

Wiley: To Be Known and Known Not

by [Samuel Hux](#) (August 2021)



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The Hemingway-esque subtitle (like *To Have and Have Not*) is

catchy if yet a slight mystery. The title is not. *Wiley Gardner* was my earliest white friend—and there's no reason to hide his actual name since no one likely to read this recollection will ever have heard of him, since he is far from well known. *White* friend? Well, I have written before of my earliest friend, a black kid named "Doot" (short for *Deuteronomy*), four or five years my elder, son of a sharecropper and my "guardian" when I lived on my grandfather's farm the first few years of my life. I adored Doot. I liked Wiley—which should not be thought a put-down. I awoke a couple of weeks ago thinking of Wiley, which I don't often do now, for no reason I can think of, or no obvious reason. Perhaps that's why I'm writing—technique as discovery I call it, using an old lit-crit term—a tactic I often employ, an essayist's tactic.

I could have been no more than five when we moved from Grandpa's farm to Chestnut Street (how small-town American!) in Greenville N.C. Directly across the street lived the Gardners, the father the local fire chief. So, Wiley (same age) and I became instant playmates. A block down was an empty lot, except for a warehouse which we just knew was full of a treasure of various kinds of candy, and we tried as best we could to force entry but never could—my life's first disappointment. Poor compensation that five years later I climbed a roof to find a window and force entry into the National Guard armory, marched about pretending . . . until the cops arrived, locked me in a cell at the police station. When my father arrived an hour or so later, he and the police had a good laugh at my criminal career. Obviously, I grew up in an innocent town. But back to Wiley and me at five: Wiley was the first and only friend to try to kill me. Or so my mother thought, as she rushed out the back door screaming and seizing and pummeling Wiley before he could behead me. I'm not sure what game we were playing that I kneeled before Wiley's plastic sword. (In my life I've had no more suicidal speculations than the normal pessimist.)

Wiley and I were classmates until the 12th grade—intense pals throughout grammar school. Adventurous afternoons sliding down the fireman's pole, allowed by Wiley's dad, the Cheif. Musical afternoons in Wiley's playroom, Wiley on trumpet, I on drum; it must have been awful, not awesome. "Army" mates in war games: kids chose up sides to do battle with BB guns (nowhere as powerful as those today) which parents knew nothing of; thank God no one lost an eye. Gender roles still very specific in those days, girls served as nurses, as BBs occasionally stung. We knew the reality of death at the same time: tempting danger we crawled into a cave near the river, showing we were as brave as other kids, and exited just minutes before it collapsed killing a kid we did not know well from another part of town.

But most memories of those years are not individuated among a foursome at Third Street School that could be named "Sonny, Sid, Wiley and I," so close that Sonny's memories could have been mine, mine Sid's. I've long wondered why some things not monumental are remembered rather than others. Such as summer league baseball—Little League was late coming to my town—when Wiley, never having heard the wisdom that right-handed power-hitters should "pull the ball" to left field, hit towering homers always to right field. Such as a tag-football game on Third Street grounds when I scored a touchdown on a wide sweep and one of my mates—maybe it was Sid—announced with all the wisdom of a ten-year-old, "Hux is the best around the end I've ever seen." Beginning for two years in the seventh and eighth grades, "Midget" football, which then had a 112-pound weight limit, coached by one the handsomest men I've ever seen, an ex-Marine named Bill Green—who sticks in my mind forever for reasons which do me no honor for modesty. Green sent me in as substitute at defensive right end: the offense naturally tested the new guy with a sweep around my position; I broke through the interference and tackled the runner for a five-yard loss. Then they tried again with similar result. I was told later my mother was shouting (a lady who never

shouted) "That's my Sammy!" Coach Green gave me the name he called me the rest of the season, "Bershak," after a UNC All-American of some years before, Andy Bershak. I remain to this day in my own mind *Bershak*.

It was with Midget football that I can separate myself and Wiley from the four-pack. In the eighth grade we were starters, no longer "second string." In those days before Wide Receivers and Tight Ends, even before Flankers and Split Ends, the principal pass receivers were simply Ends. Wiley was Left End and I was Right. We were, along with the Quarterback of course, *the* passing offense. Well, Wiley had eleven receptions and I had nine—so our Midgets were really a ground offense it seems. No matter, we won our league's championship. And then things slowly began . . . to change.

Innocently at first. In junior high school and then senior the four-pack began to expand: Jimmy, Joe, Dill and Virge and more, all of us athletes, the price of admission, and consequently Wiley's centrality along with Sonny's and Sid's diminished somewhat—and then more when girls were invented and I began "going steady" with a sweet blonde (by no means dumb) named Ann, widely nicknamed, behind her back, "Tits." Not that I was allowed to touch them; I could kiss her as long as I kept my lips sealed (both during and after the kiss). But in fact, Wiley's centrality more than diminished; by the 10th grade it practically disappeared. I have no physical, photographic memory of him for a two-year period, save during spring football practice in our junior year, alternating drinking from a water fountain. (Why would anyone remember something like that?). There's nothing like a memory of Virge, which I can play over in my mind like a movie. Virge and I are shooting baskets in someone's backyard; I am amazed at his accuracy, and delighted by his delivery: whether driving for a lay-up or halting for a jump-shot, he declaims at the top of his lungs William Cullen Bryant's "Thanatopsis," ". . . So live, that when thy summons comes to

join / The innumerable caravan, which moves / To that
mysterious realm, where each shall take / His chamber in the
silent halls of death, / Thou go not, like a quarry-slave at
night. . ." releasing the ball only on an accented syllable. I
shall never forget it

Wiley was rakishly handsome, "dirty blonde" hair, if a crewcut can be rakish. He was perfectly proportioned, as the athlete he was should be. He always had the reputation of being wild, but all that meant was unpredictable, and I suspect his name contributed to the rep. But by the age of 15 Wiley had become, unlike the rest of us, not quite unpredictably, a "Bad boy." I don't mean a gang member—Greenville was not Chicago—but he hung out with a group of slightly older kids, solidly middle-class like the rest of us but very aggressive. What did they do? Don't laugh, but they *smoked*—absolutely forbidden to us athletes; and they *drank*, which meant beer. Now you won't laugh at all: they were reputed to drive around on week-end nights with batons, leaning out of window to konk black or lower-class pedestrians on the head; they claimed they drove about "Negro-town" on Saturday nights looking for willing black girls, and claimed they found them for gang-bangs. There was other stuff, but that's enough. It's hard for me to believe the konking, simply because I can't imagine Wiley practicing a form of what very recently in New York City was called the "Knock out game," but I wouldn't put it passed some others in the crowd. The rest I do not find hard to believe but, even if exaggerated, I did not find the boasting amusing.

Nor did Fire Chief Gardner. It was a common-enough practice in the South of my youth that an undisciplined boy—given the family's ability—be sent off to military-prep school to be straightened out. So my senior year was the first time in a decade that Wiley was not my classmate.

I took the path which led to my becoming college professor and writer. Sid attended the technological branch of

the state university and became a civil engineer. Sonny followed him but—R.O.T.C.—pursued a career as officer in the Air Force. Odd (as it seems to me in retrospect) I never saw either of them again, although news reached me over the years, Sonny reaching the rank of colonel. Wiley took the most surprising route: no college, to California instead to become a *Hollywood stuntman*! —somehow, although hard to say, not so odd as it might seem. It would be 13 packed years before I would see Wiley again.

By the age of 30 I had done a tour in the Army, finished college and grad school, and was teaching in the City University of New York while writing my dissertation. I received a letter from Wiley—a tremendous surprise—who'd gotten my address from my mother. He'd returned home from Hollywood, needed a calmer environment after the bruises of stunting, and was bitten by the lit bug. He wondered if I had read Thomas Dixon, Jr.'s *The Clansman* (the novel behind D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation*). A great book, he wrote. Did I know Dixon was a Philo-Semite? (I did not know—but Dixon was.) Just goes to show you, doesn't it? (Show you what?) I read the book. Certainly not a great book, but if you force yourself to dissociate Dixon's KKK from the present Klan and practice all sorts of readerly over-back-bending it is a compelling experience.) A few months later I visited my mother and father, and of course looked up Wiley.

He was living in a mobile home, not in a mobile-home park but in the large backyard of a large house (whose, I failed to ask); the atmosphere was of something temporary. He introduced me to his wife or companion, who I guessed was ten years younger, and who retired to another room the extent of my visit, which was perhaps three hours. We drank beer, recalled old times, did what you'd expect. How's New York? How was California? Seen Sid or Sonny? No. Then, somewhat awkwardly; are you a Democrat like everyone else around here? (In those days North Carolina was still part of the solid

conservative Democratic South.) Wiley had “rebelled” and turned to the “real” conservatives, the Republicans, home of people like John Wayne. I was a socialist at the time, but avoided opening that can of worms out of delight at seeing again my earliest playmate and buddy.

Finally, after this-and-that chatter, Wiley pointed to a stack of typing paper on an adjoining table. That’s my book. Your book? Yes, my novel. Jeez, Wiley, what’s it about? You’ll see when you read it, and you’ll be surprised. Don’t you have a copy I could see? Sorry, that’s my only copy, so . . . I was, obviously, pleasantly bewildered, and also cautious: was this what the Thomas Dixon stuff was somehow about (Wiley had not mentioned *The Clansman* during my visit but I immediately assumed the novel had something to do with his new politics), Wiley, do you have a publisher? That’s being arranged, he said. And then, in great confidence . . . and confident obviously of my pleasure, he confided he already had a foreword and an introduction. What, yes? Yes, what do you think of this? Nelson Rockefeller has agreed to write the foreword, and the introduction William Buckley is writing!

After I gathered my wits, I congratulated him on his great fortune and pretended to believe him, although I could not know if the stack of paper was what he said it was, hoped it was. As for Rockefeller and Buckley, I must have done the best piece of acting in my life, for Wiley was so pleased at my “pleasure.” I cannot recall how the rest of the visit went or how long, but not long. We’ll get together next time you’re in town, yes? Certainly! When I got myself away, I was broken-hearted. I had never ‘til that moment in my life been so sad. The next sentence I will not dramatize by making it a separate paragraph. Within six months Wiley Gardner was dead.

I do not recall how I knew or exactly when—only that a deep friend of my youth had returned to his home with a medical death warrant and handled that fate the way he did or could. I do not know what his terminal illness was; one always

suspects cancer, but I never heard that word. He was the picture of health the last time I saw him, and I later found that no one saw evidence of any decline in health before the end. I am vague on details for good reasons I can assure anyone:

What I might call "The Last Days of Wiley" corresponded roughly in time with two great shocking events in my life. The first should not have been shocking since my father's health was in decline in his mid-60s, ending in a lengthy period in the terminal ward of the hospital, during which he did not "go gentle into that good night." The second was even more lengthy: when the wife of my best pal from the Army, with whom I had also attended graduate school, was found murdered, my pal was charged and spent a year on Death's Row, was retried and found innocent (on a technicality!)—a story I have told on "Friendship and Murder" in NER, June 2018. It is no wonder that other details of those days are somewhat obscure in my memory. Nevertheless:

The next time I visited Greenville, sometime not too long after Wiley's death, I chanced upon an old schoolmate from high school and had beers in a local tavern-bookstore (what a good combo). Diminutive "Willie," a year older than I, had been a teammate three years of the four I was on varsity football—although he was seldom in a game, so small he was, only in the last minute or two when the score was already decided, a decent gift from Coach Bo Farley, a lovely man. Of course, we talked about Wiley. And, I don't remember how, Wiley's disappearance into the crowd of bad boys came up. For Willie had been a member—about as likely as his being a football player—his membership a sort of "gift" like his entrance late in a game. Did you guys really do all that stuff, Willie? More talk than reality, was all that he would say. Then Willie said, "Wiley did worse than all that, I don't mean back then, but later, and quite different." "What do you mean?" "Oh, of course you wouldn't have heard." And then

Willie told me a story.

Only weeks before his death, Wiley disappeared for a day or two . . . and then reappeared at the police department with a complaint. He had been abducted, he said, by a local Democratic gang ready to do violence to him for his being a Republican—but he had escaped their grips and hid out in the woods until he judged it safe to go public and demand justice for his kidnapping. The cops were skeptical but investigated as well as they could, and could turn up nothing at all. Wiley insisted he was telling the truth. But no one would believe him. Who would? All that was left of “The Last Days of Wiley” was a scandal, comical to most people. Poor Wiley, what happened to you?

That’s a question I’ll never know the answer to. The question I began this recollection with was why a few days ago I began thinking of Wiley with such intensity after all these years since his death, near half a century gone, as a matter of fact. After my exercise in “technique as discovery,” I’m almost ashamed to say, it has much more to do with me, myself, than with my old friend. Although I’m not ready to leave him quite yet.

Who, except for me, thinks of Wiley now? Simply remembering in a vague way is not the same. If no one does, if no one will, it will be as if he never existed. Do, will, Sonny or Sid? Jimmy, Joe, Virge? Certainly not Dill, who had a jump shot sweet as Virge’s, shared with Virge the affection that had been Wiley’s, became my best pal in senior high, college, and after as long as he lived, but Dill died in a car wreck in his early 30s. Virge’s wife Edwina shared with me dreams in which Dill appeared: “I did not die.” Of course, I cannot know, but I have no reason to believe anyone dreams of Wiley or even now bears him a thought. His “wife”? I’m not sure she wasn’t a prop, as Willie never mentioned her.

Who will bear *me* a thought?

My thoughts are not heading where you might think right now they are. I have something to think about that *you* might think about—unless you’ve always lived in the same place knowing the same people—as I have not.

My home town, Greenville, is now alien geography to me. It was a lovely small city, its heart much the character of a college town. The college is now a university with a campus 37 times larger than when I was a teenager, the student body three times larger than *my* Greenville’s citizen population. But not a “university town” as a result; rather now it has no character at all. It is *ongepotchket*—and you don’t have to know Yiddish to know that’s no compliment. It has both expanded and shrunk. The open farm land that surrounded it now an ugly semi-urban blight, “downtown” much of it boarded up. My last visit there 15 years ago I was excited to show it to my spouse until my excitement turned to depression. But this is mostly a physical metaphor. I am more distant from the town I loved in ways having little to do with location. I now know no one who lives in my home town. “Greenville” is now as non-existent as Wiley Gardner.

I have to tell you—not in a boastful manner, but simply in service of the truth— that my life is nothing that I could have expected when a child or teen. After high school and one year at the local college, I did an enlistment in the Army at Fort Benning, Georgia, and never returned, visits home aside, to Greenville. I graduated from the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill and then did graduate work there and in Kentucky and Connecticut and then resided in Connecticut, New York and Spain, with visits to England, Ireland, Iceland, Belgium, Luxembourg, France, Switzerland, and Germany. (I remember asking my mother when a child if I could perhaps see the state capital in Raleigh.)

Living in Spain on the island of Mallorca, I wandered one day to the wharf in Puerto de Andraitx and saw docked there a yacht which identified its home as “Greenville, N.C.”

Amazed, I scoured the Puerto looking for Americans in every bar and restaurant and shop, finding no suspects. When I returned to the wharf to wait until . . . the yacht had sailed away. Since Greenville, although on a river, has no watery access to the Atlantic, I wrote to Jimmy, a fraternity brother and the only one of my old pals with whom I had any contact, asking who the mariners might be, and he could imagine no soul at all. The upshot of this episode was that I felt even more disconnected from my hometown than before.

I have numbered among my closest friends not only fellow vets from what we fondly called "Benning's School for Boys," grad-school buddies, and colleagues at The City University of New York, but as well a Swedish journalist, his psychoanalyst wife, a prominent German painter, and a German film actor—and dozens of other figures I cannot claim to be "closest friends," but a pleasure and gift to know.

So when I say "Who will bear *me* a thought? I do not mean I fear being forgotten.

And when I say "my life is nothing I could have expected when a child or teen," I do not refer only to locations and acquaintances. Not least do I mean that my spouse is a brilliant and talented and transcendently beautiful woman who'd make "Tits" seem a pixie. But I'm not just lucky in love. I fear now, again, being thought merely boastful—as I may be, but not *merely*. I do not mean to suggest, far from it, that my old buddies are not or were not successful people: Virge and Dill successful *businessmen*, Joe a *physician*, Sid an *engineer*, Sonny a *colonel*, Jimmy a *lawyer* and state representative, and I don't know how to judge a Hollywood *stunt man* like Wiley. But all those professions are within the "expectable" range, so to speak, Wiley's naturally excepted. And I suppose *professor* is "expectable" as well, yet . . .

In the academy I made a career of not doing what a

prof is supposed to do and doing what he is supposed not to do. I refused to be an academic specialist and got away with it. I sent not a single article to what the academy calls a "refereed journal," that is, an academic journal in which a scholarly article, to be accepted, must be approved by a committee of specialists. I sent only critical and personal essays to cultural reviews appealing to the general educated reader. And so adamant was I that I'd not be trapped within a specialty that half way through my professorial career I changed my primary residence from one discipline (or "field") to another—and while I could be called *literary critic* or *philosopher and intellectual historian* I was so un-disciplined that my field was really *any damned thing I was interested in and thought I had something worth sharing my opinion on with the generally educated man or woman*. And while that insured I would never be invited to join an Ivy-Leaguish faculty, nor would my name be recognizable to an aspiring specialist at Tallahassee Tech, and I was lucky to have a tenured position in CUNY, I probably was more widely known than your average specialist (generally known only or primarily within his or her field): I received countless letters over the years not only from within the States but from Norway, Britain, Ireland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, and Israel . . . that I can recall. I assure the reader that this chest-beating will not be eternal and has a point.

I do not know if I can say Sid has accomplished much in his life, because frankly I don't know exactly what a civil engineer does; I know that Sonny must have served well to achieve the rank of Colonel; I do not know how many lives Joe as physician has saved or extended; I know that after retiring from the law Jimmy has written local historical volumes and a novella based on his brief naval service, and if they were self-published that's because of the tastelessness of an industry that used to be a "gentleman's profession"; and so on. But I know what my accomplishments are. Setting aside half a century of college teaching, I am co-author of a volume of

selected essays of metaphysical speculations produced by a reputable publishing house, and in 25 reputable cultural reviews and journals of opinion I have published to date more than 130 essays in literary criticism, philosophy, history, politics, travelogue, and memoir. Of my old crowd I would judge that only Jimmy has any approximate idea of any of the above, or perhaps Virge, but only because his wife Edwina has been a free-lance cultural journalist.

Greenville, North Carolina, is named after Washington's best Revolutionary War general, Nathanael Greene, but Greene was a Rhode Islander. The most famous Greenvillean is probably Sandra Bullock, but the gorgeous actress is actually a Virginian who attended East Carolina University in Greenville. Among people actually born and bred in Greenville (or Pitt County which surrounds it), the most distinguished person without a doubt was Robert Lee Humber, 1898-1970, a veteran of World War I, who was legal representative of American firms in Paris until he returned to Greenville after the Nazi invasion in 1940. The town's most cultivated citizen, he was also the most educated—Wake Forest, Harvard, Oxford, the Sorbonne—and most awarded: it would take too long to list them all, so just note three honorary doctorates. Humber was co-founder of the United World Federalists, father as it were of the North Carolina Museum of Art, and the local state legislator. And he sat on more boards of firms, institutes and colleges than I have digits. I remember him well from when I was knee-high to a grasshopper. An elegant, and eloquent, distinguished looking gentleman with his lovely French wife, hard to miss in his ancestral dwelling, Humber House (now a monument), a mere block off Main Street, not hidden behind shrubbery in an exclusive neighborhood.

The Wikipedia entry on Greenville must have been written by the local sports editor and a disc jockey: it is heavy on pro athletes and pop musicians as Greenville's "notable people." There is no mention of Robert Humber, which

is a disgrace, since Humber was one of the most distinguished North Carolinians of the 20th century, not merely a local celebrity. What I am about to claim now will shock and perhaps disturb the reader. And will probably (more than *probably*) effect people who know me well the same way, since I have a reputation for proper modesty.

But after Robert Lee Humber and nowhere close to him, I honestly surprise myself to have to confess that I think there is no one born and bred in my home town who is more accomplished than I. Which is not the same thing as *famous*. Here's a rule of thumb you can bet your life on: Tight Ends and Hip-Hoppers are always more famous than essayists. If you find an exception it's illusory: George Orwell's great fame is for his novel *1984*, not for "Politics and the English Language" or "Shooting an Elephant." Neither William Hazlitt a hell of a long time ago nor Joseph Epstein now were or are really well-known outside the world of intellectual journalism. William Who, Joseph Who?

Why should this bother me? Wrong question: it doesn't *bother* me. But . . . it's hard to get right. *Interests* isn't the right word: too objective. Maybe *bothers* is not wrong after all: it is softer than *disturbs*, isn't it? Why did I think of William Hazlitt a few minutes ago? Probably because he wrote "No young man ever thinks he shall die" (in "On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth") and I think about it a great deal. Not that I'm in bad health or excessively ancient, but I can count, my only mathematical skill. And besides, of course, I have lived through the pandemic, during which the possibility of death had no connection to "ordinary" health nor to normal judgments of life-expectancy, every time I awoke looking nervously to see how my beloved was faring, catching my breath if I did not hear a normal breathing pattern. So frightened all those months, it was impossible not to think about the end of things.

I think-about-wonder-if Sid ever thinks of me; I wrote

him an amusing but unanswered letter ten years ago, but maybe, I hope, I had the wrong address. Does Joe ever recall that in our senior year we switched positions, End and Guard? Does Quarterback Sonny ever remember my giving him advice in the huddle? Does Virge recall our shooting baskets to the tune of "Thanatopsis"? In any case, when I remember them, I remember them as they *were*