

# Century Marks

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**Higher power:** Bill Wilson, founder of Alcoholics Anonymous, was a gifted, largely self-taught man. Without a college degree, he scored well on a complex test administered by inventor Thomas Edison. But when Edison offered him a job, Wilson didn't even respond. Instead, he launched into what was then virgin territory—stock market analysis. He became reasonably well-to-do until the stock market crash of 1929. But alcoholism had put Wilson's life on the skids long before the market crashed. Binge drinking was followed by desperate remorse and unfulfilled pledges to his wife and others that he wouldn't drink again. One of the doctors to whom Wilson went for treatment was an early proponent of the notion that alcoholism isn't a moral problem but a disease—without a known cure. An alcoholic acquaintance of Wilson's sought out Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung for treatment. Jung had concluded that the only cure came from spiritual experiences. When Wilson seemingly hit bottom himself, he cried out (despite his unbelief): "If there be a God, let him show himself!" After which Wilson said his room was filled with a blazing light, he was filled with ecstasy and he felt like a free person (Susan Cheever, *My Name Is Bill*, Simon & Schuster).

**Let's dance:** Jeremy Begbie, theologian from Cambridge and a professionally trained pianist and oboist, says that churches dare not ignore the associations people have with music. For instance, the tune to Sir Edward Elgar's March No. 1 could be perfectly used with the hymn text "At the Name of Jesus." But it would be inadvisable in Britain, where the tune is associated with "Land of Hope and Glory," a patriotic song with, some would say, jingoistic associations. In America that tune is known as "Pomp and Circumstance," associated with commencements. Yet context isn't everything: there is both a subjective and an objective side to music. Because of the physical properties of music and the way we are bodily made, certain responses to music are more natural or appropriate. Since we only have two legs, for instance, humans can't march to music written in triple time. And you wouldn't try to put a baby to sleep with the William Tell Overture. Music latches onto our bodily mechanisms, says Begbie; our bodies serve as a medium between the music and our emotions. He points out that the convention of sitting in a concert hall listening

to music is a relatively recent development, and very Western. Music and bodily movement were meant to go together (interview on *Mars Hill Audio Journal*, volume 64).

**The boss:** Readers of Walker Percy detect the influence of existentialists like Kierkegaard, Camus and Sartre, especially in his novels *The Moviegoer* and *The Last Gentleman*. But Percy's favorite American philosopher was rock musician Bruce Springsteen. Percy thought the "Boss" (Springsteen's moniker) was a perceptive and empathetic observer and analyst of American culture. To Percy, Springsteen's "songs are about America, without hyping the country up (becoming patriotic self-congratulation) and without knocking the country down (becoming mean-spirited nation bashing)." Springsteen doesn't just walk a fine line between these two extremes, according to Percy, for "he sings of us while singing to us, and what you hear . . . is a plain ordinary guy soaring way above himself and everyone around him through his voice, and through the songs he's written. . . . When you really care about someone or something it comes across in your voice." Shortly before he died, Percy wrote a letter to Springsteen, but Springsteen wasn't able to reply before Percy's death (from Robert Coles, *Bruce Springsteen's America*, Random House).

**Mixed metaphors:** Augustine famously confessed that he thought he knew what time was until he tried to define it. This difficulty hasn't kept other philosophers from trying. Leibniz thought of time as "the order of noncontemporaneous things," an unsatisfactory tautology since both "order" and "noncontemporaneous" imply a view of time. People who live in time know it to be divided into three parts—past, present and future. But an argument persists over whether there is something as fundamental as the present. Since time is so fleeting, Augustine had his doubts about that. R. G. Collingwood, conversely, argued that "the present alone is actual." Perhaps metaphors are the best we can do to wrap our minds around time. Time, says Yale historian John Gadden, is like a zipper that zips up but not back down; and the present is like a funnel or a wormhole "through which the future has got to pass in order to become the past" (John Lewis Gadden, *The Landscape of History*, Oxford University Press).

**Such sweet parting:** Between the world wars there were 6,000 candy companies in the U.S. Many towns had their own confectioner. One expert estimates that as many as 100,000 different candy bars have been introduced in America. Alas, only about 100 candy companies remain, and the candy racks are dominated by the big three: Hershey's, Mars and Nestlé. These giants will occasionally introduce new

products, but their profit thresholds are so large that they tend to quickly pull the new stuff from the market if sales don't measure up to the old standbys (*Algonkian*, Spring 2004).