



*The Secret Bookshelf of Bill W:  
Early influences on AA's creator  
that no one is talking about!*

*Rebellion Dogs Blog April 2023*

First of all, thank you Bob K; having interviewed Bob on Rebellion Dogs Radio about his historical fiction, *The Secret Diaries of Bill W.*, my title does in deed channel the playful intent of looking at the facts, and then succumbing to the temptation of penciling in the blanks with what may have been. Two influential books were all the rage while the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was being written. These two nonfiction, new thought movement offerings, as far as I can see, are neither credited, or studied in relation to AA: *How to Make Friends and Influence People* by Dale Carnegie (1936) and *Think and Grow Rich* by Napoleon Hill (1937).



Was Bill Wilson influenced by these books? If “No,” how could that be? What was on the radio and in the news in New York City and all across America at exactly the time Bill thought, “You know, a book is maybe the way to go, a way to kill two birds with one stone.” A brief review of these bestsellers nails the zeitgeist of the time and,

at the very least, is suggestive of potential influence on William Wilson’s ambitions and writing style.

Like everyone, AA's founder was a complex person with multiple ambitions and influences. Bill Wilson commenced authoring the book in May 1938 and a year later, the book *Alcoholics Anonymous: The Story of How More than One Hundred Men Have Recovered from Alcoholism* was printed and waiting for people to buy it and read it. We know so much more about that era, now. The jury is in; because of William Schaberg's 2019 *Writing the Big Book: the Creation of AA*, we know about the timeline from conception, putting pen to paper, to the *Big Book's* first year in print. Shared experiences of many members were included in the book. But a recommended process of maintaining sobriety was conceived by one, the book's author. We have learned from *Writing the Big Book*, chapters Five and Six, "How it Works" and "Into Action" (the middle of the book) – these two all-about-the-Steps chapters were the last chapters written, completed under the pressure of the eleventh hour.

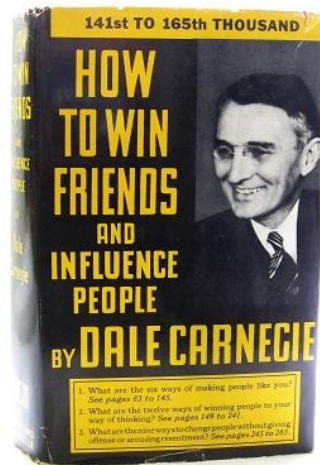
"At this most critical and important juncture in the story – for nothing is more central to the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* than the program of recovery outlined in the Twelve Steps – there are unfortunately, no primary documents mentioning the actual writing of the steps. It is an unexpected gap in the otherwise rich archival records that provide a robust and vivid picture of early A.A. history from late 1937 right up until this point in late 1938. ... the first writing of the steps wasn't actually the sudden, inspired event he so frequently reported. Instead, it is possible their creation was a much more judicious and deliberate affair, a process of formulation – whether conscious or unconscious – over weeks of reviewing and contemplating his own experiences while getting sober."<sup>i</sup> p 440-4

What books, authors and thinkers influenced the *Big Book's* creator(s)? Bill Wilson, a person on a mission to heal/help others with alcohol use disorder, what founders of AA were reading, that's been chronicled, speculated upon and done: religious readings, the Oxford Group influence, Richard Peabody's *The Common Sense of Drinking*, and from Silkworth.net, "Bill, Bob, and many early A.A.'s read Professor William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (cited by name in A.A.'s *Big Book*) and Dr.

Carl Gustav Jung's *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. Jung was later called a 'founder' of A.A. as was William James."<sup>ii</sup>

Okay, that speaks to Bill the man who connected preserving one's own recovery as being interdependent with helping another sufferer find recovery from addiction. That's one side of Bill; what about Bill W the capitalist—be a prophet, make a profit—we're dealing with a man, a mission, a movement and one man's motivations informed by the American dream. Less than a decade earlier, our hero, this same Bill W had his sites on more heady goals, as we read from *Pass It On*:

"By 1928, Bill was a star among his wall Street associates. 'in those days, of course, I was drinking for paranoid reasons. I was drinking to dream greater dreams of power, dreams of domination. Money to me was never a symbol of security. It was the symbol of prestige and power.' He dreamed of the day when he would sit on prestigious boards of directors. 'J.P. Morgan and First National Bank were, you know, my heroes.'"<sup>iii</sup>

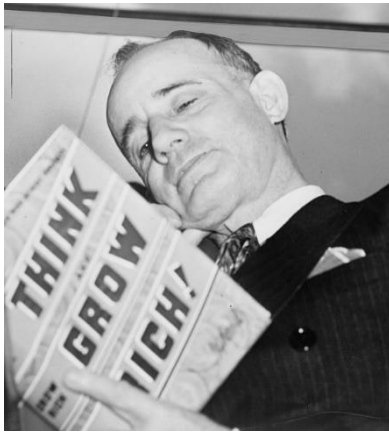


*How to Win Friends and Influence People*<sup>iv</sup>, published in 1937 quickly exploded into an overnight success, eventually selling millions of copies, cementing a fledgling genre of self-help and personal success books. *How to Win Friends and Influence People* was written for a popular audience and **Dale Carnegie** successfully captured the attention of his target. The book experienced mass consumption and appeared in many popular periodicals, including garnering ten pages in the January 1937 edition of *Readers Digest*.

Was Bill Wilson influenced by Carnegie? Who wasn't in AA pioneer's circle? The Library of Congress (2013) ranked *How to Win Friends and Influence People* as one of the top-ten most influential books in American History. In New York City, this 1936 best-seller "was number eight on the list of 'Top Checked Outs Of All Time' by the New York Public Library."<sup>v</sup>

From Lois Wilson's records, December 1937, the probable becomes confirmable, thanks to William Schaberg's research.

"For his own part, after the intense evening at Rockefeller Center, Bill realized that his presentation skills could use some improvement. Wilson always believed in making a 'maximum effort' in everything he undertook, so later that month he and Lois took a Dale Carnegie course together on public speaking." WTBB p 66



**Napoleon Hill** (1883 - 1970)'s thirteen step program (doesn't that have a ring to it?) set readers on the path to wealth and success. *Think and Grow Rich*<sup>vi</sup> was touted as revealing money-making secrets proven to work by many of America's most affluent people. "By **thinking** like them, you can **become** like them."

Forbes Magazine put Bill Wilson and Napoleon Hill in the same class of influencers of the day – self-help: the new American religion. In the pre-*Think and Grow Rich* years, Hill suffered as Wilson, having success and losing and finding transformation through religious/spiritual experience:

"A desperate Virginia man named Napoleon Hill was living off relatives, ashamed that he was unable to buy Christmas presents for his children. To battle his depression he would walk at night, trying to get his head straight. What made his dilemma so painful is that Hill had known success before, as a promoter of business extension schools. Hill walked and walked, trying to break out of his depression.

'I was thoroughly disgusted with myself, but I entertained a hope of salvation. Then, like a flash of lightning out of a clear sky, an idea burst into my mind with such force that the impulse drove the blood up and down my veins: This is your testing time. You have been reduced to poverty and humiliated in order that you might be forced to discover your other self.'

Napoleon Hill's other self would eventually write *Think and Grow Rich*, the business and personal motivation classic. It has sold more than 70 million copies since its publication in 1937 and continues to sell robustly today.”<sup>vii</sup>

The story of Bill and the story of Napoleon is so similar. That doesn't mean one plagiarized another; it's the kind of story enough can relate to that it offers hope. It is the hero's journey, memorable and relatable to those of us who are all here because we're not all there.

Here are some quotes from *Think and Grow Rich*. Decide for yourself if any of these ideas may have been the impetus for, or appropriated to become *Alcoholics Anonymous*.

“The starting point of all achievement is DESIRE. Keep this constantly in mind. Weak desire brings weak results, just as a small fire makes a small amount of heat.”

“Happiness is found in doing, not merely possessing.”

“No one is ready for a thing, until he believes he can acquire it. The state of mind must be BELIEF, not mere hope or wish. Open-mindedness is essential for belief.”

“The way of success is the way of continuous pursuit of knowledge.”

“I would find out what is wrong with me, and correct it, then I might have a chance to profit by my mistakes and learn something from the experience of others, for I know that there is something *wrong* with me, or I would now be where I would have been if I had spent more time analyzing my weaknesses, and less time building alibis to cover them.”

“I know that a negative attitude toward others can never bring me success. I will cause others to believe in me, because I will believe in them, and in myself.”

“Before success comes in any man's life, he is sure to meet with much temporary defeat, and, perhaps, some failure. When defeat overtakes

a man, the easiest and most logical thing to do is to quit. That is exactly what the majority of men do. More than five hundred of the most successful men this country has ever known told the author their greatest success came just one step beyond the point at which defeat had overtaken them.”

I could take any of these quotes and find an AA passage that makes the same point; you could too. It could be a party game in person or online — post a quote and give everyone three minutes to google and record as many AA quotes as they can that reflect the same points.

The Thirteen Step program has so much that is familiar: desire, faith, persistence, inner resources, imagination, analysis, planning, taking action, these are some of the same themes we know as the Twelve Steps. As Bill sees it, “A.A. was not invented! Its basics were brought to us through the experience and wisdom of many great friends. We simply borrowed and adapted their ideas.”<sup>viii</sup>

Dale Carnegie (1888 - 1955) was seven years older than Bill W; he could have been a big-brother figure. I have seen no actual record validating that Bill W and/or other AA pioneers met Napoleon Hill or read his book. Lack of evidence is not proof that it did not happen, mind you. We do have a record of the pre-Big Book Bill engaging with Carnegie. Like Hill, Carnegie’s how-to book has steps/lists and structure. There are stories but no documentary evidence of any such program, six, twelve, four or anything universally recognized in AA before the book *Alcoholics Anonymous* was written.

Numbered lists such as “Nine Ways to Change People Without Giving Offense or Arousing resentment,” as “Six Ways to Make People Like You,” are just a tease, but how about, Part Three of his book, “Twelve Ways to Win People to Your Way of Thinking?” Examples of people applying the principles, peer-to-peer capitalism, maybe, Woodrow Wilson, H. G. Wells, Theodore Roosevelt, Charles Schwab and J.D. Rockefeller Jr are a few of the examples that would surely get Bill W’s attention.

Here are some quotes; start thinking about making a party game out of them as we go. "But we aren't a glum lot (AA, p 132)."

"If you are wrong, admit it quickly and emphatically."

"Try honestly, to see things from the other man's point of view."

"Dramatize your ideas."

"Throw down a challenge."

"Talk about your own mistakes before criticizing the other person."

"Make the faults seem easy to correct."

"Never begin by announcing, 'I am going to prove so and so to you.' That's bad. That's tantamount to saying, 'I'm smarter than you are. I'm going to tell you a thing or two and make you change your mind.' That is a challenge. That arouses opposition and makes the listener want to battle with you before you even start."

"It is difficult, under even the most benign conditions, to change people's minds. So why make it harder? Why handicap yourself?"

"If you are going to prove anything, don't let anybody know it. Do it so subtly, so adroitly, that no one will feel what you are doing. As Alexander Pope once said: Men must be taught as if you taught them not. And thing unknown proposes as things forgot."

The Boston Transcript once printed this significant doggerel:

Here lies the body of William Jay,  
Who died maintaining his right of way —  
He was right, dead right, as he sped along,  
But he's just as dead as if he were wrong."

Hmnn, awaiting WWI deployment in London, Bill W recalls, "I wandered through the [Winchester] Cathedral yard, my attention was caught by a doggerel on an old tombstone."



Below is the actual prose, in memory of Grenadier Thomas Thetcher:

Here Sleeps in peace a Hampshire Grenadier  
Who caught his death by drinking cold small Beer  
Soldiers be wise from his untimely fall  
And when ye're hot drink Strong or none at all  
An Honest Soldier never is forgot  
Whether he die by Musket or by Pot."



In Wilson's account, on the same page of Bill's story, back in America. "The inviting maelstrom of the Street had me in its grip. Business and financial leaders were my heroes."

"The Twelve Ways to Win People to Your Way of Thinking," both reveal the same attempts at persuasion found in *Alcoholics Anonymous*, as well as ideas (Steps) held very close to these twelve points that include: Throwing down a challenge, dramatizing your ideas, begin in a friendly way, appeal to their nobler motives and be sympathetic to their ideas and desires, if you are wrong admit it quickly and emphatically – that all sounds like ideas that author Bill W was channeling while trying to appeal to us and/or

incorporating in his step-by-step plan to salvation from addiction. Could our book have been called, *Think and Grow Sober*, or *How to Make Sober Friends and Positively Influence Each Other*?

Either of these new-thought books we talked about here could have been recommended reading at Honor Dealers, Hank Parkhurt's New Jersey sales office from which Bill Wilson, Jimmy Burwell and maybe other AAs worked. It is the location where much of *Alcoholics Anonymous* was



schemed, typed and edited. Bill could have read these books. They were certainly being talked about and enjoyed at the time and in the place where it all happened, appealing to people just like AA members of yore.

It is a moot point; the salient idea is that the psychology and culture of the day informed — directly or indirectly — the architects of the first book by AA. To the Bill W's point, no element of Alcoholics Anonymous the movement or the book is unique; everything came from somewhere, borrowed from medicine, religion, psychology and folk wisdom.

Listen to [Bob K, Rebellion Dogs Radio Episode 72 on \*The Secret Diaries of Bill W\* and more.](#)

Listen to [William Schaberg, Rebellion Dogs Radio Episode 49 on \*Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA\*](#)

---

<sup>i</sup> Schaberg, William, *Writing the Big Book: The Creation of AA*, Las Vegas: Central Recovery Press, 2019

<sup>ii</sup> <https://silkworth.net/alcoholics-anonymous/the-books-and-materials-early-aas-read/>

<sup>iii</sup> B., Mel, *Pass It On: The Story of Bill Wilson and how the A.A. message reached the world*, New York: AA World Services, 1984, p. 81

<sup>iv</sup> Carnegie, Dale, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936

<sup>v</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How\\_to\\_Win\\_Friends\\_and\\_Influence\\_People](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_to_Win_Friends_and_Influence_People)

<sup>vi</sup> Hill, Napoleon, *Think and Grow Rich*, Meriden Conn: The Ralston Society, 1937

<sup>vii</sup> <https://www.forbes.com/forbes/2011/0411/opinions-rich-karlgaard-innovation-rules-american-religion.html?sh=2001b1117d5bv>

<sup>viii</sup> Bill W letter 1966 (AA Archives, General Service Office, New York, NY)