, and visiting assistant professor in 1931 to director of the Oriental Institute in 1936 and Andrew MacLeish Distinguished Service Professor in 1953. This association, or rather identification, was interrupted only briefly by leave for wartime service in Washington in 1942-44 and a Fulbright lectureship in Egypt in 1952/53. Even his official retirement in 1968 was largely only a formality.

Wilson was first, and continues to be, a thoroughgoing scholar who spared no effort in dealing in detail with the raw materials of the culture and history of ancient Egypt before he attempted his own synthesis and interpretation. His books and articles are relied upon implicitly worldwide as sourcebooks for basic facts and insights deriving from his own precise work.

In addition, it was early discovered within the Oriental Institute, and later outside, that John Wilson always did his homework when he was appointed to a post or a committee; he informed himself and analyzed the problem in hand so that later discussion had form and direction. As a result, appointments, both national and international, in learned societies and on governmental commissions, flowed in upon him as the years passed, so much so that in the '50's, at the height of his involvement, he was to remark with some frustration that he was "only a stuffed shirt." Nevertheless, all these demands upon him, as well as the academic honors bestowed on him, were firmly based upon the solid accomplishments of his scholarship in his own field and the unflinching application of his analytical mind to organizational problems.

Wilson's contribution has been, then, not only to Egyptology but to all of ancient Near Eastern studies. Several generations of students can also testify that he has been as lucid a classroom teacher as he has been an analyst of Egyptian texts and of organizational problems. He has said that the charts, diagrams and paradigms that he prepared for his students, particularly in his first years of teaching, were made primarily for his own understanding of Egyptian grammar and history. Perhaps so, but he continued to produce them and revise them, and they were characteristic of his approach to any problem, a part of his instinct for setting down the fundamental data in orderly fashion before interpretation and application began.

Wilson became an epigraphist on the Epigraphic Survey at Luxor in 1926, just two years after it began work, and he was therefore one of the team that developed the method of recording Egyptian temple reliefs to realize Breasted's plan to make a definitive record such as would, perhaps for the first time in the history of epigraphy, consistently reduce to the vanishing point the possibility of human error. He has since ardently championed both the validity of the aim and the rigorous method of achieving it, first against the skeptics who doubted that the avowed result was being achieved and later against those who no longer doubted the result but questioned the rationale of achieving it, in lieu of an "acceptable accuracy," at so great a cost in time and money.

John Wilson has not only contributed to the stature of the Oriental Institute as a scholar of worldwide reputation, he was at a critical point responsible for its very survival and eventual revival. When he

became director in 1936 upon Breasted's death, he was not immediately aware that an era had ended for the Institute and that if there was to be another he would have to initiate it. He was soon to learn what Breasted did not live to learn, that Rockefeller and the Rockefeller boards had determined that they would no longer provide for the Institute's budget after 1935/36. This decision coincided with the depth of the great economic depression that gripped the country. Wilson's duty almost immediately was to draft a budget about one-third the size of Breasted's last one, to close all but one of nine field expeditions, and to dismiss personnel all the way from secretaries to field directors. It was his judgment alone that must determine what could be continued and what must be terminated. The crisis was mercifully not to be Breasted's but it became the staggering burden of his successor. It is difficult to appreciate fully now the excruciating duty of reduction and retrenchment that devolved upon that successor. There was the very real question as to whether the Institute could survive at all as a research organization carrying on work in the Near East or would survive largely as an instructional unit of the University. It is a sufficient indication of Wilson's success in those critical eleven years of his directorship, which were also to see a majority of the staff including himself depart on leave for national war service of from two to four years, that the Institute, through his stubborn refusal to close up shop, not only survived but secured a new footing from which to face toward productive years in a different kind of world. And John Wilson survived the trauma to be a signal contributor to those productive years.

No person of the present staff has ever known the Oriental Institute without John Wilson as a key part of it. With his departure from the second floor our last intimate link with Breasted and the beginnings of the Institute has also gone. Edward H. Levi said in introducing him at the fiftieth anniversary celebration on May 7, 1969, "This remarkable man is a legend in his own time," for rare indeed in academia is the scholar who has had a professorship established and named for him on the eve of his becoming *emeritus*. The John A. Wilson Professorship of Oriental Studies is a fitting encomium to the scholar, but his colleagues and former students around the world also know him as both an exemplary scholar and a gracious and considerate gentleman.

George R. Hughes