

The Journals and Letter Books of R.C. Wyllie: A minor historical mystery

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Robert Crichton Wyllie (1798–1865) was an outstanding figure in the politics of mid-19th Century Hawaii. He was fiercely dedicated to preserving the independence of the Hawaiian Kingdom and its native dynasty, and he was prepared to devote his private fortune to this end. In his 20 years as Hawaiian Foreign Minister, from 1845 to 1865, he was the intimate of three Hawaiian kings. He was widely travelled and highly literate and came to Hawaii with cosmopolitan interests and connections. He was also a methodical diarist, and the disappearance of his personal diary for a critical period in the history of Hawaii has deprived Hawaii of a valuable part of its historical record. The present writer, currently preparing a biography of Wyllie, has a particular interest in Wyllie's diaries and letter books, and believes that a review of what is known of them and the circumstances surrounding their disappearance is long overdue.

Wyllie had a varied and interesting career. He was born in Scotland, attended the University of Glasgow, and qualified as a physician, intending to practice in Russia under the patronage of a namesake who was physician to the Czar. He was practising as a physician in Valparaiso in 1818, then set up in practice in Coquimbo. After a few years in Chile, he abandoned medicine for commerce in association with a trader in Lima. On returning from a trading voyage to Calcutta in 1826, he went into partnership with a merchant in Mazatlan in Mexico. When he returned to England in 1830, he was a millionaire, but, too young to retire, he went first into partnership with a London merchant and then set up his own counting house. By 1842 he had become a prominent London clubman and financier. In that year he left for the United States and Mexico to

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look into the dubious future of various American bonds on behalf of some London investors and banks, and in particular to see what could be done to salvage the millions of pounds that British investors had sunk in Mexican bonds and to salvage his own substantial investments in both countries. He travelled extensively in the United States and reached Mexico in early 1843 where he prepared and later published a study of Mexican finances. After meeting the notorious Santa Anna, he hit upon a scheme to obtain a large tract of land in California in the Sacramento valley with the cooperation of General Micheltorina, Governor of California.¹ If he had been successful he would have attempted to use it as the nucleus of a British colonization scheme. In Mazatlan, where he was conducting these negotiations, he met his friend General William Miller, whom he had first met in 1818 in Valparaiso, on his way to take up his appointment as British Consul General in Hawaii, and was persuaded to join him as Honorary Secretary.² They arrived in Honolulu in February 1844. When General Miller was obliged to hasten to Tahiti to deal with a critical political situation there, he left Wyllie in Honolulu as British Proconsul, an office he filled until March 1845, when he became Foreign Minister to Kamehameha III. He spent the rest of his life in Hawaii as Hawaiian Foreign Minister.

Wyllie intended that his life should be the subject of a biography, and early in his career in Hawaii he was casting about unsuccessfully for a suitable biographer. His personal journal would have been central to such a study, and it may be assumed that he made his Hawaiian entries with a biography very much in mind. His diary was, in fact, a document addressed to his future biographer. He set great store upon it as a definitive record and cited extracts to dispose conclusively of points in dispute. From the use he made of his diary in official dispatches, one may conclude that he did not regard it as a strictly private document, but rather as part of the departmental records.

Most of the quoted extracts are cited with volume and page references but some lack volume reference. Entries range from about two-fifths of a page to several pages.³ Large entries appear to have been the exception. The earliest recorded group of entries, those from volume II, embraces a period from 16 July 1845 to 24 March 1846.⁴ This span of 342 days occupies 165 pages, giving an average entry of just under half a page, but for a part of this group, from 16 July to 27 July, the average entry was just under a page. Assuming this larger average for Wyllie's first years in Honolulu, years no doubt

full of interest, volume I would probably begin early in 1844. This would suggest that Wyllie began a new series of volumes when he reached Honolulu in February of 1844. From 1847 the average entry is rather smaller. For volume III, which embraced the period 1 April 1846 to 1 October 1848, there were 12 entries cited. One, on 11 August on page 337 of this volume, had the highest page reference of the 37 entries quoted.⁵ The diaries would therefore appear to contain at least 337 pages, more likely about 350. The average entry for the whole of volume III, assuming a volume of 350 pages, is approximately two-fifths of a page. The twelve entries cited, extending from 14 May to 11 August, a period of 93 days, occupy 62 pages, giving an average entry of two-thirds of a page. An undated note in the Foreign Office files refers to an entry on page 126 of volume V for 14 June 1852. Assuming 350-page volumes, and an average entry of two-thirds of a page, this would be consistent with the diary reaching volume V about this date. For a group of entries quoted for 1858 with page but no volume references, covering the period 17 September to 20 November, the average entry was also two-thirds of a page.⁶

After 1859, when Wyllie had a serious illness, he had recurrent bouts of poor health, and his diary entries for the last five years of his life would be irregular. There would be periods when he made no entries. For the whole of his stay in Hawaii, therefore, the average entry would be less than two-thirds of a page and probably nearer half a page. At two-thirds of a page for each entry, Wyllie's Hawaiian diaries could amount to as many as 14 volumes, and at the more likely average of half a page daily the total would be about ten. Ten volumes of about 350 pages each is, therefore, a conservative figure tentatively advanced as the probable size of Wyllie's Hawaiian diaries.

Wyllie had kept a diary for many years before he reached Honolulu. An entry when he was on his way to Calcutta in his yacht the *Daule* in 1824 shows that his diary begins at least from that date (2 July 1824), and the context suggests that he had been in the habit of keeping a journal and that this was not the first entry. A reasonable guess would be that he began to keep a diary when he reached Valparaiso some time before 1818, and in addition to the ten volumes that would be expected from 1824 to 1844, assuming the same average entry, there would be several more volumes for the preceding six years. But Wyllie was naturally methodical, and it would have been in keeping with what is known of his passion for written records if he began to keep a diary when he first left Scotland on his travels.

It would be surprising, therefore, to find that the grand total was more than 25 volumes.

Wyllie had a high regard for archival material, and he would not have been niggardly about the quality of his diaries. They were likely to have been of paper of good quality, stoutly bound, possibly in half or quarter leather. He obtained all his stationery and books from Smith Elder of London, but the only two invoices from this firm in the FO & Ex files make no reference to such volumes, and an enquiry to the firm of Smith Elder was unsuccessful. The size of the volumes can only be guessed from the size and usual spacing of Wyllie's writing and his preference for large formats.

Wyllie's letter books form an equally valuable collection. There are only four references to them in his correspondence: the first to a letter dated 24 May 1842 on page 94 of letter book no. 25; the second to a letter dated 19 December 1842 on page 46 of letter book no. 30; a third to a letter the same day on page 43 of the same book; and a fourth to a letter dated 1 February 1843 on page 80 of letter book no. 31. The first three were written when Wyllie was about to leave the United States for Mexico, and the third from Havana while he was on his way to Vera Cruz.⁷ The letter books would therefore appear to contain at least 100 pages each. In the interval between the first two quoted dates, 209 days, Wyllie filled an average of rather more than two pages daily, more if the letter books contained over 100 pages. The period December 1842 to February 1843 filled another book. He would be unlikely to discontinue this practice abruptly in the middle of his investigations. If, therefore, he used letter books at the same rate for the extension of his journey in Mexico, six or seven more letter books would probably have been needed for his year in Mexico, a period of fairly intense activity. Although there are no references to letter books in his correspondence during his Hawaiian years, he could well have continued the practice. His collection of letter books, therefore, amounts to a known 31 volumes, and certainly more, possibly 38, if he used letter books in Hawaii.

These two collections, at least 58 numbered volumes, were items that had a certain value for Wyllie's family and an equal value for the historical record of Hawaii. Why, it may be asked, did Wyllie's executors not take them or for that matter all Wyllie's personal papers into their custody under seal and thus ensure that they were not dispersed, rifled, or destroyed? It was common knowledge that Wyllie set great store upon both letter books and diaries, and the

executors were all educated men, men of standing in the community. They included the Ministers of Finance and Interior, two judges, a lawyer, and a physician.⁸ One of them, Charles de Varigny, the Minister of Finance, became Wyllie's successor in the Foreign Ministry and might have been expected to take a particular interest in the diaries as a record of his predecessor's policies, his personal testament, and to accept a personal responsibility to see that they were protected. But, as far as is known, no steps whatever were taken to protect the diaries, or indeed, any of Wyllie's personal papers.

If Wyllie had left specific directions about the disposal of these records, something might have been done to preserve them. Perhaps he did leave directions, but if so they were not found. He referred in his will to a schedule with instructions for the disposal of certain heirlooms, keepsakes, personal items, and specific benefactions. This would no doubt have included directions about the disposal of his diary and personal papers. Wyllie was too methodical and too much obsessed with the possibility of a biography not to have done so. He gave Varigny to understand that he had prepared such a schedule, but Varigny was unable to find it among Wyllie's papers, although he found the will where Wyllie had said it would be found. Varigny then consulted the diary for a reference to the schedule, and when he found none up to September of 1866, when Wyllie was no longer able to write, he accepted this as satisfactory evidence that no schedule had been prepared. Whether the silence of the journal was sufficient to dispose of the existence of such a schedule is questionable, but it was apparently accepted as conclusive by the executors, for no further search was made among Wyllie's papers. There is, therefore, no record of how Wyllie intended to dispose of his diaries.

Wyllie's nephew and sole heir, Robert Cochrane, who was then in Hawaii, appreciated the importance of the diaries, and had he not committed suicide at an early stage in the protracted probate proceedings, he would unquestionably have made sure the diaries survived.⁹ He was sufficiently concerned about what might happen to them in the short time he lived to direct that all papers and the diaries should be delivered to the King. No attention was apparently paid to this direction, for if the records had reached the King they would have been preserved. Kamehameha V had no reason to destroy or suppress them. They were a record of the reigns of his two predecessors, and he had every reason to treat them with respect. No effort was made to consult any of Wyllie's relatives about his personal papers, and all his personal effects that were thought worth

selling were sold at auction, but it is unlikely that the bound volumes of journals and letter books would have been sold at the auction of Wyllie's library. So conspicuous an item would surely have had some mention in the account of the sale in the *Friend*, in the unlikely event of anyone being interested in at least 20 volumes of an illegible contemporary journal, and more than 31 volumes of equally illegible letters.¹⁰ As a working hypothesis, therefore, it is assumed that the journals, letter books, and all Wyllie's papers referring to his early life remained at Rosebank, Wyllie's residence, where they would be accessible to any prospective buyer inspecting the premises, or to the merely curious. If they were not plundered during this period and remained intact at Rosebank, they would have passed into the possession of Charles Judd, G.P. Judd's son, who acquired Rosebank at the auction of June 1866.¹¹

The only reference to the journals after Varigny's inspection and Wyllie's nephew's direction is a statement by the editor of the *Pacific Commercial Advertiser*, Walter Murray Gibson, in reply to a contributor who signed himself "Maui." He enquired what had happened to Wyllie's journal. Gibson replied:

We are sorry to inform our Maui friend, that according to our information, all the MSS and diary of Mr. Wyllie were destroyed. Mr. Jarrett, for many years the faithful clerk of the Foreign Office, stated four days prior to his death, in conversing upon this subject, that the numerous papers of Mr. Wyllie had been purposely destroyed. He said that Mr. de Varigny, who succeeded Mr. Wyllie as Foreign Minister, was with the latter at his death and took possession of his papers; and that he had strong reasons for destroying the journal, which contained some very compromising records against him when he was Chancellor of the French Legation under Mr. Perrin. Colonel Charles H. Judd, son of G.P. Judd, who occupied the Rosebank premises subsequent upon the death of Mr. Wyllie, had large quantities of old letters and MSS of all kinds, thrown out of doors as rubbish; and the editor of this journal paid natives for picking up papers and scraps of papers, relating to Mr. Wyllie which the weather had not destroyed, and which were strewn on the bank of the stream in the rear of the dwelling. And an effort will be made by and by to make up a biographical sketch of Mr. Wyllie with what documentary relics are at hand.¹²

There is no record that Gibson made any progress with his biographical sketch, and if he succeeded in salvaging any papers from the stream bank they have long since disappeared.

Jarrett's statement appears to dispose of the fate of the diaries and is worth examining closely. If it was correctly reported, for there is nothing to show how Gibson came by it, it charges Varigny with taking possession of property that did not belong to him, not only the journals but other private documents as well, for which he was responsible as executor, and then destroying it, both serious charges

that deserve close scrutiny. To destroy some two dozen stout volumes would have been a formidable physical undertaking, to say nothing of the substantial bulk of Wyllie's papers. The journal was not just a slim volume. It would have required at least a handcart to transport it from Rosebank. It would have been a troublesome task, one not likely to be undertaken lightly, and not without a powerful motive. It would also have been difficult to accomplish discreetly. Yet nothing sufficiently discreditable to explain such a desperate and bothersome enterprise by a man in a public position surfaced while Varigny was Perrin's chancellor, and if anything had come to Wyllie's ears discreditable enough to be worth the trouble of recording in his journal, and sufficiently damaging to Varigny to make him destroy the journals, Wyllie would not have chosen Varigny one of his executors. Varigny was, in fact, his principal executor. It was a position of trust, a trust Varigny had willingly accepted. But to betray this trust by appropriating Wyllie's private journal and his private papers and then destroying them would have been an action altogether inconsistent with what is known of Varigny's character. Jarrett's statement, therefore, cannot be accepted without supporting evidence.

If Jarrett's claim that Varigny destroyed the journals is open to question, what then happened to them and to the letter books? According to Gibson, a substantial quantity of Wyllie's papers were deliberately destroyed. There were many papers, therefore, that Varigny could not have taken into his possession. Were the diaries and letter books among them? Did they too fetch up on the stream bank? By destroying at least some of Wyllie's papers, Charles Judd invited the inference that he would have shown just as little regard for the journals and letter books. Or did he hand them to his father, G.P. Judd, who would naturally be interested in them? Or were the journals plundered while Rosebank stood open? None of these questions can be answered with anything more than conjecture. On purely circumstantial evidence, however, Rosebank would be a logical starting point for future enquiry into what happened to the letter books and journals.

But whoever may have been responsible for destroying or squirrelling away these items, the prime responsibility must ultimately be on the heads of the executors. It was their duty to see that Wyllie's personal papers were handed to Wyllie's heir or heirs intact. The want of a schedule that would have set out precisely what Wyllie wished done with them did not relieve them of this duty. It can only

be hoped that they were not destroyed and that whoever obtained possession of them or even odd volumes from the collection did not destroy them, and that a *Nibelung* hoard of historical treasure may still be stored in some forgotten corner of an attic or storeroom. Meanwhile, what happened to the diaries and letter books must remain a minor historical mystery.

NOTES

- ¹ General Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna (1795–1876) acquired a certain notoriety for his behaviour to the American rebels in Texas, and a greater notoriety for his mismanagement of Mexican affairs during his years as President.
- ² General William Miller (1795–1861) took a prominent part in the revolutions in Chile and Peru that secured their independence, and rose to the rank of Grand Marshall of Peru. He was exiled after the fall of the Inca President Andres Santa Cruz in 1839 and was appointed British Consul General for the Hawaiian Archipelago, the Society Islands, and Pitcairn, in 1843.
- ³ There are 33 extracts from Wyllie's diaries in the Foreign Office and Executive files in the State Archives of Hawaii. Two long additional extracts are in the Judd Collection in the Bernice P. Bishop Museum, one for 15 June 1848 of five pages, and the other for 27 July 1848 of seven and a half pages, both in the hand of Wyllie's clerk Weissflog.
- ⁴ Letter, Robert C. Wyllie to William Miller, 17 April 1847, FO & Ex, AH.
- ⁵ Letter, Robert C. Wyllie to Patrice G. Dillon 19 April 1849 contains 12 entries from vol. 3. A letter of 19 March 1849 contains another entry from the same volume. FO & Ex, AH.
- ⁶ An undated document in the FO & Ex files contains eight extracts for 1858 with page numbers but without volume reference.
- ⁷ Letter, Robert C. Wyllie to Anthony Ten Eyck, U.S. Commissioner, Dispatch no. 30, 26 July 1847, FO & Ex, AH.
- ⁸ Wyllie's executors included the following: Samuel C. Allen, of the firm of Aldrich Walker, Wyllie's agents for his plantation; S.N. Castle, of the firm of Castle and Cooke; Robert Cochrane, his nephew and sole heir; C.R. Bishop; George M. Robertson, Chancellor and Justice; Charles de Varigny, Minister of Finance and his successor as Foreign Minister; John O. Dominis, Governor of Oahu; Charles G. Hopkins, Minister of the Interior; Dr. Ferdinand Hutchison, physician to the King; and Elisha H. Allen, Chief Justice. Allen later obtained leave to withdraw.
- ⁹ Wyllie died on 19 October 1865, but final probate was not granted until 1868. Probate file 2416, AH.
- ¹⁰ An account of the sale of Wyllie's books noted that some brought high prices and that the sale realised \$1300 for about 1000 books, but makes no mention of diaries or letter books, *F*, 1 February 1866.
- ¹¹ G.P. Judd relinquished the office of Secretary of State for that of Minister of Finance when Wyllie was appointed Foreign Minister. Wyllie and Judd were fundamentally incompatible, and the deliberations of Cabinet and Privy Council were distracted by their bickering, until Judd's zeal for annexation to the United States provoked Wyllie and his colleagues as well as the King into forcing his resignation from the Ministry of Finance, the Cabinet, and the Privy Council. Judd would, therefore, have had a certain interest in Wyllie's account of those years of conflict.

¹² William Jarrett (1814-1880) sailed with Charles Wilkes on his voyage of exploration in 1841-1842. He was Wyllie's clerk for some years and was later much befriended by Wyllie. Emil Perrin, Commissioner for France from 1850 to 1860, was rigid-minded and uncompromising in his negotiations with Wyllie over amendments to a humiliating treaty forced on Hawaii in 1839. There were times during the negotiations when Perrin and Wyllie were barely on speaking terms, but relations between Wyllie and Varigny, Perrin's Chancellor, were always friendly, and this cordial relation continued when Varigny became Minister of Finance in 1862. Gibson's reply appeared in *PCA*, 1 October 1881.