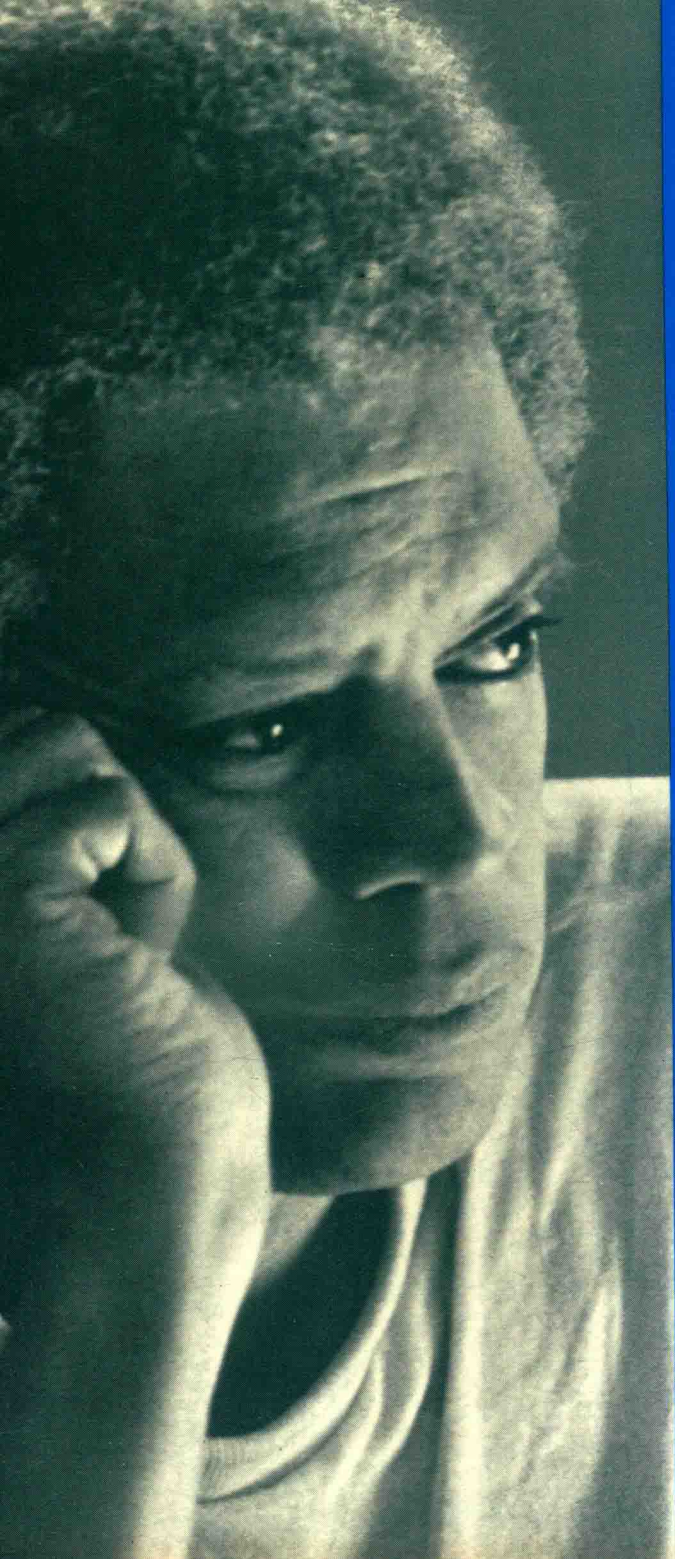

A MAN'S LIFE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY

ROGER WILKINS

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OX BOW PRESS
Woodbridge, Connecticut

1991 reprint by:
Ox Bow Press
P.O. Box 4045
Woodbridge, CT 06525

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Wilkins, Roger W., 1932–
A man's life : an autobiography / Roger Wilkins.
p. cm.
Reprint. Originally published: New York : Simon and Schuster, c1982.
Includes index.
ISBN 0–918024–83–8 (paperback : acid free paper)
1. Wilkins, Roger W., 1932– . 2. Afro-Americans—Civil rights. 3. Afro-Americans—Biography. 4. Civil rights workers—United States—Biography. I. Title.
[E185.97.W687A3 1991]
973.91'092—dc20
[B]

The paper used in this book meets the guidelines for permanence and durability of the Committee on Production Guidelines for Book Longevity of the Council on Library Resources.

Printed in the United States of America

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For Amy and David

I

Perhaps because we live in different cities, conversation does not flow easily between my children and me—particularly between my son and me. When my daughter's interest is engaged, she talks. Otherwise, there's silence, but a not-uneasy silence. With my son, it's different. He is eleven, and there is a boundless admiration for a distant and mysterious father who writes in Greenwich Village and earns a living at *The New York Times*. Our closeness causes distance, and our silences are filled with searchings for the next thing to say. Conversation comes in short, quick bursts.

One day during one of my visits to them in Washington, David and I were driving to pick up Amy at some house where she had been attending a party. "Yuh know, Dad," he said, breaking a silence, "I can't decide what I want to be when I grow up. A writer or a football player." I looked at him quizzically. "Well," he asked, "what do you think?"

What indeed did I think? I thought at that moment almost everything I had ever known and felt. My son wanted me to help him to choose an occupation by which he could define himself. And his question showed how completely he believed all that his world had told him, especially that he could be whatever he wanted to be. How could I help him? What of value could I tell him? Or Amy either, for that matter. At fifteen she was rapidly becoming more adult than child, her dark and brooding face filled with questions—"Who are you? . . . And what is that to me? . . . Where am I going? . . . How will it be?"

There is no answer in a sentence or in a paragraph to such questions—rather, there is everything that I can remember and all

that I have learned, beginning with the day my father began telling me what it meant to be a black in America. It was Kansas City, Missouri, where I was born, and it must have been about 1936, when I was four. I loved to watch the "streamlined trains"—the ones where gleaming, steel-encased power roared under our viaduct on its way to some mysterious Western place called Santa Fe. He'd often take me on Sunday night to stand on the viaduct to wait for the rumble and the tremor that was the sure signal that my train was on its way.

One of those Sunday nights, I told him that I wanted to drive a train like that when I grew up. He didn't say anything, so I repeated my words. His face grew somber. To me he was a commanding and somewhat mysterious man. He had been sick and away at a sanitarium for tuberculosis patients for as long as I could remember and had just returned home. Did his silence mean disapproval? Had I made him angry? I was growing uneasy. When he finally spoke, he said—in a very gentle voice—"You can't do that, Peter." (He had suggested to my mother that they name me Roger after a character in a book he liked but when it came time to talk to me, he always called me Peter.)

"Why not?" I wanted to know. Why was he being mean?

"There are white people and Negro people in the world," he answered. "And the white people make the rules. One of the rules is that Negro people can work on the trains, but they can't drive them."

"What?" I asked, incredulous and uncomprehending. "What?"

"That's one of the rules," he continued. "There are many more."

"But that's not fair," I protested.

"That's right," he said. "It's not fair, and you must fight against that all your life."

I promised him I would.

Two years before that, when he was in the tuberculosis sanitarium, he had written me a letter, which I obviously couldn't read, but which tells a lot about how he planned to raise his Negro son in America and something about his hopes for me. It read:

Friday, March 22, 1934

DEAR ROGER—

Let me congratulate you upon having reached your second birthday. Your infancy is now past and it is now that you should begin to turn your thoughts upon those achievements which are expected of a bril-

liant young gentleman well on his way to manhood.

During the next year, you should learn the alphabet; you should learn certain French and English idioms which are a part of every cultivated person's vocabulary; you should gain complete control of those natural functions which, uncontrolled, are a source of worry and embarrassment to even the best of grandmothers; you should learn how to handle table silver so that you will be able to eat gracefully and conventionally; and you should learn the fundamental rules of social living—politeness, courtesy, consideration for others, and the rest.

This should not be difficult for you. You have the best and most patient of mothers in your sterling grandmother and your excellent mother. Great things are expected of you. Never, never forget that.

Love,

YOUR FATHER

That was his approach to raising a black child in America, and as a beginning it was enough. But he never lived long enough to face the tougher and substantially more complex kind of challenge his grandchildren have put to me. Whether Amy actually decides to continue writing poetry, and whether David chooses football, writing or neither, I hope that their occupations will never define them. I want them to be evolving creative forces in the worlds they come to inhabit. I have no answers on how they are to get there—only lessons learned in experiencing life as a black man in America at a complicated time. And the most valuable things I can give my black children, I suppose, are the stories of my own broken illusions—and my continuing growth from the struggle.

In the beginning, it was warm and empty in Kansas City, Missouri. There was a neat little stucco house on a hill in a small Negro section called Roundtop during the depths of the Depression. There was always food, and there was always clothing. I had no sense of being poor or any anxiety about money. If my mother ever worried about money, she never let on to me. At our house, not only was there food and furniture and all the rest, there was even a baby grand piano that my mother would play sometimes. My father had bought it for her for an anniversary. And there was a cleaning lady, Mrs. Turner, who came every week. She was very religious and would not tell lies. Once when the phone rang and my mother didn't feel like being bothered, she told Mrs. Turner, "If it's for me, tell her I'm not here." So she told the caller, "Mrs. Wilkins does not feel like being molested." We called her Saint Turner.

In addition to the furniture and the cleaning lady, the house harbored, but barely contained, an enormously vigorous woman whom I called Gram. She was my mother's mother. She took care of me when my mother was at work and did the woman's work around the house. My father's tuberculosis kept him away. It was lonesome without him.

My father was not a big man. He stood five foot nine and weighed 140 at most. He was very neat and well-groomed, and his mind, according to those who knew him well, was as fastidious as his wardrobe. He had been business manager of a black weekly newspaper in Kansas City, the *Kansas City Call*, until he was stricken—when he was twenty-eight and I was one. He entered the state tuberculosis sanitarium at Springfield, about a hundred miles south of Kansas City. Occasionally during those three years when he was away, my grandfather would drive us down to see him.

My grandfather was a preacher. He pastored an African Methodist Episcopal church in Kansas City, Kansas, across a viaduct over the stockyards from which there emanated an incredible stench. He was taller than my father and shorter than my uncle Roy—maybe about five ten. He had a large stomach and wore a key chain across his vest with a big cross hanging from it. He gave me dollars on my birthday equaling my age. I recall that my father disliked him very much.

As far as I can tell, my grandfather was born in Holly Springs, Mississippi. In later years that fact was to be of some small comfort to me when street blacks would challenge the validity of my blackness. I could always summon up my "old country" connection as some token of authenticity. My grandfather's father was a man named Asberry Wilkins. He must have been born in slavery or close to it. Anyway, he was wise enough to have become in the 1890s somebody who was respected—in the ways that blacks were then respected by whites in such Mississippi towns. The town fathers gave him the only honorific title bestowed on blacks in those days. They called him "Uncle Asberry."

Grandpa was about twenty near the turn of the century when lynching blacks was not an uncommon occurrence in Mississippi. He was walking down a road one day when a white man came along driving a wagon. As was the custom in that place then, the white man demanded that Grandpa get off the road. For some reason, Grandpa didn't feel like getting off the road and he didn't. So the white man hit him with his horsewhip. Grandpa grabbed the whip, pulled the white man off the wagon and beat the shit out of him.

As a result of that, the town fathers of Holly Springs went to my great grandfather and said to him:

"Uncle Asberry, you're a good nigger and we like you. But your boy Willie is a crazy nigger and if it wasn't for you, we'd have killed him by now. If you don't get him out of town by sundown, we will." By sundown, the man who was to become the Reverend William De Witt Wilkins was on his way to St. Louis, Missouri, where he was to marry a woman named "Sweetie" Mayfield Edmonson. In the years between 1901 and 1905, bad Willie and his wife Sweetie had three children, a son Roy, a daughter Armeda and a son Earl.

Soon after the birth of my father, Earl, in 1905, Sweetie Wilkins died, and her sister Elizabeth came down from St. Paul, Minnesota, for the funeral and took all three of the children back home, where she and her husband, Sam Williams, a sleeping-car porter, raised them and sent them all to the University of Minnesota. Men who worked on the railroad in those days were the backbone of the black middle class. Sam Williams provided the Wilkins children with a modest, but stable and wholesome childhood. When the boys became old enough, they too went to work serving white people on the railroad. It was good employment for black youngsters in those days.

Roy and Earl finished the University of Minnesota—Roy in 1923 and Earl in 1926. Their sister, Armeda, who had become a Christian Scientist somewhere along the way, contracted pneumonia and died while she was still in college. When Roy finished Minnesota, he went to Kansas City to work for the *Call*, and when his little brother finished college a few years later, Roy had prepared a job in the business department of the paper for him. Roy was six feet tall and Earl was smaller. They were jaunty, well dressed, and adored each other. Their wives laughed at their devotion and called them "big Jesus and little Jesus."

The *Call* was not the only place where Roy had made a place for Earl. While he was in college, Roy began dating a Minnesota coed from Minneapolis named Marvel Jackson. The daughter of another railroad man, Madison Jackson—a dining-car waiter on the Northern Pacific—Marvel was light-skinned, had dark flashing eyes, a warm generous personality and quick, supple mind. It was heavy romance and neither doubted that it would lead to marriage. Sometime after his courtship with Marvel had become serious, Roy took his little brother on the long streetcar ride from Nicollet Avenue in St. Paul over to 2003 S. Franklin in Minneapolis. There, in the bosom of the

Jackson family was another light-skinned, dark-eyed and brilliant girl named Helen Jackson.

The Jacksons thought well of themselves and their station. Or at least Amy Wood Jackson, the mistress of 2003 S. Franklin, did. She had been born the eleventh of thirteen children of a pair of former slaves just ten years "after surrender," as the old people used to say. She was a small, extremely pretty caramel-colored woman with long, soft hair and the flashing eyes that all of her daughters would someday inherit. Farm life in rural Virginia held few attractions for her, and she set out on an independent journey that was to include the friendship of the great black intellectual W.E.B. DuBois. Dr. DuBois has described the shock of intuition he felt when he came upon her as an eighteen-year-old servant in the house of some white people in Connecticut. She was beautiful, so he talked to her and found out that she had a splendid mind. In time he asked her to marry him, but she rejected his proposal because she thought he was too old for her. Later in a book called *Dusk of Dawn*, DuBois wrote that it was a tragedy that such a fine person should have to spend her life serving white people. She finally settled down as a teacher with an eighth-grade education in a school for native American children in the Dakota country.

It was there in South Dakota that she met Madison Jackson, who was then both "running on the road" and also reading law between the meals he served to travelers in the dining cars on the trains of the Great Northwest. After reading for the bar in South Dakota, he took the examination and became the first black to be admitted to the bar there. But then, as I once told George McGovern, he was dismayed to find that there was no pool of potential clients for him there. (McGovern didn't laugh, but then, McGovern wasn't laughing at very much in 1973.) So, Madison Jackson kept on serving white people on the train, and when he married Amy Wood, they moved to Minneapolis, where there was a great state university and he could educate his children inexpensively.

Though he was a very idealistic man, Madison Jackson had a quite practical side to his nature. When he moved to Minneapolis, he wanted a good solid house that would be sturdy over the years as his family grew. The one he found back then before 1905 in Minneapolis was on the south side of town in an otherwise all-white neighborhood. Though Madison Jackson and his family were light-skinned Negroes, the neighbors were discomforted by this new family, but they were