

**Meeting the Cowboy Turned Renegade Missionary:  
William Cullen Wilcox<sup>1</sup>**

*Simangaliso Kumalo*

Ministry, Education and Governance Programme,  
School of Religion and Theology,  
University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

*Abstract*

The Rev. William Cullen Wilcox is a relatively unknown missionary of the American Board Mission. He left an indelible legacy in South Africa as an initiator of mission stations, a land activist, and mentor to John Langalibalele Dube, the first president of the African National Congress. He lived and worked in South Africa for over 40 years after which he returned home to California with nothing to show for his work among the poor black people of South Africa whom he had served. It was only seventy years later that his story was brought to the attention of the South African church and government, which led to President Zuma bestowing on him the order of the Companions of Oliver Tambo. This article offers a brief profile of Rev Wilcox as a progressive political missionary and highlights his contribution to the struggle of the African people for self-determination.

In recognition for such support, the new democratic government of South Africa regularly bestows the highest honor; the government of KwaZulu-Natal has nominated Reverend Wilcox for the Grand Order of Oliver Tambo, as a mark of respect upon a worthy individual. I have now been informed that President Zuma has assented to bestowing this honor on Reverend William Wilcox, and the Chancery of National Orders has today delivered me a notice that invites the Wilcox family to receive the National Order posthumously on 11 December 2009, in Pretoria, South Africa. I now formally inform you of this by handing the letter to the eldest and youngest generations of the Wilcox family.

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<sup>1</sup> This article was first published as a chapter in my book titled *Pastor and politician: essays on the legacy of John L Dube, first president of the African National Congress* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2012).

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This further cements the relationship of the American people with those of South Africa. Our prayers as the people of South Africa, the beneficiaries of William and Ida Belle Wilcox's ministry, are that their spirit and that of JL Dube will live long and continue to guide us (Premier Zwelini Mkhize 2009).<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

This announcement was made by the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, Dr Zwelini Mkhize, on behalf of the South African nation and announced the sending of an official ANC delegation from the new administration of President Jacob G Zuma to pay tribute to William C Wilcox and Ida Belle Wilcox. The ceremony was held at their final resting place in Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale, California, where they were awarded, eighty years after their death, the Medal of the Grand Companions of Oliver Tambo. This is the highest civilian honour bestowed on foreigners who have helped the people of South Africa during their struggle for liberation. The letter was received with overwhelming enthusiasm by both the Wilcox and the Dube families. So it was that the Grand Order of the Companions of Oliver Tambo was bestowed on a missionary, William Wilcox, and his wife Ida Belle Wilcox.

Responding to Premier Mkhize's announcement and speech, Cherif Keita, the man behind the event and the story of John Dube's association with William Wilcox, said:

I finally understood that day that the land had spoken to me, that it was those "ancestors", or *amadlozi* in Zulu, who had chosen me to go on a decade-long quest to South Africa to bring back to their adventurous daughter Ida Belle and their son-in-law William Cullen Wilcox, their long overdue recognition as architects and heroes of the liberation of South Africa.<sup>3</sup>

The question to be asked is why that order was bestowed on a missionary who had died seventy-one years earlier? To make matters more complex, this was the first missionary to have received such a highly respected order. Missionaries are not likely to receive an honour from an African government for they have generally been accused of having collaborated with the forces

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<sup>2</sup> Premier Zwelini Mkhize, Tribute to William and Ida Belle Wilcox: Address delivered on the occasion of the laying of wreath ceremony on 9 November 2009, Glendale Cemetery, Los Angeles, United States of America, 2.

<sup>3</sup> Cherif Keita, Cemetery Stories: A Rebel Missionary in South Africa. Documentary film on William Cullen Wilcox. 2009.

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that took away the African people's freedom. What made Wilcox different? What was the connection between him and John Langalibalele Dube's family? His name had been forgotten by the people of Inanda and maybe even by the Council for World Mission, the successor of the London Missionary Society that had sent missionaries to KwaZulu-Natal through the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions. His was not a household name in South Africa. Even among Congregationalists, the name was no longer widely known. Who was William Cullen Wilcox?

### **Introducing William Wilcox**

William Cullen Wilcox (1850–1928) was the first missionary to be honoured with a national order, the Grand Order of Oliver Tambo, by the South African government. Wilcox had a number of other firsts: he was the first missionary of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions to be assigned to Mozambique to start mission work there; he was the founder of the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company (ZIIC), the first company established by Zulu people to buy land so that they could use it for business purposes, and he was the founder of the communities of Cornfields and Tembalihle in Estcourt.

#### *Panoramic view of Wilcox's legacy*

Wilcox made a significant contribution to the relationship between mission education, the gospel and political liberation in South Africa. Although he appreciated the positive contribution of missionary enterprise to African people, he was highly critical of the missionaries' tendency to limit their involvement only to spiritual matters and ignore the political oppression of the African people. He also warned against a gospel that aims at domestication, but called for an approach that brings about liberation and transformation. He was a pioneer who sought to emphasise an African perspective on mission in general, but especially political independence in the mission of the church and among the ever growing number of African Christians both in Mozambique and Natal. As I have already noted, he was the first man to put the Zulu language into writing. Looking back at the work that he had done, he observed that his translation was "the greatest and most important literary work of my life".<sup>4</sup> This article seeks to examine his contribution to political theology and the liberation of the African people through his work in Natal and his mentoring of John Langalibalele Dube. As far as research is concerned, this chapter demonstrates how an unusual alliance between

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<sup>4</sup> [http://www.gospelcom.net/dacb/stories.southafrica/dube\\_john.html](http://www.gospelcom.net/dacb/stories.southafrica/dube_john.html). Accessed April 10, 2006.

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William Wilcox and John Dube gave South Africa one of the early black leaders of international stature. He did this by opening the doors of American education, both secondary and higher, to the founding fathers of the African National Congress. These were the Oberlin-trained Reverend John L Dube and the Columbia and Oxford-trained barrister Pixley ka Isaka Seme. Both men became politicians and educators who successfully championed US-inspired political values of freedom and liberty and used their ties to American philanthropy and media as an effective weapon against British domination in South Africa.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of this article is not to give a detailed biography of William Wilcox and his wife Ida Belle (1858–1940), but to discuss his work and the contribution it made to the liberation of the people of South Africa and his association with John Dube. The biographical details are aimed at helping us to place him and his contribution in context in order for us to gain a good understanding of his contribution and legacy. I did not have the privilege of interviewing Wilcox, since it is already over seven decades since he died, but I was able to have a glimpse of his life by reading his book *Man from the African jungle*, watching Cherif Keita's documentary *The Rebel Missionary*, and reading other pieces of material from documents produced by various authors.<sup>6</sup>

William Cullen Wilcox was born in 1850. He was educated at the ultra-liberal Oberlin College in Ohio. In 1881 he married Ida Belle. In that same year they set off for mission work in Southern Africa. He was assigned by the AZM and ABCFM to East Central Africa (Mozambique).<sup>7</sup> After six years of hard work in Inhambane, which included starting a mission station from the ground up, compiling the first grammar resource and securing rights for the ABCFM to start work there in spite of opposition by the dominant Catholic bishop, he spent some time at Adams Mission Station to reconsider his future. In 1886 he withdrew from his ministry in Mozambique so that he could go back to the USA to raise funds for his work. Ultimately he resigned from the AZM so that he could go back to the USA for a while.

In 1887 Wilcox, while based at Adams College, met with John Dube and left with him for America. He helped Dube to get a job and register at the prestigious Oberlin Institution. He was then employed at Keene Valley Congregational Church in New York where he worked from 1887 to 1894. He returned to South Africa to resume his mission work. In appearance he was: "Tall and solemn with deep-set eyes and a moustache, he was a man of great intellect and had the ability to mobilize people for different projects that

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<sup>5</sup> Keita, *Cemetery Stories*.

<sup>6</sup> W. Wilcox, *Man from the African Jungle* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1925), 21.

<sup>7</sup> The American Board for Foreign Missions was formed in America in 1810 and was Congregational. They first sent missionaries to South Africa in 1835.

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he started.”<sup>8</sup> His ministry of political and economic resistance on behalf of and with the African people was done at great personal cost. Now I would like to look at his unique contribution.

*Faith Plan*

Wilcox introduced a new model of doing mission work which he called “Faith Plan”.<sup>9</sup> According to this model mission work was about setting up missionary settlements based explicitly on industrial activity – trades, milling or farming – that would be self-supporting from the start. This was to work towards political and economic independence for people. Most importantly, he used a critical reading of the Bible to challenge the way missionaries and other Christians were justifying their belief in the inferiority of black people and to justify his work of uplifting them.

*A belief in the equality of people*

Wilcox refused to conform to the racist attitudes that whites practised at that time. For instance, one of his enemies was Cecil Rhodes, whom Wilcox had met in the harbour in Cape Town. Wilcox was travelling with his African American colleague Benjamin Ousley. Rhodes shook Wilcox’s hand but refused to shake Ousley’s and from there on Wilcox wanted nothing to do with Rhodes and his company, which he felt were exploiting the African people.<sup>10</sup> He once wrote:

The missionary cannot help giving the native ideas of his worth when he teaches the Gospel of Christ. There is nothing in the whole Bible to show the superiority in a white skin, or that a man born with kinky hair and a dark complexion is not just as good as any other man. When to this idea of worth, which means racial equality, is added an education which is above the simple requirements of religious belief, the man emerges, realizing his worth and hating the white man who would kick him off the sidewalk. As he and his kind become more enlightened, and as their numbers continue to increase more rapidly than the whites, they will not always submit to taxation without representation. They are not always going to be excluded from every place of honour and responsibility.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> H. Hughes, *The first president: a life of John L. Dube, founding president of the ANC* (Johannesburg: Jacana, 2011), 37.

<sup>9</sup> Hughes, *First President*, 38.

<sup>10</sup> Hughes, *First president*, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Wilcox, *Man from the African jungle*, 22.

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According to Wilcox's son Mark, Wilcox refused to have anything to do with "a farcical and fantastic presentation of native character and custom".<sup>12</sup>

### **Wilcox's vision for Africa**

Wilcox will go down in history as one of the few missionaries who had a positive and affirming view of Africa and its people. For him Africa was not a dark continent, occupied by ignorant and barbaric inferior beings, which needed a dose of European culture to gain some degree of humanness. He believed they were intelligent human beings, deserving of freedom, of being treated with dignity and having the right to determine their future without the interference of white people, be they missionaries or merchants. Heather Hughes has noted that:

Wilcox's vision for Africa was of a whole continent thrumming with lives, hard-working, independent Christian communities who shouldered obligations and shared rewards. In short, he was more radical than most of his contemporaries in his approach to belief and conversion, stressing a cooperative social dimension of Christian teaching and living.<sup>13</sup>

### *An early vision of Pan Africanism*

Wilcox expressed a strong anti-imperialist position in the American press while on a sojourn there, sufficiently publicised to cause tension between the AZM and the Natal authorities.<sup>14</sup> Wilcox had observed that the presence of white people, be they missionaries, merchants or even politicians, was not always to the advantage of the African people. This was because such people had their own selfish agenda. He said:

I have sometimes myself wished for a mission field where the natives could never see a white man. In practice we should have the Natives on some fertile island in the midst of the ocean where no white man could ever come to them for any purpose but to do them good, and where they could never be drawn into the services of godless white men where they are beset with so many temptations.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Hughes, *First president*, 87.

<sup>13</sup> Hughes, *First president*, 86.

<sup>14</sup> Hughes, *First president*, 91.

<sup>15</sup> Mark F. Wilcox, *Proud endeavour: the story of a Yankee on a mission to South Africa* (NY: Graphic Press, 1963), 43.

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He questioned the Native Land Act, arguing that it was not for the benefit of the African people. He argued:

Is the proposed separation to diminish the number of servants in the closest intimacy with the white men? Is it to lessen the number of magistracies and white police and white men's stores in the Native Reserves? Is it proposed to give them better land where they can do more for themselves and thus be less dependent on the charity of missionaries and colonists? No! I venture to say without fear of contradiction, if such had been the thought this unjust law would never have been heard of.<sup>16</sup>

His commitment to the wellbeing of and respect for the African people was demonstrated when he was offered a part in a film about the Zulu people from the perspective of the white people. He had become destitute after the collapse of the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company (ZIIC), as a result of the Native Land Act of 1913. An opportunity to act in a film would have improved his financial situation. Dube recommended him to the producers, probably hoping that this opportunity would help his old friend. Wilcox had agreed to work in the film. According to Cherif Keita:

Wilcox welcomed the offer because of the chances he was being given to satisfy his long dormant dramatic instincts and the much-needed financial rewards he would reap from this unexpected job. He was asked to write a story for the production; he wrote about the romantic story of a Zulu chief who fell madly in love with a princess. The story was accepted by the film company and even approved for immediate production. It was agreed that Wilcox would act as the white missionary in the film. But a few days later, the story was brought back to him and made unrecognizable after all the changes introduced by the company's own screenwriter. After reading the new version of "his" story, Wilcox undiplomatically sent it back with these caustic comments: "You'd better go find Christy Minstrels to act in your movie because I cannot train proud Zulus to act in such a travesty of their lives".<sup>17</sup>

### **Opposition to taxation without representation**

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<sup>16</sup> Wilcox, *Proud endeavour*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Keita, *Cemetery Stories*.

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One of the key issues that Wilcox fought against was the Mission Station's policy of charging its tenants rent. At the time there was a policy where people were charged 2 pounds and if they were not able to pay they were sent to prison. After serving their sentences they were still required to come back and were forced to pay back the money. Wilcox was opposed to this policy and opposed the AZM for taking that action which he regarded as unjust and as "taxation without representation".<sup>18</sup>

### **Champion for land rights**

Wilcox was opposed to the taking of land from people by both the government and the AZM.

But I have had from the first the belief, which has been confirmed by these years of experience, that the best way to help the needy people is to help them to help themselves. It is not always the easiest way. It is easier to give the tramp a bob, which he is likely to spend at the first canteen, than it is to put him into the way of providing for his own necessities. But most people take the easier way, which is to encourage pauperism. That I did not get into the bandwagon and go with the crowd was unfortunate for me and my Native constituency. But it would not have been but for the arbitrary act of the Government which was in our case akin to spoliation.<sup>19</sup>

He went on to express his conviction on the importance of self-reliance, which he taught to people:

In my opinion the only way to encourage people to industry and self-dependence is to give them motives for work and one of the strongest and purest motives I know of is the interest in a home, a place where one can live in security with his family. "Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home." Therefore when a number of Natives came to me with their hard-earned savings and begged me to help them secure places for them, which they would call their own, I consented. Why not? As I heard Sir Richard More say, "Why should the Natives not be free to buy land where they want to in the land of their birth,

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<sup>18</sup> Keita, *Cemetery stories*.

<sup>19</sup> Wilcox 1925:17.



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the same as anybody else, especially as Indians and other foreigners do?”<sup>20</sup>

He firmly believed that the land belonged to the African people and they should not be forced by newcomers to live on it as tenants. He detested the policies that deprived the African people of land because they had turned them into slaves in their own country. Combined with the AZM’s policy of charging its tenants rent, the government’s policy of taking land away from the people was reducing the once free and proud Zulu people to near slaves. This led to Wilcox starting the Zulu Industrial Improvement Company in 1908, and he used it to mobilise the Africans to pool together their resources and buy back land. Through this company he was able to establish two communities, Thembalihle and Cornfields in Estcourt, which still exist today.

Cherif Keita has observed that:

Cornfields and *Thembalihle*, two settlements started by Wilcox in 1912 as an expression of his unwavering wish to see Blacks own land “wherever they want, in the country of their birth, just like whites, Indians and other foreigners”, a daring act for which the Natal white establishment marked him for destruction as the enemy of their interests and an obstacle to their supremacy in the Natal Colony.<sup>21</sup>

These were among the few communities where blacks could own land and hold the title deeds.<sup>22</sup> The name “Cornfields” arose from the fact that the people planted corn (*amabele*) on their newly acquired land. *Thembalihle* means “hope is good”. Indeed, this venture improved people’s lives economically and restored their dignity. According to Mandla Vilakazi, a descendent of Wilcox’s congregants:

I was born in Cornfields and I still remember that my grandfather had a title deed for the land we occupied. He recalled with excitement how at Cornfields they were amongst the few black people in Natal to own land and have title deeds, *amatayitela*. He fondly remembered umfundisi Mbuyabathwa who made it possible for them to own land.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> W. Wilcox, “The native land”, *Ilanga lase Natali* (March 16, 1917), 16.

<sup>21</sup> Keita, *Cemetery stories*.

<sup>22</sup> Another community was Edendale Methodist Mission Station which had been started by the Rev. James Allison.

<sup>23</sup> Mandla Vilakazi, who was born and grew up at Cornfields, was interviewed by Simangaliso Kumalo on 11 October 2011.

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The government responded to Wilcox, and other people of goodwill who were helping the African people to buy back land, by passing the Land Act of 1913. As intended, this policy frustrated Wilcox's company, ZIIC, so that it was forced to close business because of a shortage of subscribers. With the collapse of the ZIIC Wilcox became destitute and with all options closed to him, he reverted to Inanda, where he tried to help with the mission work.

Finally the Rev. Wilcox left South Africa in 1919, bowing down to the pressure of his opponents who were opposed to his radical mission work which took the side of the poor and oppressed. In March 1919, he preached his last moving sermon. A farewell function was held by the congregation, mostly Zulu people, where tributes were paid to him.

The church sang "Go well, Reverend" and some of the church members burst out in tears. The females were begged to stop crying for his departure since it is believed that crying for a departing person causes bad luck to him, especially when that person will cross the Ocean. The pastor shook people's hands and said goodbye. I have never seen such a moving farewell ceremony in my life.

To sum up his praises, the poet praised Reverend Mbuyabathwa for coming from a distant land to come and preach to the local residents. He likened him to a shield which protects people from danger. He also said that they will always remember him like a dream. The poet (*imbongi*) ended by bidding him farewell and giving him the money donated by the church members.<sup>24</sup>

By this time Wilcox had become totally destitute and could not even afford to pay for his passage back to America, let alone pay for his wife Ida Belle. The congregation at Inanda made a collection and gave him 32 pounds which was enough to cover the costs of his trip back home, though without his wife because they could not afford enough money to travel together. She was forced to stay behind and work for a year as a teacher at Bulwer in order to save enough money to follow her husband.

After working for almost forty years in Africa, Wilcox had nothing to show for it back at home. He was seen as one who had failed in life through his African schemes. He subsequently wrote a book, *Man from the African jungle*, reflecting on his early life in Africa and his work, especially in Inhambane in Mozambique. It is important that, although he might have felt that he had fought a losing battle and had nothing to show for his work, the

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<sup>24</sup> A. Sivetye, *The Farewell Ceremony of Reverend W.C. Wilcox*, Inanda Seminary, Natal, May 3, 1918.

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people he had served remembered him. However, he continued to support the work of Dube in Natal, hosting him on his fundraising trips, writing material about his experiences in Africa and talking about the situation of the African people at fundraising meetings.<sup>25</sup> He died in 1928 at Glendale, California and was buried at the local cemetery which has since become famous for being the place where Hollywood celebrities are buried.<sup>26</sup> What an irony! When news of his death reached South Africa, *Ilanga lase Natal* published his story and people paid warm tributes to his noble efforts for the liberation of African people in the face of opposition from both the European government and the AZM. For instance, Josiah Maphumulo wrote:

The pastor used to be my teacher and he is the one who encouraged John Dube to go overseas with him. I was in the same class with John Dube who is now famous among our people ... Wilcox was a very courageous man who was not afraid to criticize other pastors if they were not acting in the interests of the people. That is why these days we need people like Mbuyabathwa (Rev. Wilcox), people who will stand up for the truth!<sup>27</sup>

In the words of Lulu Dube, last living child of the Rev. John Dube:

In the name of all the descendants of John Dube in South Africa, it is my great honour to say "Thank you!" to William and Ida Belle Wilcox, exceptional missionaries among missionaries, for their precious contribution to the freedom all of us enjoy today as South Africans.<sup>28</sup>

Therefore it is fitting that on 9 November 2009, at the Forest Lawn Cemetery of Glendale, California, Dr Zwelini Mkhize, the Premier of KwaZulu-Natal, on behalf of the president and the people of South Africa paid tribute to the Rev. Wilcox and announced the bestowal on him of the Companions of Oliver Tambo, which is the highest honour that a South African president can give to any foreign national. This was a fitting tribute to the man who had been a catalyst for the development of African elites who would later lead the African people to liberation.

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<sup>25</sup> Hughes, *First President*, 38.

<sup>26</sup> Celebrities such as Michael Jackson and others have been buried at that cemetery. In the words of Cherif Keita, he was not loved and respected whilst alive and was not liked by people, but after death, celebrities pay huge sums of money in order to be buried next to him.

<sup>27</sup> J. Maphumulo, "Ngomufi uRev. WC Wilcox". Letter published in *Ilanga lase Natali*, August 10, 1928.

<sup>28</sup> Lulu Dube, Letter to Rev Jackson Wilcox. 23 December 2006.

### **Lessons from Wilcox's legacy**

Four critical points arise from this brief exploration of Wilcox's life and approach to mission through his conscientious leadership, politics and development ministry or schemes.

First, for Wilcox, the church needed to assist in the liberation of oppressed black people by offering an empowering ministry. It had to promote a gospel that leads to ownership of land and self-reliance. As demonstrated in his ministry in Inhambane with people like Angelasi and Tizora, and in Natal with people like John Dube and Sivetye, he was convinced that Africans needed a gospel that would give them the space and encouragement to uplift themselves, rather than a paternalistic one that exacerbated their subservient position in society. For him the Zulu people were not just ignorant visionless people, but rather a proud people who could fight for what they wanted. He believed they possessed knowledge about their own lives and culture and about the rest of creation (their environment), from which the white people could benefit.

Second, a church that embarks on a liberating mission creates space where people can discuss the policies that undermine their freedom and their opportunity to experience abundant life. The church should encourage people to participate in processes that would promote their sense of freedom and human dignity. In short, he was one of the pioneers of the ideas that the church is a "site" of struggle against any form of oppression, be it from the church itself or from the government. This included fighting for people to have rights to the ownership of land and also subverting the attempts of the church to make people pay rent for being tenants of the mission station. In his language, the church must not practise "taxation without representation" like oppressive governments. It should be "an institution of full life, hope and fulfilment".<sup>29</sup> Linked to that is the conviction that methods of mission must lead to financial independence for people.

Third, African languages can contribute significantly to the development of theological discourse. If that discourse is to be relevant in Africa it must be owned by the African people and this can happen when the Bible is translated into the people's languages. As a result, when he was in Inhambane he began a translation of the Bible from English to Tsonga. For this work he depended on the knowledge of his assistants, Angelasi and Tizora. When writing his bibliography he noted how much he depended on them to teach him their language so that he could translate the Bible. In this way he recognised the significance of the African language and symbols and the importance of using them in theological discourse. His approach was not

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<sup>29</sup> Wilcox, *The man from an African jungle*, 234.

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to use language to exploit the people but rather to empower them through the liberating message of the Christian faith.

Fourth, political theology and mission work in South Africa were also given force and impetus through Wilcox's radical leadership. He was an opponent of racism and imperial agendas at a time when the government and the church were working together to obliterate the freedom of the African people and their way of life, because they believed it was pagan and uncivilised. He was trusted by the African people, in partnership with John Dube, the founder of the ZIIC and a great supporter of the formation of the South African Native National Congress, and was a bitter opponent of the 1913 Land Act.

As the church in a democratic South Africa seeks for a new and better way forward in ministering to the country, it is crucial that it grasps firmly the legacy of William Wilcox and gives expression to his liberating vision. It is therefore a matter for great celebration that the government in South Africa, through its heritage projects, is working towards rekindling the stories of missionaries such as William Wilcox, Newton Adams, John Moffatt, John and Nokutela Dube and many others.

### **Conclusion**

The name of William Wilcox has become synonymous with the emergence of non-conformist leadership in church and society in South Africa. His primary context is the AZM, which later became one of three components of the United Congregational Church of Southern Africa (UCCSA); but it is evident, particularly through his influence on figures of major national importance like John Dube that his legacy extends beyond the Congregational alone, to both church and nation. The dangers of losing this legacy are obvious in the prosperity gospel, in the apolitical gospel and in the corruption that threatens democracy at present. The legacy of William Wilcox must not be forgotten, but rather be held up as a beacon for future development in church and society in the Southern African subcontinent.

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Simangaliso Kumalo