

# — hidden — HISTORY

## CELEBRATING NATIONAL POETRY MONTH: THREE POETS AT WILSON

By Kieran McGhee

Throughout Wilson's history, the College has hosted readings and lectures by a number of notable poets. While current alumnae/i may remember hearing Robert Frost and Maya Angelou read their works at Wilson, the 1914 visit by William Butler Yeats might have vanished from memory if it weren't for a small note in the 1915 *Phaethra* student newsletter contained in the college archives.

Simply described as a "known Irish poet" in promotional materials, Yeats held a reading of his works for Wilson students in Thomson Hall. When he spoke on campus, the symbolist poet was 49 years old and already a massive figure in the world of literature. His visit speaks to the strength of Wilson's reputation as a college.

This poetic tradition continued with the 1960 campus visit by the four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize, Robert Frost, who was Wilson's first Given Foundation Distinguished Visitor. The New York-based Irene Heinz and John La Porte Given Foundation had made a \$100,000 gift to Wilson in 1958 to bring "scholars, statesmen, educators and leaders" to campus for lectures and discussions.

Frost not only gave readings of his poems, but also presented a series of lectures to the Wilson community and the public in Laird Hall. He covered a litany of subjects, from poetic style and meter to his thoughts on "hurried reading," which he described as

"merely looking a book over to see whether you want to read it." Frost also hosted two small groups of students in the Norland Hall parlor where the then-Dean of American Poets and Wilson students informally discussed poetry.



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*But I, being poor, have only my dreams;  
I have spread my dreams under your feet;  
Tread softly because you tread on my dreams.*

William Butler Yeats

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Articles on Frost's visit written by the *Billboard* and numerous local papers are stored in the archives.

In 1976 poet, writer, Pulitzer Prize nominee and Medal of Freedom recipient Maya Angelou was a guest speaker at Wilson's Orr Forum. Faye Wilson '77, a member of the Afro-American Society, described her visit in the spring 1976 edition of the *Alumnae Quarterly* as a "rich experience for the combined communities of the College and Chambersburg." Angelou gave a lecture on "African Values in American Life" and read from two of her works, *Oh Pray My Wings Are Gonna Fit Me Well* and *Just Give Me a Cool Drink of Water 'Fore I Diiie*. She also sang spirituals from her childhood and hosted a small group in Laird (now Patterson) Lounge, where she spoke on issues such as her future books and dealing with a family unit. Angelou also met privately with student members of the Afro-American Society.



Current students using Thomson and Laird halls and Norland Parlor may be unaware that Yeats, Frost and Angelou once discussed their poems there. But Wilson's commitment to education enabled those bygone students to have the experience of speaking directly to a four-time winner of the Pulitzer Prize and two of the most celebrated poets of their respective generations.

— For more information on famous campus visitors and college history, visit the Hankey Center's G. Elizabeth Boyd '33 Archives.