

LETTER

William Richard Wilson (1737–1808)

to William Henry Wilson (1774–1831), his son

William Richard Wilson, member of the Warwickshire gentry and captain in the First Regiment of the Warwickshire Militia, lived near Solihull (Warwickshire), where he married Jane Ann Harries. As their son, William Henry Wilson, prepared to matriculate at Christchurch College, Oxford, the father wrote the following letter, offering advice as his son left home.

Knowle, 1793

As you are now going, my dearest William, to enter on a new scene of life, I think it my duty, as an affectionate parent and an anxious friend, to give you my sentiments on the occasion, which I shall confine to the three following heads—behaviour, expences, and study.

Before I lay down rules for your behaviour, it is necessary for me to undertake the unpleasant task of pointing out what is defective in your present manner. You have, I know not how, acquired a harsh and decisive mode of delivering your sentiments; and the least opposition to them makes you assume an appearance of resentment and passion which I am sure is not in your heart. This, in a great degree, arises from your being very nervous; but it is more particularly on that account that you should keep a check on yourself, for that violent manner is not only unpleasant to others, but is materially hurtful to yourself. Your own observation must have pointed out to you how very prepossessing a modest, diffident manner is in everyone, and more particularly in a young man. A dictatorial manner in argument provokes opposition; and if the parties are tenacious of their opinions, often ends in a quarrel.

Your heart is good, and it always leads you to take the humane side of an argument, but out humanity, like all the rest of our feelings, should be under the guidance of reason—else our virtues will degenerate into weaknesses. When you mix with strangers, you should be very careful of your expressions as well as manner. An unmeaning speech, or a rudeness in behaviour may give an unfavourable impression, which you may never be able to eradicate.

The best general rule that I can give you on this subject is to study attentively those men of your acquaintance whose behaviour or language you hear commended by men of sense in order to imitate them. It will be equally useful to you to remark the behaviour or language of those who are laughed at for their peculiarities in order to discover if you have anything of the same kind in your manner of acting or speaking.

Let me beg you, before you speak, to consider what you wish to say and the clearest method of conveying your meaning. If you are not attentive to this rule, you will either say what you not mean or express yourself so confusedly that you will not be understood. Nothing is so hurtful to clearness of expression as a hasty manner of talking.

As much, very much, of your future, good or ill, in life will depend on your choice of companions at college, be very cautious what persons you admit to your itinerary. It is not enough that a man is lively or agreeable.; you should be well-convinced that he is esteemed by men of discernment for his morals and sense. The idle will always be forcing themselves into your acquaintance, because they have nothing else to do.

As to the article of expence, I wish you to consider that though you will mix with the great, you are not one of them; and though you will associate with the rich, yet you are not rich. I have fairly told you my circumstances and everything they can afford you. I will give with pleasure, but you know, my dearest William, that I neither can or ought to feed extravagances. I would never have you do a mean thing to save money, or ever do an extravagant one in the spending of it. Always dress like a gentleman, but do not throw away money by following the whim of the day. Baubles cost a great deal, and are neither creditable or useful to the possessor. Avoid lending

money, if you can with decency, but never borrow of anyone. That moment you are in debt you cease to be independent. Never game, I conjure you, and the less time or money you spend on bad women the better it will be for your mind and your body.

Your studies will be directed by abler men than I am, but the progresses you make in them must chiefly depend on yourself. Remember that I make a great effort in order to give you the best means of improvement, and it will be cruelty to me, and to yourself, if you do not make the best use of them.

If a reasonable proportion of your time is not devoted to study, it must be spent in amusement, which amusement will not improve your mind and will certainly exhaust your purse. As you have a talent for drawing, I wish you would spend some time in the cultivation of it. And if you feel an inclination to learn any musical instrument, it may very innocently fill up some of your vacant hours.

To conclude, I send you to college an undebauched, dutiful, and affectionate youth. God grant that I may see you leave it an accomplished and a virtuous man. Should the event prove otherwise, I trust the Almighty will, in His mercy, spare me the sight. Never let it be out of your remembrance, my dear, dear, William, that the happiness or misery of you dearest mother¹ and myself depend on your conduct.

Warwickshire County Records Office, CR 71 / 26 (1793).

¹ Jane Harries Wilson