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IN MEMORY OF WILMER COOPER, 1920-2008

PAUL ANDERSON

As the current issue of *QRT* was being drawn together, we received the sad news that Wilmer Cooper passed away on November 5th. He was 88 years of age and was preceded in death by his wife Emily in 2005. As Hugh Barbour and others in the present issue have documented, Wil made amazing contributions to Quaker institutions, ecumenism, and dialogue over the last half century. Without his vision and organizing work, the face of American Quakerism would be vastly different than it is today, and the world would be the less for it.

As a birthright Conservative Friend, Wil was educated at Olney Friends School and Wilmington College, and he received graduate degrees from Haverford College, Yale Divinity School, and Vanderbilt University. His book, *Growing up Plain*, presents in a winsome way the ethos of the Friends testimonies to simplicity and plain living, and his book, *A Living Faith*, presents an excellent outline of Quaker faith and practice—one of the best available. His other books and essays make enduring contributions to the world of Friends and beyond.

Wil served as administrative secretary of the Friends Committee on National Legislation in the 1950s, and he became the founding dean of the Earlham School of Religion in 1960. In 1998, Wil Cooper received the Alumnus Award for Distinction in Theological Education from Yale Divinity School, and his ability to draw students together from across the Quaker spectrum has made ESR stand out as a singular intersection of Friends among the Quaker educational programs around the world. According to Keith Esch, who shared the eulogy at Wil's memorial service,

From its beginning, ESR has been and is unapologetically Christian and unapologetically Quaker. Growing out of this identity, ESR embraces the universal ministry which holds that each member is uniquely gifted for ministry. This then requires a leadership who are prepared to equip the general membership for their particular ministries.

The stance of the school was often too conservative for those from a more liberal tradition and too liberal for those from the

evangelical tradition. Even so, Wil Cooper never wavered from his commitment to the universal ministry and to the centrality of the living Christ.

Equally and perhaps foundationally, Wil was committed to the unity of the Religious Society of Friends. His vision was that the school would be instrumental in bringing together those from widely disparate views and learn to trust each other, perhaps even to learn from each other.

In looking over his eight contributions to *QRT*, two things stand out: Wil was fully appreciative of the human situation and its limitations, and yet he believed equally strongly in the power of God to transform and guide the individual. His last contribution to *QRT*, “The Search For Unity in Diversity Among Friends” (#90, 1998), best conveys his vision for how Quakers of diverse persuasions and backgrounds might yet be challenged and helped by one another in maintaining dialogue and truthful engagement together. That would be a fitting place to come back to in reflecting upon Wil’s lifetime calling and his enduring contributions among Friends. Commenting on how Wilmer Cooper became a teacher of all he came into contact with, Joshua Brown, pastor of West Richmond Friends Meeting, shared the following tribute:

His teaching and wise counsel affected the lives, vocations and careers of hundreds of students. One of the best Quaker historians and theologians of our time, Wil’s many articles and books have had an immense influence among Friends around the world.... Wil helped to start the Quaker Theological Discussion Group and the journal, *Quaker Religious Thought*, which bring together scholars interested in deep and detailed discussions of historical and theological topics concerning Friends.

Wil served as the representative from Friends United Meeting to the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, from 1969 to 1975. He was very influential in the starting of the Faith and Life Movement among Friends, as well as the New Call to Peacemaking. He served on the boards of Friends University and his alma mater, Wilmington College.

Even in the last months of his life, Wilmer Cooper was seeking to encourage dialogue among Friends, and his contribution to the present issue of *QRT* exemplifies his vision and effort to “explore the meaning and implications of our Quaker faith and experience through discussion and publication.” Through the institutions he founded and served, the writings he produced, and the lives he touched, his vision continues. Thank you, Wil, for your contributions and encouragement, and for your life and faithfulness, we thank the Lord!