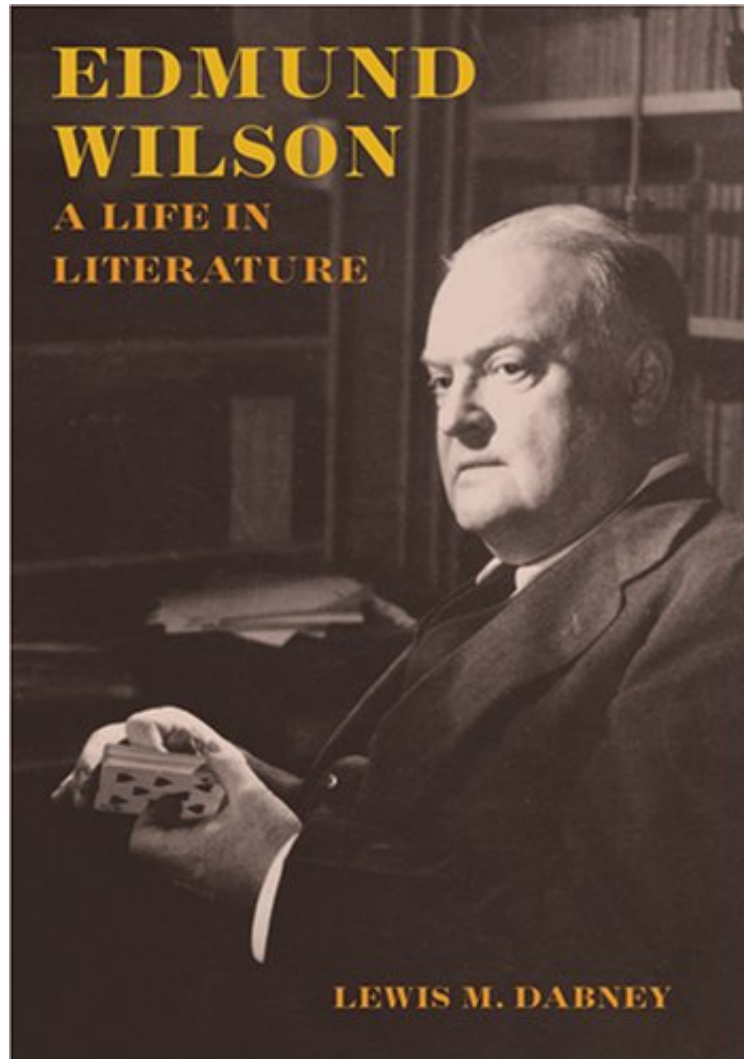


Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature

Lewis M. Dabney

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Lewis M. Dabney : Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Edmund Wilson: A Life in Literature:

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From the Jazz Age through the Kennedy administration, Edmund Wilson (1895--1972) stood at the center of the American cultural scene. A champion of the young Ernest Hemingway, a loyal friend and mentor of F. Scott Fitzgerald, and an ally of John Dos Passos during the Depression, Wilson wrote classics of literary and intellectual history (including *Axel's Castle*, *To the Finland Station*, and *Patriotic Gore*), searching reportage, and insightful criticism. Though he documented his private life in openly erotic fiction and journals, he left the personal dramas at its center in shadow. Lewis M. Dabney, the first writer to integrate Wilson's life and work, vividly encompasses his formative love affair with Edna St. Vincent Millay, his tempestuous marriage to Mary McCarthy, and his lasting accord with Elena Mumm Thornton, as well as his volatile friendship with Vladimir Nabokov and enduring ties with W. H. Auden and Isaiah Berlin. Steeped in knowledge of the era, this compelling narrative follows the critic's intellectual development, from son of small-town New Jersey gentry to America's last great renaissance man, a lucid commentator on everything from the Russian classics to Native American rituals to the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. Dabney shows why Wilson was and has remained -- in his cosmopolitanism and trenchant nonconformity -- a model for young writers and intellectuals, as well as the favorite critic of the general reader. Edmund Wilson has been widely recognized as the authoritative biography of a brilliant man whose life reflected the grand sweep of twentieth-century cultural, social, and human experience.

From Publishers Weekly Dabney, who edited *The Sixties*, the last volume of Wilson's posthumous journals, brings a deep familiarity with his subject to this critical biography. Wilson (1895-1972) was mid-20th-century America's most influential literary critic, and Dabney meticulously unfolds the circumstances behind the writing of his most significant books while tracing the evolution of Wilson's thought. Wilson was equally skilled at criticism and reportage, and fairly successful at fiction including the scandalously erotic (for the 1940s) novel *Memoirs of Hecate County* and Dabney confidently sorts out these varied writings and their part in Wilson's legacy. Biographical details are generally filtered through the literary perspective, but the life story does get a thorough if sometimes slow rendering. The account of Wilson's "nightmarish" marriage to Mary McCarthy, for example, carefully weighs everything that both authors wrote about the relationship after the fact, as well as the perspectives of other sources, before judging that accusations that Wilson abused her are probably unfounded. Often, though, the best source on Wilson is his own detailed (and uncensored) journals, which frequently add a welcome personalizing touch. Readers seeking an introduction to Wilson will find their perseverance through this hefty tome rewarded with a rich context for approaching his writings. (Aug.) Copyright Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. From *Bookmarks Magazine* A divisive character deserves a split decision, and Edmund Wilson and his "authorized" biographer Lewis Dabney suffer from mixed reviews. Some critics welcome the new treatment as a balanced, sober look at a life that was anything but. Comparisons of the biographers literary style with that of his subject are unfair, but the criticism of Dabney's tendency to linger on the sordid details while parsing out dry readings of Wilson's work hangs over the negative reviews. These questions seem less pointed at Dabney's work than at the metalevel value of personal information in a biography: is Wilson or any writer just his work, or are we simply happier to view him that way? Copyright 2004 Phillips Nelson Media, Inc. From *Booklist* Edmund Wilson was a man of great intellect and voracious appetites. He adored women, bedding many (beginning with Edna St. Vincent Millay) and marrying four (including Mary McCarthy). He drank to excess and traveled widely, following his interests in Native Americans, Haiti, and Judaism, which led to his groundbreaking work on the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. The most expansive, questing, and influential critic of his time, Wilson read deeply and wrote keenly about the work of his contemporaries, including his friend and rival, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and was one of the first to recognize the significance of Yeats and Proust. Holding staff jobs at *Vanity Fair*, the *New Republic* and the *New Yorker*, Wilson critiqued theater, literature, music, architecture, and movies. He wrote prose famous for its "concreteness, its glinting exactness." Fascinated by creativity and psychology, deeply concerned with politics, race, and justice, he was an astute observer and master craftsman difficult to live with but a profound pleasure to read. Dabney, who edited *The Sixties* (1993), the final volume of Wilson's published journals, presents a meticulous biography that is illuminating in its explications of Wilson's volatile personal relationships and benchmark writings. Donna Seaman Copyright American Library Association. All rights reserved