



Fred Yates



Woodrow Wilson

# A SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP

Writer and broadcaster Eric Robson tells the story of the enduring friendship between the 28th President of the United States and a bohemian artist living in the heart of the Lake District at Rydal

**MAIN PHOTOGRAPHY** PHIL RIGBY **ARCHIVE PHOTOGRAPHY** COURTESY OF CELIA FOX AND HILARY PICKFORD (YATES FAMILY ARCHIVE)

**T**his is the story of an extraordinary transatlantic friendship linking New Jersey in the United States with the hamlet of Rydal in the Lake District through the intertwined lives of two apparently very different characters.

In the American corner was a man who would become the most powerful politician in the world for a time as 28th President of the United States. Woodrow Wilson had the reputation of being a

rather bookish and starchy character – “too intense for his own good” according to his critics. Meanwhile in the English corner we find someone who, on the face of it was a very different chap – the bohemian, rather scruffy artist Fred Yates with his fondness for limericks, riddles and bad jokes.

In July 1906 Yates heard on the local grapevine that Wilson was staying in the area and set out to meet him. They bumped into each other on Pelter Bridge in Rydal. Fred introduced himself as a family man and humble portrait painter and then memorably said “We’re poor but, thank God, not respectable.” It’s a





phrase Woodrow Wilson would dine out on for years. It also set the stamp on a deep and enduring friendship that, in its sheer good humour, survived illness, high office and war.

To understand what inspired that friendship you need a bit of back story. Fred Yates was born in Southampton but in the early 1880s his parents emigrated to California where he took up painting professionally. He trained in Paris and travelled extensively across America and the Far East. In San Francisco he threw himself into the burgeoning bohemian arts scene.

He'd heard of the up and coming Woodrow Wilson long before the meeting at Pelter Bridge. In 1890, newly married, Fred came back to England and established himself as one of the foremost portrait painters in the country. In a long career he painted some 2,000 subjects, among them conductor Sir Henry Wood, Canon Rawnsley - one of the founders of the National Trust, John Muir who campaigned for national parks in America and eventually Woodrow Wilson himself, a portrait that still hangs in Princeton University, where he was president.

It was a commission to paint the portrait of Charlotte Mason, who had established a teaching college at Ambleside, which brought Fred to the Lake District in 1902. The local landowner, Squire le Fleming, was so impressed by his work that he built a house for Fred and his family on a hill above Rydal



**Top: The Yates family home Hart Head Cottage. Above: The same house with 'Old Glory', the American flag Woodrow Wilson gave Fred Yates after his inauguration as US President in 1913**

Hall. Here Fred created a studio in a shed in the garden that's still there today.

What the bare bones of his career don't reflect, though, is the joyousness of the Yates household. By all accounts their cottage was filled with music and poetry and laughter. They delighted locals and visitors alike with their antics. Fred and his wife and daughter would walk out to an abandoned slate quarry on the other side of Rydal Water and sit in the entrance singing part songs. The overarching rock would act as a loudspeaker to the delight of travellers passing on the lakeside road.

Fred's daughter Mary Yates surreptitiously took notes of the gatherings round the dining table in the little house at Rydal and on excursions into the hills ▶



## Woodrow Wilson and Fred Yates



Fred's studio in the grounds of Hart Head Cottage; below: the artist at work in Rydal

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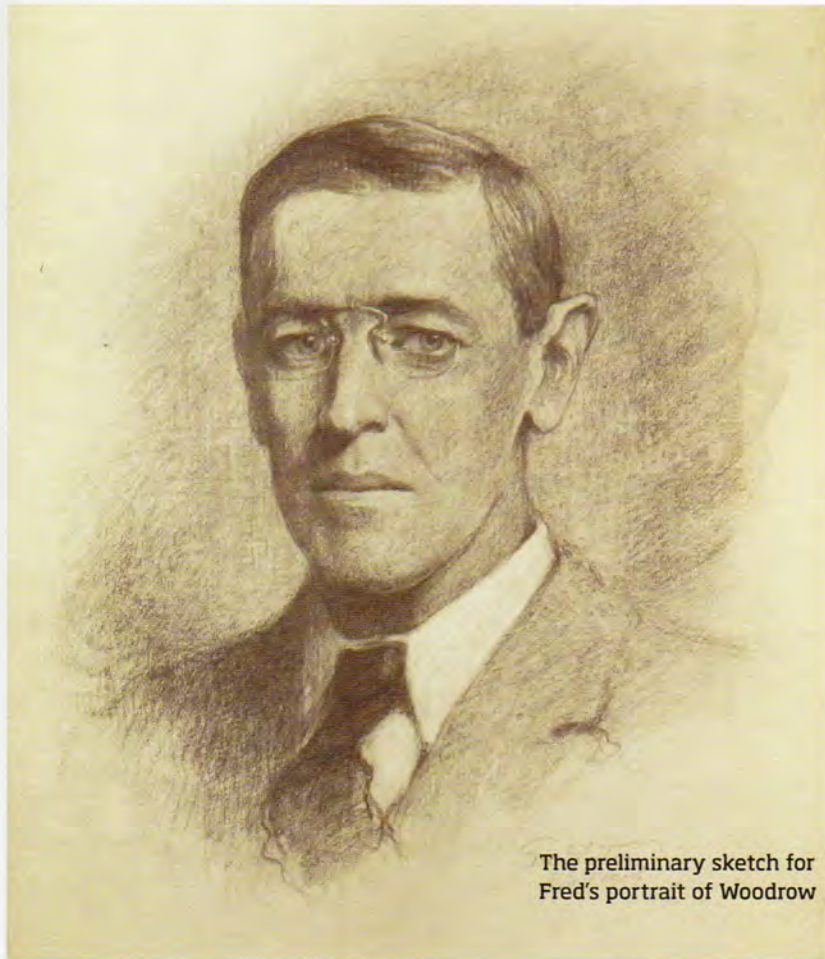
when Woodrow Wilson was present. What emerges is a far cry from the strait-laced and rather dour chap that official photographs portray. He even told the occasional joke, apparently. On one expedition on The Nab the little party sat down near the summit and Wilson told of a reply by a friend of his who heard a tale of one of George Washington's feats of strength, that he had thrown a dollar over a river which was the better part of a mile broad. Woodrow Wilson's friend remarked "Well a dollar went further in those days". OK, it's not a very good joke but it's better than the formal top-hatted scowl.

When Woodrow Wilson was invited into Fred's home he came as part of the family and it was as if the cares and challenges of his academic and political lives evaporated. In November 1906 Wilson, back home in America, wrote to Fred and his wife: "It is always affection that heals me: and the dear friendships I made were my real tonic and restorative. It would be hard to overstate what the dear Yates did for me: and I shall forever bless them and seek them as I turn hither and thither in my journey."



Pelter Bridge, where the pair met in 1906; right: Woodrow Wilson at the Crown & Mitre Hotel in Carlisle in 1919





The preliminary sketch for Fred's portrait of Woodrow

**W**hen Woodrow Wilson first came to the north of England on a cycling tour in 1896 it was partly to give him a break from the punishing schedule that came with his job at

Princeton but also because he was going in search of his family history. His grandfather had been a Congregational Church minister in Carlisle before emigrating with his eight children to America in 1835. His fifth daughter, Janet, who would eventually be Woodrow's mother, was eight when they sailed. Wilson didn't have much luck. In a letter to his wife he says that he couldn't find his grandfather's church or the house in which his dear mother was born. He had travelled 3,000 miles to learn nothing.

The next day, though, he learned something that would change his life. On a cycle ride from Keswick to Rydal he learned that the Lake District had a world-class landscape that from his first sight of it would fascinate and delight him in equal measure; a landscape that he would visit six times before presidential duties tied him to America. I'm often asked why this most famous visitor to Lakeland, a man with Yosemite and Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon in his own back yard, would travel half way round the world to this little congress of mountains in the north west of England. The answer, hinted at time and again in his letters, is that Lakeland is a

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landscape on a human scale. It's not wilderness. Look from any Lakeland summit into the surrounding valleys and you see the footprints and fingerprints of man. People and scenery share this precious space in a partnership that stretches across the centuries.

Meanwhile the careers of both Woodrow and Fred were moving on apace. Fred's reputation as the portraitist of choice for the great and the good ensured that commissions were rolling in from Britain and America. In November 1910 Wilson was elected governor of New Jersey. Two years later at the party convention in Baltimore he secured the Democratic presidential nomination and was elected president on November 5 1912. The Wilsons began to lay plans for Woodrow's presidential inauguration and central to those plans was the man who would be their special guest of honour - Fred Yates.

The night before the inauguration he dined with them at the Shoreham Hotel in Washington DC and was one of 14 who sat down to the Wilsons' first meal in the White House the following day. Fred was the only one not from the Wilson family. At 8.30 the following morning he and the new President had breakfast together and later in the day Woodrow Wilson took his wife for a drive round the Washington Monument and invited Fred to join them. As he told his wife in a letter home, "I alone was with them. Great crowds cheering. Then when we left Mrs Wilson the President took me off alone with him round the park. We were gone about an hour and you may imagine your dear husband's distinction!"

Before Fred left to travel home Woodrow asked him what he'd like as a memento of the occasion and Yates asked for the large American flag on which the President had rested his hand as he took the oath of office. For some years it lived in the attic of the cottage in Rydal, being taken out to celebrate special occasions such as the end of the Great War and VE day.

Fred and Woodrow would never meet again. Wilson had planned a meeting in December 1919 on his way to the Paris peace conference. Having been welcomed to London by King George V and Queen Mary, the President borrowed the royal train to whisk him to Carlisle for a whistle-stop visit to his mother's birthplace - a pilgrimage of the heart as he described it.

Woodrow was given the freedom of the city, met the city's worthies at the Crown & Mitre Hotel and spoke in the Congregational church in Lowther Street which had replaced his grandfather's chapel. Only one person was missing. Fred Yates was confined to a London clinic and too ill to travel. He died in February 1919.

In his last letter to Woodrow Wilson he wrote "Dear Mr. President, we so much regretted that we could not see you when you came to Carlisle... I want to give you my love and reverence. You have lifted us all up, dear Great Man. I send this to Washington so as not to disturb you by even adding one feather weight to your cares. I know you love us, your friend Fred Yates."

Thank you to John and Gilly Hodkinson, the occupants of Hart Head Cottage.