

With a New Preface, Introduction, and Notes by

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

Our Nig;

or, Sketches from the
Life of a Free Black

HARRIET E. WILSON

at up most of the night reading and pondering the enormous significance of Harriet Wilson's novel, *Our Nig*. It is as if we'd just discovered Phillis Wheatley—Langston Hughes. . . . She represents a similar vastness of heretofore unexamined experience, a whole new layer of time and existence in American life and literature." —Alice Walker

OUR NIG;

or,

*Sketches from the
Life of a Free Black,*

In A Two-Story White House, North.

SHOWING THAT SLAVERY'S SHADOWS
FALL EVEN THERE.

by "OUR NIG."



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This edition of
Our Nig
is dedicated to
Pauline Augusta Coleman Gates
and
Henry Louis Gates, Sr.

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In Memory
of
Marguerite Elizabeth Howard Coleman,
and
Gertrude Helen Redman Gates

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David A. Curtis, Director of Research for the Yale Black Periodical Fiction project, devoted several weeks in September and October 1982 to archival research in Massachusetts and New Hampshire, research that helped me to confirm and supplement the initial facts about Harriet E. Wilson I had gathered in the summer of 1982. David Curtis's contribution to the rediscovery of *Our Nig* is major.

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Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
New Haven

PREFACE TO THE THIRD EDITION

The authentication of Harriet Adams Wilson as an African American woman and the author of the novel *Our Nig* (1859) generated a surprising amount of interest among both scholars and writers and in the popular press when it was announced in 1982. From *The New York Times* to *People* magazine, a surprising number of people seemed fascinated that a novel could have been written and published by a black woman before the Civil War, ignored almost completely for well over a century, and then, quite by accident, be rediscovered, authenticated, and added to the canon of American literature. Today, twenty years after I discovered Harriet Wilson's identity, *Our Nig* is regularly taught in literature classes, and has been canonized by its inclusion in the *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* as well as other anthologies.

The reaction to the text among black women authors was especially gratifying. Ann Petry, author of *The Street* (1946), one of the signal works of American naturalism, wrote that reading Wilson's novel "affected me to the point of tears. Everyone, everywhere," she continued, "should read *Our Nig*." Alice Walker confessed that she "sat up most the night reading and pondering the enormous significance of Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig*. It is as if we'd just discovered Phillis Wheatley—or Langston Hughes." Maya Angelou hailed Wilson's recovery as the literary analogue for black women writers of Alex Haley's quest to find his African "roots." And even

Preface to the Third Edition

Ralph Ellison, generally skeptical about the role of the slave narratives in the development of the African American novel, was moved to write about Harriet Wilson, pointing to her use of “the conventions of sentimental fiction [to demonstrate] conclusively that fictional forms were at least as important in determining *how* we write, *what* we write as were the slave narratives.” Wilson’s existence, Ellison continued, “confirms my suspicion that there was more ‘free floating’ literacy available to Negroes” before the Civil War “than has been assumed.”

The curiously broad attention paid to the recovery of *Our Nig* reflected growing interest in the writings of women, generally, and of African American women, more specifically, largely as a result of the then-nascent field of Women’s Studies and the growing interest among black and white feminist scholars in this body of work. The mere fact of Wilson’s—and her novel’s—existence generated further research in nineteenth-century black women’s literary history, leading ultimately to the publication of the monumental forty-volume *Schomburg Library of Nineteenth-Century Black Women Writers*, published by Oxford University Press. Over the past two decades, republication of these and other works has led to the publication of a plethora of scholarly essays and books about the lives and works of nineteenth-century black women writers.

Since *Our Nig*’s republication in 1983, new details about Wilson’s early life have been brought to light by the scholarship of Barbara A. White. White has identified the fictional Belmont family, to whom the novel’s protagonist was indentured, as the family of Nehemiah Hayward, “an established Milford farming family.” I have included the results of White’s

Preface to the Third Edition

research as an afterword to this edition. In addition, the scholar R. J. Ellis has identified several of Wilson's epigraphs, which were not identified in the first edition. These have been included in the notes to the text.

Despite a wealth of new research and scholarship in African American women's literary history over the past twenty years, Harriet Wilson's *Our Nig* remains the first novel published by a black woman, and the first novel published in this country by an African American. The recent discovery and authentication of Hannah Crafts' manuscript of her unpublished novel, *The Bondwoman's Narrative*, thought to have been written between 1857 and 1860, continues to confirm Ralph Ellison's suspicion was correct: a remarkable degree of "free floating" literacy was indeed available to more free blacks and former slaves in antebellum America than we once could have imagined. For them, curiously enough, the will to power—the will to be truly free—was, of all things, the will to write, the will to testify that they endured, despite the odds. And among these pre-Civil War testaments to the human spirit, none is more poignant and compelling than is the saga of Harriet Wilson's heroine, Alfrado.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr.
Cambridge, MA
February 4, 2002

Introduction

In offering to the public the following pages, the writer confesses her inability to minister to the refined and cultivated, the pleasure supplied by abler pens. It is not for such these crude narrations appear. Deserted by kindred, disabled by failing health, I am forced to some experiment which shall aid me in maintaining myself and child without extinguishing this feeble life.

The experiment undertaken for financial reasons was a book whose central theme is white racism in the North as experienced by a free black indentured servant in antebellum days: a subject that might have been highly controversial among white abolitionists and free blacks who did not wish to antagonize their white benefactors. Nonetheless, Harriet E. Adams Wilson asked her "colored brethren" to "rally around me a faithful band of supporters and defenders," and to purchase her book so that she might support herself and her child.

Just five months and twenty-four days after the publication of *Our Nig*, the Amherst, New Hampshire, *Farmer's Cabinet* dated February 29, 1860, included among its obituaries the following item:

In Milford, 13th inst [ant], George Mason, only son of H. E. Wilson, aged 7 yrs. and 8 mos.

According to his death certificate, George Mason Wilson succumbed to "Fever" on February 15, 1860. Described as the child of Thomas and Harriet E. Wilson, he was probably named in honor of George Mason, the prominent Revolutionary-era Virginia planter and statesman who opposed slavery. The "color" of the child is listed as "Black."

INTRODUCTION

*Though I've no home to call my own,
My heart shall not repine;
The saint may live on earth unknown,
And yet in glory shine.*

*When my Redeemer dwelt below,
He chose a lowly lot;
He came unto his own, but lo!
His own received him not.*

—HARRIET E. WILSON, CIRCA 1852

*I sincerely appeal to my colored brethren
universally for patronage, hoping that they
will not condemn this attempt of their sister
to be erudite, but rally around me a faithful
band of supporters and defenders.*

—HARRIET E. WILSON, 1859

On the eighteenth day of August 1859, at the Clerk's office of the District Court of Massachusetts, Mrs. Harriet E. Wilson entered the copyright of her novel, a fictional third-person autobiography entitled *Our Nig; or, Sketches from the Life of a Free Black, In A Two-Story White House, North. Showing That Slavery's Shadows Fall Even There*. Printed for the author by the George C. Rand and Avery company, the novel first appeared on September 5, 1859. In a disarmingly open preface Mrs. Wilson states her purpose for publishing *Our Nig*:

Introduction

The death certificate of George Mason Wilson establishes that "Mrs. H. E. Wilson"—the name that appears on the copyright page of the first edition of *Our Nig* and in the *Farmer's Cabinet* death notice—was a black woman, apparently the first to publish a novel in English. Ironically, George's death certificate helped to rescue his mother from literary oblivion. His mother wrote a sentimental novel, of all things, so that she might become self-sufficient and regain the right to care for her only son; six months later, her son died of that standard disease, "fever"; the *record* of his death, *alone*, proved sufficient to demonstrate his mother's racial identity and authorship of *Our Nig*. These curious historical events could easily have formed part of the plot of a sentimental novel. That Harriet Wilson, moreover, dared to entitle her text with the most feared and hated epithet by which the very humanity of black people had been demeaned adds to the list of ironies in her endeavor.

With this audacious act of entitlement, Harriet Wilson became most probably the first Afro-American to publish a novel in the United States, the fifth Afro-American to publish fiction in English (after Frederick Douglass, William Wells Brown, Frank J. Webb, and Martin R. Delany), and along with Maria F. dos Reis, who published a novel called *Ursula* in Brazil in 1859, one of the first two black women to publish a novel in any language. Despite their importance to the Afro-American literary tradition, however, Mrs. Wilson and her text seem to have been ignored or overlooked both by her "colored brethren universally" and by even the most scrupulous scholars during the next one hundred and twenty-three years, for reasons as curious and as puzzling as

Introduction

they are elusive, reasons about which we can venture rather little more than informed speculation.

Reconstructing the life and times of Harriet E. Wilson is as challenging as it is frustrating. While there remains no questions as to her race or her authorship of *Our Nig*, we have been able to account for her existence only from 1850 to 1860. Even her birthdate and date of death are unknown.

The first record of the woman who through marriage would become "Mrs. H. E. Wilson" is the 1850 federal census of the state of New Hampshire. This document lists one "Harriet Adams" (H. E. Wilson's maiden name) as living in Milford, New Hampshire. Her age is said to be "22" and her race is described as "Black" (the choices were "White," "Black," and "Mulatto"). Harriet Adams's birthplace is listed simply as "New Hampshire." If these statements are correct, then Miss Adams was born a free black in 1827 or 1828.

This birthplace and birth date, however, are problematic for several reasons. According to the 1860 Boston federal census, Mrs. Harriet E. Wilson was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, in 1807 or 1808 (if the age of fifty-two recorded by the data collector was accurate). Again, as in the 1850 census, she is described as "Black." We have found no other black women listed in either Hillsborough County, New Hampshire (where Milford is located), or in Boston, where the author of *Our Nig* registered her copyright on August 18, 1859.

A strong reason for pursuing the leads in the 1860 federal census is that the novel itself asserts that its author lived in

Introduction

Massachusetts at the time it was written, namely 1859, as internal evidence suggests. In the final chapter of *Our Nig*, where the narrator abandons the mask of storyteller, and, in her own voice, appeals to the reader for sympathy and support, the text reads as follows: "She passed into the various towns of the State she lived in, then into Massachusetts."

If Harriet E. Adams Wilson's place and date of birth remain shaky, we are on firmer ground in the decade between 1850 and 1860. Harriet Adams, in 1850, lived with a white family in Milford, New Hampshire, the family of Samuel Boyles. (Boyles, a white fifty-year-old carpenter—according to the 1850 census—is fifty-two in the 1860 census; similarly, his birthplace has shifted from "Vermont" in 1850, to "Massachusetts," suggesting that discrepancies in census data were common even among stable and middle-class white Americans.) Since the Boyleses had four resident adult nonfamily members living with them, according to the 1860 census—three of whom are described as "Spinsters"—we can surmise that they rented rooms to boarders and possibly were remunerated by the county for sheltering the aged and disabled, probably on a regular basis.

One year later, in 1851, according to records at the Milford Town Clerk's Office, Harriet Adams married Thomas Wilson. This information was "returned by the Rev. E. N. Hidden" in April 1852, along with information about a dozen or so other marriages. The Reverend Hidden, a thirty-eight-year-old white Congregational clergyman, according to the 1850 census, dated the marriage as October 6, 1851, at Milford, New Hampshire. Thomas Wilson's "residence" is listed as "Virginia," and Harriet Adams's as

Introduction

“Milford.” Incidentally, the church’s marriage records, which could have provided more information, were destroyed by fire.

In late May, or early June 1852, George Mason Wilson was born, the first and apparently only child of Harriet E. Adams and Thomas Wilson. (Of Thomas Wilson, we know no vital statistics. A brief narrative of the escape of a “Tom Wilson” from New Orleans to Liverpool was published in the *Liverpool Inquirer* on February 28, 1858. This narrative, however, does not overlap in any way with *Our Nig* or the three letters in its Appendix.) We know the child’s birth date, his race, and his parents’ identity from his 1860 death certificate. His birth date was approximately nine months after Thomas and Harriet married.

George Mason Wilson was born in Goffstown, New Hampshire, just a few miles from Milford, where his parents were married. In Goffstown was located the Hillsborough County Farm, which was established in 1849. One of the letters appended to *Our Nig* states that, abandoned by her husband, the author of *Our Nig* was forced—after “days passed; weeks passed”—to go to the “County House,” where she gave birth to a child.

The 1855 *Boston City Directory* listed a “Harriet Wilson, Widow,” at 7 Robinson Alley. Two “Harriet Wilsons” appeared in the *Boston City Directory* of 1856. One listing designates a “widow,” who lived at 4 Webster Avenue, the other a “dressmaker,” who lived or worked at 19 Joy Street. These “Harriet Wilsons” may, or may not, be the same person. In each successive *Boston City Directory*, an annual publication similar to contemporary telephone directories,

Introduction

only one Harriet Wilson appeared between 1857 and 1863: the widow who remained at Webster Avenue.

This widow, according to the 1860 Boston census, was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, and is listed as "52" years of age. The census describes her as "Black," and living in the home of Daniel and Susan Jacobs, ages thirty-eight and thirty-one, respectively. The census lists Mr. Jacobs's profession as "mariner."

Harriet E. Wilson registered the copyright of *Our Nig* at the District Clerk's Office at Boston on August 18, 1859. Because New Hampshire had had its own District Clerk's Office since 1789, and because the office in Boston served most, if not all, of Massachusetts, it is reasonable to assume that Harriet E. Wilson was a resident of Massachusetts by 1859, and was separated from her son, whom she had been forced to foster to another family because of her desperate financial condition. Since the novel was printed for the author, rather than "published" by a commercial house, and since other Massachusetts printers would have been capable of producing *Our Nig*, the fact that she selected the George C. Rand and Avery company of Boston reinforces speculation that by 1859 Mrs. Wilson lived in or near that city.

Many of these facts about H. E. Wilson's life that have been drawn from public documents correspond dramatically to assertions about the life of the author of *Our Nig* that were made by three acquaintances who endorsed her novel, in the seven-page Appendix that follows Chapter XII. When brought together, these facts leave no doubt that the author

Introduction

of *Our Nig*, who signed her copyright as “Mrs. H. E. Wilson,” and Harriet E. Adams Wilson, are the same person. But another source of confirmation is the plot of *Our Nig*—described as autobiographical by her supporters—which parallels major events of Mrs. Wilson’s life that we have been able to verify.

Let us first analyze the statements found in the text’s Appendix.

Margaretta Thorn, whose letter is entitled “To the Friends of Our Dark-Complexioned Brethren and Sisters, This Note Is Intended,” is the source of the little that we know about the author’s childhood. She has “known the writer of this book for a number of years,” she testifies, and therefore is uniquely able to “add my testimony to the truth of her assertions.” Harriet Wilson, “the writer of this books,” she repeats as she concludes her first paragraph, “has seemed to be a child of misfortune.” Harriet’s childhood apparently was less than ideal: early on, she was “deprived of her parents, and all those endearing associations to which childhood clings.” She was hired out to a family “calling themselves Christians,” Margaretta Thorn continues, adding parenthetically that may “the good Lord deliver me from such.” This family put her to work “both in the house and in the field,” allegedly ruining her health by unduly difficult work. “She was indeed a slave, in every sense of the word,” she continues, “and a lonely one, too.”

Harriet’s health had been impaired since she was “eighteen,” Margaretta Thorn continues, and “a great deal of the time has been confined to her room and bed.” This protracted illness forced some authorities, she suggests, to