

# John Wilson

(1804-1875)

Mumbai Legacy Project  
D Ward



Many voyaged across the seas to India in the 1800s making the country their permanent home, but one such person, born in a small farmhouse in Scotland, was so loved by the residents of Bombay that a native Christian said upon his death and subsequent burial in the city, “We are so glad that (he) will never go home. You all go and leave us; we know you are always looking longingly to England; but (he) will never go home!” (Holcomb 1901, 212). His accomplishments in education, social work, philanthropy, archaeology, and governance have immortalised him for centuries in the areas of Malabar Hill and Girgaum.

This person was Reverend John Wilson, D.D., M.R.A.S., who notably founded Wilson College in Charni Road and was one of the founding fathers of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bombay and the University of Bombay. Born in Scotland on 11th December 1804, he was religiously inclined from a young age, acting as a ‘priest’ and preaching to his playmates in school. While studying at Edinburgh University, he was employed as a teacher to the family of Rev. Dr. Cormack, whose nephews hailed from India but were sent by their father to study in their Scottish homeland. Thus was his first exposure to Indian culture and languages, as his students spoke Hindustani. When he was 21 years old, he joined the Scottish Missionary Society as a missionary to foreign places. He enrolled in anatomy, surgery, and physics classes to better help the people he would be working with in the future (Marrat 1882).

John Wilson was ordained to the office of the Gospel ministry on 24th June 1828 and was married to Margaret Bayne on 18th August of the same year. At the end of the month, the newlyweds left for India and reached Bombay on 14th February 1829. In a letter to his parents, who were initially against their oldest son joining the missionary and the subsequent separation that came with the profession, Wilson described India: “Figure to yourselves a clear sky, a burning sun, a parched soil, gigantic shrubs, numerous palm trees, a populous city with inhabitants belonging to every country under heaven, crowded, dirty streets, thousands of Hindus, Mohammedans, Parsis, Buddhists, Jews and Portuguese; perpetual marriage processions, barbarous music, etc. etc.; and you will have some idea of what I observe at present”. Already proficient in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Urdu, Arabic and Zend while in Scotland, he studied Marathi in the village of Harnai and began preaching and speaking to the natives within five months. He also learned Gujarati, Hindustani, and Persian. He established the Ambroli Church in 1832 and dreamt about opening a high school and college for native children. It is one of the few churches in India which empowers women to become preachers (Thomas 2019).

Armed with vast knowledge, which made him a popular figure among the natives, Wilson engaged in debates with Hindu and Muslim apologists from 1830. Some of his students, Narayan Sheshadri and his younger brother Shripat, who were Deshastha Brahmins, converted to Christianity, and Ram Chandra himself debated with several Brahmin apologists in public. One of his strongest opponents in the Mohammedan controversy later accepted Christianity and was baptised by the reverend. Wilson was also close to the Parsi community, but the amiable relations turned taut after the baptism of three Parsi students from Wilson College. Wilson travelled to neighbouring villages to understand the people and translated his works into their vernacular languages. He also spoke against the practice of female infanticide and sati, which he had heard about while in Scotland, where a neighbour, General Walker, fought against this practice amongst the Jadeja Rajputs in the princely state of Baroda (Marrat 1882).





Wilson's wife Margaret passed away on 19th April 1835 in their residence at Malabar Hill. She had supported her husband in his work in India and made several advancements in female education in the six years she lived in Bombay. Margaret established the first boarding school for girls in Western India, the St. Columba High School (David 1999). Her sisters Anna and Hay Bayne, who were called from Scotland by Wilson after her death, continued the work she had begun (Wilson 1844). While in Scotland, Wilson married Isabella Deniston, and then they left again for India.

John Wilson was one of the founding fathers of the University of Bombay in 1857. At the time, there were only three colleges in Mumbai, Elphinstone College, Grant Medical College and the Free General Assembly's Institution. The latter was previously known as Ambroli English School, founded by Wilson in 1832. Wilson College thus became the first privately owned institution affiliated with the University in 1861. In recognition of his work, he was appointed



first as the Dean of the Faculty of Arts and then the Vice Chancellor of the University in 1868. He was involved in the ceremonial laying of the foundation stone of the University building, designed by Sir Gilbert Scott. He was respected by many British government officials of the time, notably Lord Mountstuart Elphinstone, Sir Bartle Frere, and even Dr. David Livingstone. Lord Elphinstone said about his friendship with Wilson, “To no other man was he so indebted personally, for public and private services, but he could not prevail on him to accept so much as the value of a shoe latchet” (Holcomb 1901).

As the president of the Asiatic Society of Bombay from 1835 to 1842, Wilson wrote books such as *Parsi Religion* (1843), *History of Suppression of Female Infanticide in Western India* (1855), *Indian Caste* (1877), and many others. As an archaeologist, he wrote *The Caves of Karla* (1861) and was instrumental in deciphering the Brahmi script by reproducing the Ashokan Girnar inscriptions (David 1999). Using this information, with the help of Dr. Livingstone, Wilson deciphered the Buddhist inscriptions at Karla caves. He also offered a helpful hand to the Bene Israeli Jews of Bombay and wrote the history of the community (Wilson 1861).



On 14th February 1869, the 40th anniversary of Wilson's arrival in India, leading communities in Bombay decided to commemorate this event by presenting John Wilson with a silver salver designed by John Lockwood Kipling, the father of Rudyard Kipling, with an inscription in Sanskrit, today found in the Wilson College library (Smith 1878). The felicitation welcomed celebrated participants like Sir David Sassoon, Dr. Bhau Daji Lad, and many others, and the gift amount was upwards of 21,000 rupees or 2,110 pounds at the time, which John Wilson donated for aid in his philanthropic and literary labours (Kamat 2005).

John Wilson passed away on 1st December 1875 in Mumbai. The burial was at the Scottish Cemetery in Marine Lines, Churchgate (The Times of India 1875). The Senate asked to place a marble bust of his likeness in the Sir Cowasji Jehangir Hall of the University of Bombay to honour his life and legacy, which was eventually placed in the Library Hall (Kamat 2005). During the first Convocation at the University after his death, Vice Chancellor James Gibbs said, "All will, I think, agree in the applicability to him of the often-quoted sentiment of the Prince of Denmark: 'He was a man, take him for all and all, we shall not look upon his like again'" (Smith 1878, 626).

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