

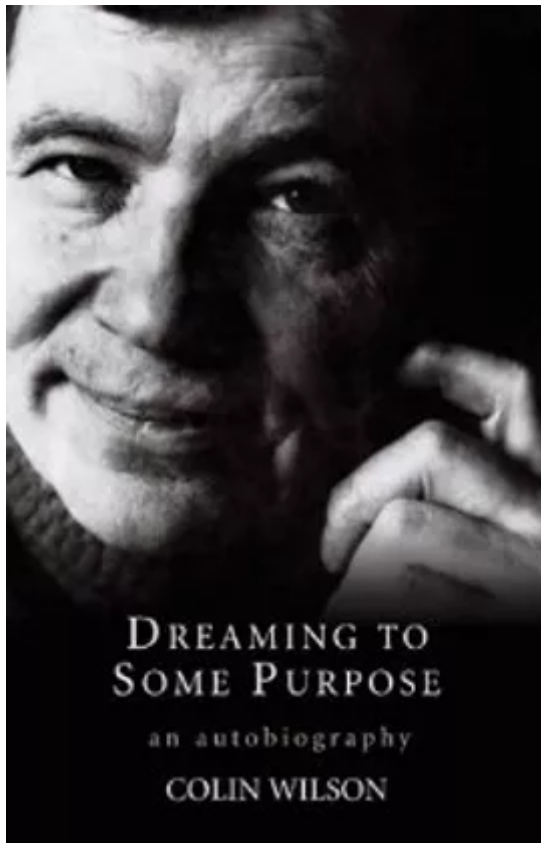
[www.colinwilsonworld.net /dreaming-to-some-purpose](http://www.colinwilsonworld.net/dreaming-to-some-purpose)

The book he was put into the world to write

10-13 minutes

The 'classic book' he was put in the world to write

Interview by Geoff Ward (2004)



How did Wilson arrive at the title of *Dreaming to Some Purpose* for his autobiography, and what was the significance of it?

He said: “When I started thinking about a title for the autobiography I realised that I’d already used the ideal title for another book, *The Strength to Dream* (1962). That’s what I wanted to get at. George Bernard Shaw said: ‘Every dream can become a reality in the womb of time for those who have the strength to dream’. It’s that business of actually being able to dream purposefully, so to speak. It was only after brooding on this for a while that I saw that *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, while far from satisfying me, is more or less the title that says what I want. But on the other hand, one of the chapters of the book is called *Dreaming To Some Purpose*, and you can perfectly well see in that chapter why I’ve called the book that.

“We’re talking, mind you, about individual purpose. You see, if you think of it, *The Outsider* was about Romantics who basically find this world a bit too much for them and who want to escape into some wonderful, ideal world, to what T E Hulme contemptuously called the ‘eternal vapours’, but nevertheless I personally sympathised deeply with the ‘eternal vapours’ because that’s the way we all start off.

“All writers who are worth anything and really get anywhere start off as Romantics who really don’t like the world we’re in and who feel as Omar Khayyam does, they wish they could shatter it to pieces and rebuild it just to the heart’s desire. That’s why Shelley had all these dreams about the future and so on, it’s this desire to reshape the world. The only problem is that reshaping the world requires a much more practical attitude than Shelley had. Shelley tended to be a rather self-indulgent human being and actually wrecked his own life and the lives of a lot of other people.

“What you’ve got to have is a sort of practical attitude which is closer to that of, say, Shaw or William Morris and various other

practical-minded dreamers. Shaw, I'm sure, admired Morris who was not only a complete Romantic, with the long poems of his such as *The Earthly Paradise*, but could also stand up and give a speech to a socialist meeting. I always realised that this is what it's all about.

"When I was in Paris for the first time when I was 19, when I had just come out of the RAF, I went along to this so-called atelier in the Rue de Seine run by Raymond Duncan who was the brother of the famous dancer Isadora. Raymond had come to Paris, made a pair of sandals for himself, and other people saw them and asked him if he could make them some like that, and suddenly it was a business and made him a fortune. He became a millionaire several times during his life and then spent it all again, made huge fortunes. Now Raymond regarded himself basically as a poet and an idealist and when I went along to see him he invited me to move into this place on the Rue de Seine. He said: 'What we are trying to teach people like you is that if you are an idealistic poet, you'd be a far better poet if you can actually mend a leak or do various other practical things'.

"I believed him absolutely totally. It was a conclusion I'd already arrived at, that we must have this practical, down-to-earth spirit, enjoying the real world and real life. I could see what had killed off all these Outsiders was the fact that they'd been Romantics, and they'd been flapping around up there in the ethers, and getting themselves into terrible states, and that actually what they really needed was a far more practical attitude. This was a very deep feeling of mine.

"The proper way to get away from the problem of the Outsider was simply to become more and more practical about it and to finally begin to see that there must be practical down-to-earth

solutions, that the world isn't somehow loaded against artists, and eternity kills them off, and so on, that Dostoevsky is wrong when he says we've got to give God back his entrance ticket because we're in such an appalling world. In point of fact, once you take a practical down-to-earth attitude towards things - once you try dreaming to some purpose – you suddenly begin to see what things really are about. Here is the basis, I suppose, of my optimism.

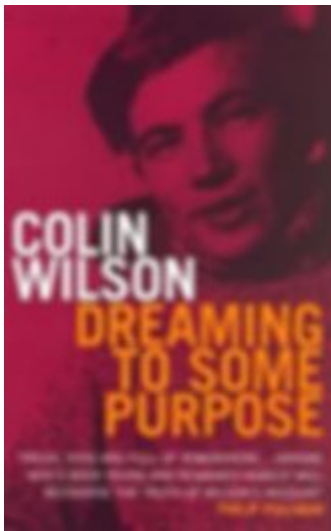
Early in his career Wilson had encountered problems. “Certainly, as far as I'm concerned, it started off very, very difficult. But I can now see it was intended to be very difficult. If Steiner's right in saying ‘never complain about your lot in life because you chose it before you were born’, I can see that before I came into the world I thought ‘OK, now what do I actually want to do? What do I actually want to make myself do? Well, first of all you've got to run into a lot of problems, because of your background and so on, and really grit your teeth and do things determinedly’.

“So, there I was, dumped into a working class background, so that I had to go to work in a factory when I was 16, and I hated that enormously, and then gradually struggling away in the RAF and various other things, having to get married... I nevertheless became more and more cheerful. When I came out of the RAF, I'd been reading a lot of Nietzsche and Thus Spake Zarathustra, but also Rabelais and John Millington Synge, and various others, people who were basically down-to-earth, so that when I re-read Ulysses I no longer felt as I had at first that my ideal was somebody like Stephen Dedalus, the artist. I was much more in sympathy with Buck Mulligan. He was actually based on a character called Oliver St John Gogarty who wrote a superb

poem called Ringsend (1878).”

Spontaneously, Wilson recited the poem:

I will live in Ringsend
With a red-headed whore,
And the fan-light gone in
Where it lights the hall door;
And listen each night
For her querulous shout
As at last she streels in
And the pubs empty out.
To soothe that wild breast
With my old fangled songs
Till she feels it redressed
From inordinate wrongs,
Imagined, outrageous, preposterous wrongs -
Till peace at last comes,
Shall be all I will do
Where the little lamp blooms
Like a rose in a stew,
And up the back garden
The sound comes to me
Of the lapsing, unsoilable,
Whispering sea.



* The 1957 Readers' Union edition of *The Outsider*.

“That really seems to me to be the answer,” Wilson continued. “It’s that practical, down-to-earth business. Once, like Gogarty, you realise that you’ve got to be down-to-earth and not like Stephen, all up in the clouds, full of misery and self-pity, you notice that Stephen throughout *Ulysses* is going around with a superior air, whereas Mulligan seems to be infinitely preferable in every possible way.

“Anyway, once I’d discovered this, once I’d actually got this notion, that that’s what really happens, that’s the way to actually live, then quite suddenly I became a different person. When I came out of the RAF I’d become cheerful, practical, down-to-

earth, all prepared to wander round and be a tramp, and do all kinds of things of that sort, with the absolute certainty that sooner or later I would actually achieve what I wanted to achieve.

“When I first met Joy, and was instantly absolutely charmed by her lovely, sweet, good-tempered smile, I thought ‘My God, she’s the kind of girl that I’ve always wanted’, and then I noticed that she had what I thought was a wedding ring on, and I thought no, no, no point in being sort of all dopey about her, my British training sort of stepped in and said ‘forget it’, but then I discovered that Joy, in fact, was perfectly willing, so to speak. I was absolutely delighted because I’m sure she was one of the things I’d decided I must get before I came into the world, as it were, the ideal kind of person for a writer’s wife.

“But anyway, the point was that I said to Joy ‘I’m a genius and I’m going to become famous’, and Joy said ‘Oh yes’, she said she quite believed me, and I once said to her ‘What would have happened if I hadn’t succeeded and hadn’t got anywhere and done anything?’ and she said ‘I always knew you would’. So it was that kind of practical down-to-earth feeling that made me absolutely certain, so that when *The Outsider* came out and it was an immense overnight success, I wasn’t at all surprised. I’d always known that it would happen.

“But what, of course, I didn’t expect was the terrific backswing after it, the tremendous backlash, and the attacks on me which I found pretty hard going, and then I’d produced some book which I knew to be brilliant and I’d get lousy reviews, or I’d give a lecture tour where it seemed... I could see in America I was having an effect on college audiences a bit like an intellectual Elvis Presley. I’d get these groupies following me around. I thought, how was it possible that someone as brilliant as I am

nevertheless never seems to get anywhere, and I'm always broke?

"It's only recently that I've realised the answer to that question. What I had to do was to push on because if I had become as successful as I thought I should be it would have been terribly bad for me. Suddenly there would have been no weight on the needles. What living in the way that I had lived had done was to keep a weight on the needles and keep me going in a certain direction." (For the relevance of this analogy, see The Weight on the Needles interview on this website).

Wilson continued: "Things were pretty difficult at times, and I wish I'd realised that, you know, basically it was OK, but maybe it wouldn't have been good to realise that basically it was OK. Maybe I would have struggled slightly less hard. Anyway, things have worked out amazingly well and they've worked out, I feel, because I planned it myself in advance. This is the situation at the moment. Here I am, having done a lifetime of this, and having put all this down in the autobiography, in a way I feel the autobiography is the consequence of what I've been doing all my life. It is my life's work. It is, in a way, my classic book, it's what I was put in the world to write. There are still a lot of other things I want to write but that's our business, we're supposed to carry on, we're not supposed to say 'OK well I've done what I came into the world to write, now I can relax'."



* Colin and Joy Wilson in the garden of their home at Gorran Haven, Cornwall.

Photo by Geoff Ward