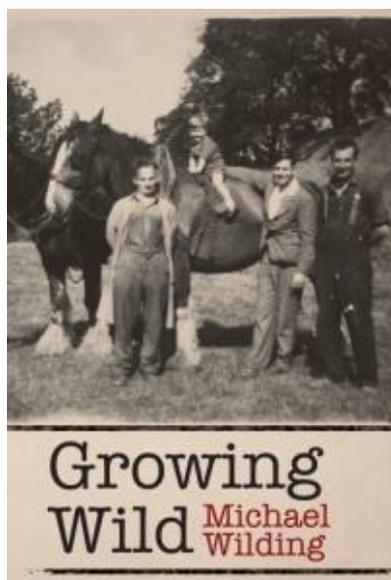


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Book Review

Michael Wilding, *Growing Wild*.
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A Portrait of the Artist as a Wild Man: Michael Wilding's *Growing Wild*

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In 1963, Michael Wilding left Oxford for Sydney, moving from an imperial center of British education to a far-flung colonial outpost beyond the daily reach of *The Times*, bringing with him “a generalised left wing politics” and “a working class resentment of exclusion from privilege” (161). In addition, his intellectual baggage contained a firm decision to become a writer. It was Wilding who would “in the smithy of his soul” help forge the literary conscience of the nation whose renowned man of letters he was to become.

Growing Wild is a memoir which reads like a *Künstlerroman* in postmodernist style, tracing the trajectory of intellectual awakening and artistic development of the protagonist as he negotiates relationships with his family and the politics and history of both his native and adoptive countries. Wilding's memoir picks up where Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* leaves off the protagonist—in self-exile after he has left a restrictive environment for a freedom to become an artist, a writer. It begins in epic fashion, *in medias res* or “Among Leavisites” rather, landing the protagonist in the midst of F. R. Leavis's acolytes at University of Sydney's English Department and then, in broken chronology, takes the reader back to the first words on the slate in the English Midlands.

Not only is his memoir complementary to his fiction, which extensively draws on autobiographical material, but Wilding writes *Growing Wild* in the style which his best prose is written in—a dynamic, ironic, satirical, observant, humorous, vivid and informed narration invigorated by insightful digressions and relevant dialogues, and interspersed with intertextuality, revealing an inquisitive, alert, educated and non-conformist mind at work behind it. Indeed, Wilding has a metafictional dialogue with himself on how a memoir is to be written, which technique should be adopted and in his ever unique way opts for the non-conventional. Admitting the unreliability of memory, so crucial to the intended genre, he nevertheless proceeds with what he has, those brief illuminations and “silent vignettes” (70)

masterfully translated into the written text by means of “that duplicity of the English language, which disturbed [him] in [his] quest for certainty, and came to delight [him] in [his] literary practice” (85).

Versatile and prolific, Michael Wilding, an author, literary critic, editor and publisher, to mention just a few areas he has left his mark in, comes to be appreciated in this memoir chiefly through his skills of keen observation, superb story-telling and ingenious literary criticism. “Preface” outlines key issues which are directly approached or indirectly discussed in the memoir but also appear as critical thematic concerns of his fiction. He starts with the issue of identity, claiming “a sort of Australianness as well as Englishness” (ix) and asks “how important is this search for one’s national identity, one’s defining ethnicity” (x). However, the issue of class is found to be of paramount importance for him throughout his life, from the troubling school forms asking for “father’s occupation” to the academic freedom to analyze a particular text from the previously neglected class perspective. Ensuing from the previous two is the question of belonging, and Wilding attempts to rise above them all by being a writer, “[t]ranscending mere nationality,” being “[a] citizen of the world” (xi). It is the pursuit of writing and the pursuit of literature in earnest which have always been the primary interests of Wilding. Perhaps the best early pictorial indication of this is shown by a photo from prep school where all children are dressed up as characters from *Alice in Wonderland*, except him. He is standing up reading from a book, “preparing for [his] own future” (90).

Chapters titled “Slate,” “On the Edge of the Country,” “Midlanders,” “Grammar School,” “Oxford” and “Ten Good Years” show a master story-teller at work as he offers an intimate glimpse of an English village in the West Midlands at the “forgotten frontier” (41) in the late 1940s and early 1950s; depiction of a “life of structured insecurity” (89), milk boys, PE and showers in grammar school, which all led him to “reject failures of the body and live in the head. Rebelliously” (94); exposure to the conformist and conventional environment at Oxford as he reveals its provinciality and the closed world of colleges and university. It was at that point he adopted what he calls “the writer’s solution” (149), turning one’s disappointments into fiction. He did it just in time for “ten good years” to unfold in Australia which was to take him to the forefront of one of the most interesting decades in Australian literary, academic, political and public life. It was one that featured the pub culture of the Sydney Push, the enthusiasm of the Balmain readings, the ingenious project of the *Tabloid Story*, and the introduction of courses on Australian literature and creative writing into the curriculum of Sydney University.

What shines most brightly in this memoir is its writer’s inquisitive mind, innovative as much as interested in the old, neglected and forgotten. It is a mind curious about the history of things, background stories, reasons why things are as they are and how they can be improved. Examples abound but a few will suffice in providing a foretaste of that delicious feast this memoir offers. Very early on, Wilding wonders about “the village school without a village” about the church without the village and writes almost a short essay about “the village that was not there” and possible reasons for it (40-41). On another occasion, it is a canon-ball from the Civil Wars, now used to hold back the wooden gate, which prompts a reflection on the disunity of Worcester, typical of so much of the United Kingdom. Years later, the same relic provided him with an introduction to the essays on the writers of the English revolution. Furthermore, with his “literary solution” (190) and his interest in expatriate writers with whom he could relate to, Wilding spearheaded the revival of critical interest in Australian short-story writers before Henry Lawson. Not only did he fight for the assertion of new

writing but he fought tooth and nail against the nationalist agenda for the reassertion of their significance and incorporation into Australian literary tradition in the same way he fought “unshaven, sockless and shoeless” (282) before professor Dame Leoni Kramer for the introduction of a creative writing course.

In chapters titled “The Fiction of Instant Experience,” “Writing Humour” and “Writing My Campus Novel” Wilding dons the mantle of a literary critic and discusses themes and techniques he employs in his writing and those of his contemporaries whose “lives, careers and aspirations no longer seemed expressible by the traditional narratives” (219). He seems particularly engaged when writing short critical pieces on his own novels and actually offering a categorization of comedy worthy of inclusion in a dictionary of literary terms, such as the comedy of embarrassment, the comedy of paranoia and conspiracy, and the comedy of over-interpretation. Indeed, he reveals that the first piece he sold commercially was called “Miserrimus” and appeared on April Fool’s day, 1960. Comedy is also chosen as a means to depict representative episodes and situations from the reality of university life which he exposes in his campus novel, written after his retirement naturally.

When embarking upon the task of reading a memoir of a public intellectual, the mouth of the reader might water in expectation of intimate gossip, juicy details from life of fellow public intellectuals, scandals and an assortment of inappropriate behaviours. Those engaging this work will not be disappointed in that respect, being entertained by accounts of humorous escapades, embarrassing details and idiosyncrasies of renowned figures. However, Wilding never does to others what he does not do to himself first.

In addition, whatever is recounted in a particular chapter, what stands out in this memoir is the writer’s broader picture in mind, that, coming from “a family of runaways and escapees” (x), his path has always involved the crossing of boundaries, his attitude always being the one of inclusion and his stance that of relentless non-conformism. Moreover, what is most conspicuously on display in his memoir is Wilding’s capability of bringing to life whatever is touched by his creative mind—a new course, a new mode of writing, alternative ways of publishing, new genres, forgotten authors, and even something as inanimate as concrete buildings at the University of Sydney campus trying to draw apart because they are named after a poet and a Vice-Chancellor who later dismissed the poet from the university. His story-telling gift coupled with broad education, extensive reading and keen observation is laced with humour and irony and displayed every time he gives the background on a character or event, or a couple of buildings, as in this case. The suggestion of gossip never diminishes the value.