

Mítoszok bűvöletében

Enchanted by Myth

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Ünnepi kötet
Virágos Zsolt Kálmán 70. születésnapjára

Enchanted by Myth

A Volume for Zsolt Kálmán Virágos
on his 70th Birthday

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Woodrow Wilson, Women, and Illness: The Human Dimensions of the Man Who Shaped the 20th Century*

Thomas Woodrow Wilson is among the most influential US presidents ever: his ideas and ideals have shaped international relations and American politics for over a century now. His call for “making the world safe for democracy” has been echoed by Republican and Democratic presidents alike, and his New Freedom reforms (e.g. the establishment of the Federal Reserve Bank system) continue to define everyday life in the country. It is hardly surprising that quite a lot has been written about him, but there appears to be a tendency in Wilson-scholarship to separate the private sphere from the public one: biographies focus on the man himself, while historical surveys on his decisions, as if the two were unrelated. Arthur Stanley Link’s multi-volume biography could have been the exception of note, but he abandoned the project halfway through (taking the story only up to the US entering the war in 1917)¹ and chose to edit 69 volumes of Wilson papers for Princeton University Press instead.² Supplementary volumes of secondary historical accounts were added to the series courtesy of Princeton and Chapel Hill, NC,³ and heated debates ensued concerning the reliability of some of these analyses. But the public and the private remained separated.

Hungarians would have been quite interested in the unfolding of these debates but the communist government prevented any free discussion of American matters, especially matters related to the Treaty of Trianon, 1920, which dismembered historic Hungary by giving two-thirds of her territory and population to neighboring states (which, by twist of fate, were then allies in the Soviet bloc). The aim of this paper is thus to offer insights into Wilson’s private life and explain the man behind the daring foreign policy that reshaped the world in general and Hungary in particular. That private life was defined by four women and untreated chronic high blood pressure.

Wilson’s character was molded by contradictory impulses coming from his parents. Joseph Ruggles Wilson (1822-1903) was a Presbyterian minister, who mixed unrealistic

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¹ Arthur Stanley Link, *Wilson. A Biography*. 5 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1947-65), and *Wilson the Diplomatist* (Baltimore: New Viewpoints, 1957).

² Arthur Stanley Link, ed., *The Papers of Woodrow Wilson*. 69 vols. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1966-94); hereafter cited as *WWPs*.

³ The canonized texts came out in the official Princeton series called “Supplementary Volumes to the Papers of Woodrow Wilson,” also edited by Link. Works challenging the Link canon appeared as independent volumes published by the University Press of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

expectations with cynicism and condescension when dealing with his son. Jessie Janet Woodrow (1826-88) was always nervous and physically weak, a hypochondriac, and tended to blame others for everything. Young Wilson was dyslexic, which meant he was unable to meet his father's expectations, but his mother always found some excuse for him and someone else to blame.⁴ In light of this, it is easy to see the point in Jerrold M. Post's conclusion that this turned Wilson into a politician with strong autocratic tendencies.⁵ Thomas Woodrow Wilson is generally seen as a cold and calculating politician, a classic case of the professor-turned-politician. It is a little known fact that he was overtly romantic, falling madly in love with about half a dozen different women.⁶ The second woman to shape his life, after his mother, was his second love and first wife, Ellen Louis Axson (1860-1914).

She was born in Savannah, GA, and, like Wilson, she was the child of a Presbyterian minister. Woodrow and Ellen knew each other since childhood, and she was quite like the future president's mother. They got married in 1885 and had three daughters: Margaret (1886), Jessie (1887), and Eleanor (1889). By the time Wilson entered the political arena they had long been alienated. She was aware of Wilson's health problems and repeatedly warned him, in vain, against the pressures of high politics. As First Lady, Ellen Axson Wilson had two of her daughters married, launched a campaign to clean up slums in the US capital, and painted in her private studio in the White House. She passed away on August 6, 1914, halfway through Wilson's first term in office.⁷

Although Wilson's biographers carefully avoided the matter for quite some time, we know for sure that he repeatedly cheated on his wife. His best-known romantic interest was Mary Allen Hulbert Peck. The story goes back to Wilson's tenure as President of Princeton, when he got into a fight over the location of the new graduate school and its dorm. He took the issue so personally that one morning he woke up to not being able to move his right hand and not seeing with his left eye. Following a quick medical check-up, his frightened wife, Ellen, agreed to let him go by himself to the Bahamas to recover. There Wilson met Peck, the wife of a Massachusetts wool trader, who also holidayed alone. Their private correspondence testifies to the passionate nature of their relationship as well as to the fact that she made no effort to become an intellectual match for Wilson. The relationship was resumed a year later, when the future president lost the "war" over the graduate school and returned to the Bahamas, again unaccompanied by his wife. Later on, amidst wild rumors of the liaison, Wilson privately admitted to cheating, and his wife forgave him. In 1909, Peck moved to New York and continued to meet

⁴ A traditional interpretation of Wilson is: Arthur Walworth, *Woodrow Wilson*. 2 vols. (New York: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1958). A non-canonized study is: Alexander L. George and Juliette L. George, *Woodrow Wilson and Colonel House. A Personal Study* (New York: Dover, 1964). The original version was published in 1956 by the John day Company. This edition is cited because it features a new introduction and reflects some of the debates discussed below.

⁵ Jerrold M. Post, "Woodrow Wilson Re-examined: The Mind-Body Controversy Redux and Other Disputations," *Political Psychology* Vol. 4, No. 2 (1983), 289-306.

⁶ For details see August Heckscher, *Woodrow Wilson. A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1991); hereafter: Heckscher, *Wilson*.

⁷ A personal take on the Wilson-Axson marriage is Stockton Axson, "*Brother Woodrow:*" *A Memoir of Woodrow Wilson* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993).

Wilson. When the Princeton strong man went on to serve as Governor of New Jersey and then entered the presidential race in 1912, Mary Peck became a problem. She was paid off twice, in 1912 and 1915.⁸

The officially rather formal Wilson's private life continues to generate speculation, sometimes with thinly veiled anti-Semitic overtones. One such, fully uncorroborated, conspiracy theory is that he also cheated with the wife of a Princeton colleague, and she too had to be paid off with a sum of 40,000 dollars. The legend continues: he had to borrow money from Jewish financiers, who, in return, asked for the appointment of Louis D. Brandeis to the Supreme Court.⁹ As regards the facts, there is no evidence to prove the existence of this unidentified lover, but Wilson did appoint Brandeis to the Supreme Court. Brandeis, one of three appointments by Wilson, became the first Jewish member of the Supreme Court, but his nomination met with mixed reviews. For example, in a letter to Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts, Ellerton James explained that although Brandeis "is a Hebrew, and, therefore, of Oriental race and his mind is an Oriental mind" and "some of his ideas of what were fair might not be the same as those of a man possessing an Anglo-Saxon mind," he still believed that "contrary to the usual ideas of Jews, I do not think the almighty dollar is very attractive to him."¹⁰ In a convincingly argued article Urofsky explained Wilson's actual motivations, which, of course, did not include Jewish blackmail.¹¹ Still, the myth lives on, as conspiracy theories are hard to eliminate.

The fourth and final woman to play a key role in Wilson's life was his second wife, Edith Bolling Galt (1872-1961). She came from a Southern aristocratic family dating back to the *Mayflower*, the seventh of eleven children of a federal judge. Edith studied music and married Norman Galt in 1896, but he passed away in 1908. She inherited her husband's jewelers business in the federal capital, where she met Wilson in 1915. When the first Mrs. Wilson (Ellen Axson) died, Mary Peck resurfaced almost instantaneously. In an attempt to avoid complications with the former lover, Helen Bones (Wilson's nephew and Ellen's closest friend) and Cary T. Grayson (Wilson's private physician) set up a date between Edith and Woodrow. They quite liked each other and got married on December 18, 1915. Edith proved to be a real politician's wife: she fully supported her husband's political ambitions and accompanied him on official trips.¹² The contrast between the two Mrs. Wilsons could not have been greater.

⁸ Heckscher, *Wilson*, 161-62, 174-75, and 185-89. See also: Kenneth S. Lynn, "The Hidden Agony of Woodrow Wilson," *The Wilson Quarterly* Vol. 28, No. 1 (Winter 2004), 59-92. Hereafter: Lynn, "Hidden Agony."

⁹ One such source is: Benjamin Freedman, "Seven US Presidents: Jewish Pawns" at <http://iamthewitness.com/audio/Benjamin.H.Freedman/Seven.U.S.Presidents-Jewish.Pawns.htm#Justice> (access: 1/27/2012). There are many others that I am not citing for the sake of decency.

¹⁰ Leonard Dinnerstein, *Anti-Semitism in America* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 1994), 68-69.

¹¹ Melvin I. Urofsky, "Wilson, Brandeis, and the Supreme Court Nomination," *Journal of Supreme Court History* Vol. 28, No. 2 (July 2003), 145-56. Urofsky also penned a critical biography of Brandeis: *Louis D. Brandeis: A Life* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2009).

¹² Edith Bolling Wilson, *My Memoir* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1939).

When Wilson decided to attend the Paris Peace Conference to end World War I, thus breaking with a century-old tradition that the president should not leave the country while in office, it was hardly surprising that Edith decided to go along. She had viewed the Wilson-House friendship with some suspicion (maybe even jealousy), but it was only in Paris that she could physically separate them. The subsequent Wilson-House break pushed Wilson emotionally even closer to his second wife.¹³ The pressure of high politics eventually took its toll on the president, and Wilson collapsed with a major stroke in September 1919, when he was campaigning for the acceptance of the German peace treaty in the United States. He barely survived the incident and his wife took over the reigns of government for the last 17 months of his presidency. Edith Bolling Wilson thus became the “secret president” and “the first woman to run the country.” Still, before we look at the broader implications of Mrs. Wilson’s takeover, we must also consider President Wilson’s health issues.

Wilson was physically weak and prone to illness all his life. By the age of 40, he had developed chronic high blood pressure and arteriosclerosis, but was not treated regularly with either. He also responded to psychological pressure (and emotional shocks) with physical symptoms, and considered his illness a divine warning. As has been mentioned, in 1906 he suffered temporary loss of vision in his left eye and could hardly move his right arm. The increased pressure of the Peace Conference, combined with two quick return trips to Washington and a bout of flu, took its toll on his body. At age 63 he was the oldest president up to that time. When the Senate threatened to reject his peace design he embarked on a nationwide speaking tour to exert direct pressure on his political rivals. It was during this trip that he suffered a major stroke that practically removed him from decision making for the rest of his tenure.

Based largely on secondary evidence culled from Wilson’s private correspondence and the notes of his private physician, the aforementioned Cary T. Grayson, but in the absence of hospital and autopsy records, American neurologist Albert Weinstein concluded that the 28th president suffered repeated strokes as of the 1880s, and this limited his decision making abilities considerably. Weinstein’s diagnosis has been challenged by various other experts who argued that the experienced neurologist should “not think of zebras” when he heard “thundering hooves” outside his window. There appears to be general consensus today that Wilson suffered a major stroke in September 1919, but his earlier breakdowns were physical reactions to stress, probably brought about by untreated high blood pressure and arteriosclerosis.¹⁴ This, however, indicates that illness had

¹³ Inga Floto, *Colonel House in Paris. A Study of American Policy at the Paris Peace Conference 1919* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973), and a more recent account: Godfrey Hodgson, *Woodrow Wilson’s Right Hand. The Life of Colonel Edward M. House* (New Haven and London: Yale UP, 2006). Edward Mandell House (1858-1938), an honorary colonel from Texas, was called Wilson’s “alter ego” and served as the chief foreign policy advisor for the 28th president. He later rendered similar services to Franklin D. Roosevelt. His papers are an invaluable source for Hungarian history and are kept at the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale.

¹⁴ The debate over Wilson’s health was triggered by Edwin A. Weinstein, *Woodrow Wilson: A Medical and Psychological Biography* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1981). His conclusions were accepted by Link at face value and became part of the official canon as the *WWPs* were being published. The debate began in earnest in 1979 (in *Political Science Quarterly*), continued in 1983 (in *Political*

little if anything to do with his performance in Paris. He did hover between life and death for four months following the September 1919 stroke, and it was during this time that Edith assumed control in the White House.

Mrs. Wilson and Doctor Grayson completely isolated the recovering president from members of his cabinet and congress. Edith decided by herself which issues would be presented to Wilson and who would be allowed to see the president in person. There is evidence to suggest that she drafted and wrote up her husband's communications and even signed them for him. The ever suspicious Secretary of State Lansing demanded that the president should be declared incapable of performing his duties and replaced by Vice President Thomas R. Marshall. Lansing tried to call a cabinet meeting in Wilson's absence but Mrs. Wilson prevented the session from taking place, and this cost Lansing his job. Grayson refused to declare Wilson incapable of performing his duties, so the 28th president stayed in power officially until the inauguration of his successor, Warren G. Harding, an Ohio Republican. The Wilsons retired to their private home in Washington, D. C., and lived there until the president passed away in February 1924.¹⁵ The second Mrs. Wilson published her much anticipated memoirs in 1939 and called her involvement in 1919-21 "stewardship," which failed to clear accusations. She died in 1961.

Wilson's illness raised two interesting constitutional questions. What should happen if the president becomes incapacitated? And, who should decide whether he is capable of performing his duties or not? The presidential line of succession is clearly laid out in the US Constitution, but it was not until the 25th amendment that temporary incapacitation was regulated. This is all the more so interesting, since, overall, one in three presidents have faced this issue. Following Wilson, Franklin Roosevelt, Eisenhower, Johnson, Reagan, and George W. Bush all were temporarily incapacitated. With the US becoming more and more involved in international diplomacy in the course of the 20th century, the precedent set by the second Mrs. Wilson came into discussion repeatedly. It took half a century to settle the issue in the 25th amendment. Passed in 1965 and ratified in 1967, it rules that (1) the president may voluntarily transfer power to his vice president temporarily, or (2) the vice president and the majority of the cabinet may declare the president unable to perform his duties. Reagan (in 1985) and George W. Bush (in 2002 and 2007) both transferred power temporarily to their vice presidents on the basis of the 25th amendment.¹⁶

What conclusions does this brief survey of the private life of Thomas Woodrow Wilson offer to historians in general and Hungarians in particular? Does it fit into existing Wilson research, or does it open new avenues in the field? By way of conclusion, let us answer these questions.

Jessie Woodrow Wilson influenced her son in two key ways: it was her influence that made him rely, perhaps too heavily, on outside approval, and it was his mother that Wil-

Psychology) and 1984 (in *The Journal of American History*), and was concluded by Lynn's "Hidden Agony" in 2004. I am planning to write an extensive review of the debate over Wilson's health, including a full bibliography.

¹⁵ Heckscher, *Wilson*, 611-44, and Lloyd E. Ambrosius, "Woodrow Wilson's Health and the Treaty Fight, 1919-1920," *The International History Review* Vol. 9, No. 1 (February 1987), 73-84.

¹⁶ Rose McDermott, *Presidential Leadership, Illness, and Decision Making* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007), see especially chapters 2 (on Wilson) and 7 (on the 25th amendment).

son sought in his first wife. This mother-son relationship was ignored until the 1960s, and the debate over health issues and family influences (1979-84) has brought about a partial review in Wilson scholarship, although not in the official supplementary series of secondary works published by Princeton. Ellen Axson Wilson may have been the ideal wife for an academic, but not for a politician. She was Wilson's second mother, suffered from his infidelity, but never left him. In the absence of a properly researched biography it is difficult to estimate the true impact of unhappiness on her projects to paint professionally and do social work in the White House, but it is fair to say that she set a trend for future First Ladies. The story of Mary Peck highlights at least two issues. On the one hand, Wilson's passionate love letters challenge the image of a cool and calculating politician: this calls for a review of his character, but this has not been done yet. On the other hand, his love affairs and infidelity raise the question of responsibility on the part of a candidate towards the party that nominates him. Personal secrets lead to speculation and wide spread conspiracy theories, as is evidenced by the resilience of the story concerning the appointment of Brandeis. Edith Bolling Galt succeeded where Mary Peck had failed: she became First Lady. She is the only woman on record to marry into the White House. This is no ground to question her love for Wilson, but she recorded in her memoirs that the president was quite formal even in private life. Her takeover of government indicates that driving ambitions sometimes find interesting avenues to power. Technically speaking, Wilson stopped running his administration in December 1918, when he left for Europe and began to focus almost exclusively on the creation of the League of Nations and then on ratification. He suffered a major stroke before he could have returned to domestic issues, and his wife took the reins of government: this adds up to Wilson being *de facto* president only for six years (1913-18) and sheds a different light on his rumored intention to run for a third term.

The effects of Wilson's untreated high blood pressure (especially strong headaches) and the tendency to produce physical symptoms in response to psychological pressure have largely been ignored in analyses of his decision making. Link described his foreign policy as "missionary diplomacy" and his unwillingness to compromise has largely been attributed to his religious background. Wilson's medical record (or as much of it as can be reconstructed) offers a different explanation, which, in turn, should be used in a reevaluation of his character. Suppressed passions and extended headaches point to impatience and lack of sustained attention, which suggest the possibility of rash decisions. Cases in point for this new analysis are the Princeton fight over the graduate school and the treaty fight in Congress.

Finally, what lessons does this offer for Hungarian history writing? Hungarians tend to ignore the entire First World War and start discussing Trianon when the issue comes up. In the absence of systematic research political narratives take over, as I have explained it in my articles on the myth and history of the Fourteen Points.¹⁷ On the eve of the centennial of the outbreak of the Great War, there is still no national research pro-

¹⁷ Glant, "The Myth and History of Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points in Hungary," *Eger Journal of American Studies* Vol. 12, Nos. 1-2 (2010), 301-22; and "A 14 pont története és mítosza," *Külliügyi Szemle* 2009/4: 84-99.

ject in sight, and fresh new military histories are more the exception than the rule.¹⁸ Popular historical narratives abound when academic history writing is absent, and in this field Wilson is blamed, in Hungary, for not carrying his ideal of national self-determination into effect, and praised in the successor states for doing so. What academics and popular historians fail to understand is that the East Central European settlement was not his work, nor did he want any part of it. His main focus in Paris was to hammer out the Covenant of the League of Nations as soon as possible, and, to achieve this, he agreed to have it included in each peace treaty. Thus, as a result of this particular compromise, his main aim was to conclude the German treaty and have it ratified at home. He left Paris as the subsequent treaties were being drafted and many key issues were still unresolved.¹⁹ Thus, when Hungarians look at the American position in Paris, they must learn new names, first of all that of State Department Counselor Frank L. Polk, who took over as head of the American Commission to Negotiate the Peace. And therein lies the connection between diplomatic history and private life.

¹⁸ Military histories of the various army units that fought in the Great War were published regularly between the wars, but this was cut off by communism after World War II. Not much happened in this field after 1989, either. The two notable exceptions are: Imre Makó, *Életünket és vérünket! Az első világháború hőmezővásárhelyi áldozatai* (Hódmezővásárhely: Városi Önkormányzat, 2004) and Tamás Pintér, János Rózsafi, and Norbert Stencinger, *Magyar ezredek a Doberdó-fennsík védelmében* (Budapest: Hibernia Nova és Zrínyi, 2009).

¹⁹ Arthur Walworth, *Wilson and His Peacemakers. American Diplomacy at the Paris Peace Conference* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Co., 1986).