

“The Ultimate Backroom Boy”: The Border-Crossing Career of Joseph Vivian Wilson in the League of Nations Secretariat

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RESÜMEE

Der Aufsatz analysiert am Beispiel des neuseeländischen Völkerbundbeamten und späteren Diplomaten Joseph Vivian Wilson die Karrieremöglichkeiten, die der Völkerbund seinen Angestellten bot. Wilson strebte in den 1920er Jahren zunächst die Laufbahn eines Diplomaten an. Dieser Karriereweg war auf Grund seiner Herkunft aus einem Dominion innerhalb des Britischen Empire nur eingeschränkt möglich, weswegen er sich gegen einen Eintritt ins britische Foreign Office entschied. Der Autor argumentiert, dass der Völkerbund für Wilson eine Chance bot, um Hindernisse in seinem beruflichen Werdegang zu umgehen und seinen Aufstieg voranzutreiben. Der Völkerbund erlaubte einerseits eine quasi-diplomatische Tätigkeit und bot andererseits neue Möglichkeiten einer erfolgreichen Karriere in einem internationalen Umfeld. Die mikrohistorische Analyse von Wilsons Werdegang zeigt damit die Relevanz persönlicher Netzwerke innerhalb internationaler Sekretariate. Der Artikel schlägt vor, die Karriere von Wilson als eine freiwillig gewählte Form einer globalen Biographie einzustufen - eine Biographie, für die das Überschreiten von Grenzen nicht nur Nebenprodukt, sondern distinktes Charakteristikum ist.

“[P]erhaps the greatest intellectual the department ever had – he was the ultimate backroom boy.”¹ With these words, Bryce Harland, New Zealand’s former ambassador to China, appraised the life work of the diplomat Joseph Vivian Wilson² in 1977. His

1 “Foreign affairs ‘greatest’ intellectual dies,” *Evening Post*, December 30, 1977, 1.

2 Cf. *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara – The Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, “Wilson, Joseph Vivian,” by Malcolm Templeton, <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/5w39/wilson-joseph-vivian> (accessed Decem-

description as the “ultimate backroom boy” draws attention to the topic of this paper: Wilson’s rather unconventional career. After graduating from Cambridge in the 1920s he pursued an occupation in diplomacy and took part in the selection procedure of the British Foreign Office and Diplomatic Service with outstanding results.³ But as a New Zealander, a ‘colonial,’ as he would have been termed in British society during the interwar period, his career prospects in the elitist world of the British diplomatic service were, despite his education, limited; most likely his career would have slowed down considerably in middle ranks.⁴ Recognizing this limitation he rejected a career in the British diplomatic service and decided to take advantage of the new opportunities arising at international institutions after World War I to enlarge his professional agency. Wilson started what can be called a professional border-crossing career between New Zealand and the Geneva-based international organisations, working first for the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and then for the League of Nations until 1940. These organisations offered him an occupation that was similar to the traditional diplomatic career. He was employed in Europe until his mother country received full external autonomy and he concluded his career in the newly established diplomatic service of New Zealand. Former Foreign Service Officer Malcolm Templeton emphasized that Wilson’s experiences in the League of Nations made him an ideal recruit: “He (...) acquired unique expertise as an international civil servant, and lived for nearly 20 years in foreign milieu; and unlike almost all of his new colleagues, he was fluent in a foreign language.”⁵

This paper outlines how Wilson used his occupation in international administration as a ‘backdoor’ by which to overcome the impossibility of following the traditional career path of a national diplomat, which was restricted by his colonial origin.

But why do we focus on the case of an unknown League of Nations employee from New Zealand? This paper analyses the dynamics of Wilson’s life and investigates the role that the League of Nations played in his professional advancement. Wilson is used as an example to shed light on the professional opportunities of citizens from British dominions – peripheral countries with low political agency – in the international system during the interwar period. Therefore, the aim of this article is not simply to reconstruct the biography of Joseph Vivian Wilson but to conduct a biographical case study which contributes to a micro-history of international organisations in terms of individual professional opportunities. The article focuses on the new career opportunities provided by international hubs like the League of Nations in the interwar era. By doing so, the article will stress the importance of personal networking for our understanding of how international

ber 17, 2013). The only published biographical sketch of Wilson up to now is an entry in *Te Ara – The Encyclopedia of New Zealand*, which was written by his former assistant and later Foreign Service Officer, Malcolm Templeton. Despite the rather subjective and emotional tone of this article, it provides quite a lot of information about the personal and professional milestones of Wilson’s life.

3 Ibid.

4 In a list of successful and unsuccessful applicants to the Foreign Office for the time span between 1908 and 1913 there is not a single applicant from a British dominion. Cf. Zara Steiner, *The Foreign Office and Foreign Policy, 1898–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 167.

5 Ibid.

organisations worked.⁶ Supporting this contention, this paper also suggests analysing the international lives of the members of the League of Nations secretariat as examples of deliberately chosen forms of ‘global biographies’ – that is, biographies for which border-crossing is an essential aspect.⁷ Focusing on these moments of transgression provides a promising approach with which to grasp the dynamics of the lives of those international civil servants from distant countries.

After introducing the context and the conceptual approach, the structure of this paper will follow Wilson’s pivotal moments of border-crossing. This paper argues that there are three moments of border-crossing that shaped Wilson’s professional life. The first moment was the decision to become an international civil servant and thus to enter the backroom. The second moment of border-crossing affirmed his status as a ‘backroom boy’: Whilst occupied at the League, Wilson visited his mother country New Zealand every three years. He used these voyages to act as an official representative of the League’s secretariat: Thus he tried step out of the backroom and act in an official position. Whilst Wilson went to Geneva to evade the hurdles posed by his origins, the third moment of border-crossing is his return to national contexts. During World War II, New Zealand began to send out diplomatic missions to different countries. Because of his experiences in international administration, Wilson was an ideal recruit for the newly established diplomatic service.

British Dominions, the League of Nations and Lives Beyond Borders

Wilson’s biography is embedded in a period of rapid transformation not only for his individual life but also for the British dominions and for the whole world.⁸ First, this section seeks to introduce the two major processes that influenced Wilson’s career: The transformation of diplomacy after World War I and the changing of the self-understanding of the British dominions. And second, based on the context of Wilson’s life, the methodological approach of this paper will be presented.

Johannes Paulmann has recently demonstrated that after the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 the understanding of diplomacy was conceptually extended and filled with new meanings, so that the “old” and “clandestine” diplomacy belonging to the nineteenth century could be contrasted with a “new” diplomacy that was termed “open” or “democratic.”⁹ The secretariat of the newly founded League of Nation was to form one of the

6 Akira Iriye, *Global Community: The Role of International Organizations in the Making of the Contemporary World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Craig Murphy, *International Organization and Industrial Change: Global Governance since 1850* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004).

7 Bernd Hausberger, “Globalgeschichte(n) als Lebensgeschichten,” in *Globale Lebensläufe. Menschen als Akteure im weltgeschichtlichen Geschehen*, ed. Bernd Hausberger (Vienna: Mandelbaum Verlag, 2006), 9–28, 12.

8 Zara Steiner, *The Lights that Failed: European International History 1919–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), vii.

9 Johannes Paulmann, “Diplomatie,” in *Dimensionen Internationaler Geschichte*, eds. Jost Dülffer and Wilfried Loth (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012), 53.

main institutions of a new and democratised form of diplomacy, which was intended, in its conceptual character and its daily work, to oppose the secret power diplomacy of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ As a platform the League offered new possibilities, especially for small states, to articulate their voice against the big powers. The international secretariat in Geneva, established in Article 6 of the Covenant of the League of Nations, was thought to be an expression of this new character and, indeed, it is regarded in the historiography as novelty in international administration. In contrast to the international organisations and bureaus of the nineteenth century the League's secretariat was from the very beginning intended to display a more international and even gender-equal composition.¹¹ Its staff was expected to develop a specific form of League loyalty and identity in their international service, as is famously described in the Balfour Report¹² of 1920:

*The members of the Secretariat once appointed are no longer the servants of the country of which they are citizens but become for the time being the servants only of the League of Nations. Their duties are not national but international.*¹³

The loyalty of the international civil servants was to the secretary-general who was himself only responsible to the Assembly of the League of Nations. This construction of an international League loyalty was strengthened by the special legal status of the civil servants: The members of the secretariat enjoyed immunities in civil and criminal law as well as tax exemptions.¹⁴ The legal position of secretariat employees was in many ways comparable to that of national diplomats in the interwar period with exceptions concerning the freedom of travel.¹⁵ Thus, the international civil servants overcame, at least formally, the borders of national legislation and loyalty while at the same time approaching the professional distinction of national diplomatic representatives. The shifting to a new, public, and democratized form of diplomacy opened new career choices for men and women apart from the traditional paths of diplomacy. Contemporaries like the Australian journalist Charles Howard-Ellis even noticed that the international secretariat of the League had evolved a new career station and platform of opportunities for "national" diplomats.¹⁶

10 Ibid, 54; Madeleine Herren, *Internationale Organisationen seit 1865. Eine Globalgeschichte der internationalen Ordnung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2009), 80; Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of an Idea* (London: Penguin Press, 2012), 126.

11 Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *The International Secretariat: A Great Experiment in International Administration* (Washington: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1945), 53; Georges Langrod, *The International Civil Service* (Leyden: Oceana Publications, 1963), 38; Alain Plantey, *The International Civil Service: Law and Management* (New York: Masson Publications, 1981), 10.

12 The Balfour Report was an investigation into the bureaucracy of the International Secretariat, which provided important advocacies about the international administration. Cf. Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *International Secretariat*, 25–8.

13 League of Nations, *Official Journal*, June 1920, 137.

14 Katharina Erdmenger, *Diener zweier Herren? Briten im Sekretariat des Völkerbundes 1919–1933* (Baden-Baden: Nomos Verlagsgesellschaft, 1998), 68.

15 Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *International Secretariat*, 268.

16 Charles Howard-Ellis, *The Origin, Structure & Working of the League of Nations* (London: G. Allen & Unwin, 1928), 201; Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *International Secretariat*, 402f; Erdmenger, *Diener?*, 58.

For the dominions of the British Empire the new order of international affairs also led to a reorientation of their appearance on the world stage. In 1919/20 they participated as victorious powers in the Peace Conferences of Paris and used this occasion to substantiate their position within the international system of states. Though not yet acknowledged as completely independent states with activities of foreign policy, each of them signed the intergovernmental peace treaties and they all became members of the League of Nations, which came into existence in the aftermath of the Paris Conference. Conventional historiography usually mentions the Balfour Declaration in 1926 and the Statute of Westminster in 1931 as the next steps in the process of the dominions' breaking away from the system of the British Empire. Although the Westminster Statute granted full internal and external autonomy to the former dominions, some of them only hesitantly ratified this document. New Zealand postponed the ratification of the Westminster Statute even to the year 1947. As an extension to this conventional narration, Paul Gorman has recently emphasized the role of emerging internationalism within the British Empire.¹⁷ He indicates that the general process of internationalism encouraged "the Dominions to seek greater autonomy as part of a broader process of what some historians have termed 'de-dominionization.'" ¹⁸ The involvement of the British dominions in the foundation of the international organisation during the interwar years is one aspect of this active participation in internationalism. Research has pointed out the role that the League of Nations played for the British dominions in the "beginnings of an independent foreign policy,"¹⁹ but most studies have been linked to aspects of official representation and to the dominion's direct influences on the League's policy.²⁰ Fewer works have focused on the role of civil society in the dominions and their connection to the League.²¹ The study of Wilson's life is an opportunity to examine those transformations within international relations on another – hitherto practically unconsidered – level: the professional connections between the Geneva-based international organisation and the distant British dominion. The League of Nations and other international organisations were important carriers of a new and public diplomacy and offered new career possibilities outside the established career processes of the British Empire. Professional connections became particularly interesting at the end of World War II: Newly independent states appreciated

17 Daniel Gorman, *The Emergence of International Society in the 1920s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 11.

18 Ibid., 11. For the concept of 'De-dominionization' cf. Anthony G. Hopkins, "Rethinking Decolonization," *Past and Present* 200/1 (2008): 211–47; Jim Davidson, "De-dominionisation Revisited," *Australian Journal of Politics and History* 5/1 (2005): 108–13.

19 Gerald Chaudron, *New Zealand in the League of Nations* (Jefferson: Mc Farland, 2012).

20 For other dominions cf.: Michael Kennedy, *Ireland and the League of Nations, 1919–1946: International Relations, Diplomacy and Politics* (Dublin: Irish Academy Press, 1996); Richard Veatch, *Canada and the League of Nations* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); William J. Hudson, *Australia and the League of Nations* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 1980).

21 Cf. Hilary Summy, *From Hope ... to Hope: Story of the Australian League of Nations Union, Featuring the Victorian Branch, 1921–1945* (PhD Thesis: University of Queensland, 2007); Bain Attwood, *Apostles of Peace: The New Zealand League of Nations Union* (MA Thesis: University of Auckland, 1979).

the classical professional attributes of diplomacy²² and were therefore eager to establish their own missions in other countries. As the example of Wilson reveals, the former League of Nations servants were ideal recruits because of their experience in international contexts.

This paper argues that the importance of studying the life of Wilson lies in these processes of transformations during the interwar period, which allowed Wilson to enlarge his professional agency and to have a career through the 'backdoor.' By applying the idea of international organisations as a backdoor onto Wilson's career trajectory, how they opened up new opportunities for individual lives can be more clearly seen.²³ A career within the League of Nations acted as just such a 'backdoor,' and it allowed Wilson to become the 'ultimate backroom boy' by providing him with expanded professional agency. As an international civil servant he worked on topics of international relevance just as traditional diplomats did – but outside of the official representation for his mother country and outside of the traditional career paths in diplomacy. However, as will be shown, his career as a 'backroom boy' had its limitations as well. For instance, Wilson was not able to get an aspired at position in the later New Zealand Department for External Affairs, because, due to his long absence in Europe, he lacked the political networks in New Zealand.

To grasp the dynamic of Wilson's life, this paper connects two approaches that were recently discussed in the historiography as promising methodologies for global history: a micro-historical study and the classifying of Wilson as a form of a global biography. Originating in the Italian historiography of the 1970s,²⁴ microhistory was often criticized because of its conscious abdication of a consistent conception.²⁵ But there is in recent (American-German) micro-historiography a trend toward a common methodological understanding that claims to be able to stimulate new areas of research.²⁶ Otto Ulbricht has tried to summarize the central methodological commonalities of those approaches: (1) the need to ask big questions on small-sized research topics; (2) the focus on 'how' in contrast to 'why'; (3) the concept of the 'extraordinary normal', which states that in every extraordinary source there is an element of normality; and (4) a strong refusal of

22 Paulmann, "Diplomatie," 60.

23 The term backroom is based on Madeleine Herren's study *Hintertüren zur Macht*. She argues that small and peripheral states in the nineteenth century used the admission to international organizations as a backdoor to improve their standing and reputation on the international state. Cf. Madeleine Herren, *Hintertüren zur Macht. Internationalismus und modernisierungsorientierte Außenpolitik in Belgien, der Schweiz und den USA 1865–1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2000).

24 Historiography usually mentions Carlo Ginzburg's study on the world-view of a sixteenth-century miller as a starting point for micro-historical research in Italy, though Ginzburg does not use term 'microhistory' in this book. Cf. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1980).

25 Jürgen Schlumbohm, "Mikrogeschichte – Makrogeschichte: Zur Eröffnung einer Debatte," in *Mikrogeschichte – Makrogeschichte: komplementär oder inkommensurabel?* ed. Jürgen Schlumbohm (Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, 1998), 7–32, 27.

26 Otto Ulbricht, "Divergierende Pfade der Mikrogeschichte. Aspekte der Rezeptionsgeschichte" in *Im Kleinen das Große suchen. Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis. Hans Haas zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2012), 22–36, 22.

any teleology in history.²⁷ Recent research continues to discuss the applicability of such approaches to the history of globalization: While global history is often criticised because of its obsession with structures and its distance to sources, adherers to a global microhistory often argue that the strengths of micro-historical approaches can adjust these problems because micro-historical studies are based on intensive source studies and usually accentuate the agency of actors adverse structures.²⁸ The studies of Angelika Epple are seminal for the development of such a microhistory methodology. Based on a discussion of gender historiography, Epple argues that “from-below-approaches,” like microhistory, postcolonial-, and gender studies, on the one hand, and global history approaches on the other, share two common concerns: the acknowledgment of categories like time, gender, and space as relative and the strict refusal of methodological nationalism.²⁹ She concludes that it is only possible to study the global by “starting the analysis with an actor-centered approach on a local level.”³⁰ By putting single actors or groups in the centre of a study, it is possible to question and reconfigure smooth meta-narratives by confronting them with the realities of the life of a specific actor.³¹ In her micro-historical study of the enterprise Stollwerck,³² Epple puts a strong emphasis on the role and agency of individual actors, which she calls “actors of globalization.”³³ Thus, tracing Wilson’s career in the League of Nations is not simply limited to Wilson’s life; by asking how Wilson’s career functioned, this paper contributes to the history of relations between the distant British dominion and the League of Nations, and it investigates the opportunities that the international organizations of the interwar period provided in terms of professional careers for a New Zealander.

However, tracing a border-crossing career confronts microhistory with a number of methodological problems: Lives beyond borders are hard to trace because of their tran-

27 Ibid., 22–23.

28 Angelika Epple, “Globale Mikrogeschichte. Auf dem Weg zu einer Geschichte der Relationen,” in *Im Kleinen das Große suchen. Mikrogeschichte in Theorie und Praxis. Hans Haas zum 70. Geburtstag*, eds. Ewald Hiebl and Ernst Langthaler (Innsbruck: Studien Verlag, 2012), 37–47, 37. For other studies combining microhistory and global history, cf. Rebekka Habermas, “Der Kolonialskandal Atakpame – eine Mikrogeschichte des Globalen,” *Historische Anthropologie* 17/2 (2009), 295–319; Natalie Zemon Davis, *Trickster Travels: A Sixteenth Century Muslim between Worlds* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2006); Wiebke Hoffmann, *Auswandern und Zurückkehren. Kaufmannsfamilien zwischen Bremen und Übersee* (Münster: Waxmann, 2009).

29 Angelika Epple, “Globale Mikrogeschichte,” 40.

30 Angelika Epple, “The Global, the Transnational, and the Subaltern: The Limits of History beyond the National Paradigm,” in *Beyond Methodological Nationalism: Research Methodologies for Transnational Studies*, eds. Anna Amelina, Thomas Faist, and Devrim Sel D. Nergiz (London: Routledge, 2012), 241–76, 269.

31 David Warren Sabean, “Reflections on Microhistory” in *Transnationale Geschichte. Themen, Tendenzen und Theorien*, eds. Gunilla-Friederike Budde, Sebastian Conrad, and Oliver Janz (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 2006), 275–89, 284.

32 Angelika Epple, *Das Unternehmen Stollwerck. Eine Mikrogeschichte der Globalisierung*, (Frankfurt/Main: Campus Verlag, 2010).

33 Ibid., 34. Cf. Ulbricht, *Divergierende Pfade*, 25. The research project “actors of globalization” at FU Berlin coordinated by Sebastian Conrad and Andreas Eckert uses global actorship as a heuristic tool to connect the micro and macro levels of historical research. By focusing on actors and their agency, the research group points out the specificities in the process of globalization. Cf. „Actors of Globalization,” <http://www.geschkult.fu-berlin.de/e/fmi/forschung/kultglobe1900/about/index.html> (accessed December 17, 2013).

snational activities,³⁴ and they tend to elude the categories of traditional biographic research. In recent years, the historiography has once again developed an increasing interest in biographical studies about border-crossers.³⁵ One of the core interests of these approaches is to develop a methodology that explains how these could open up new opportunities. Bernd Hausberger proposes in a foreword to an edited volume published in 2006 a very pragmatic definition of the "global biography," with its central points being the covering of great distances, the transgressing of religious, cultural, or political borders, and the awareness of the global scope of one's life.³⁶ The papers collected in this volume emphasize how the biographical subjects could enlarge their agency through border-crossing activity.³⁷ A comparable approach pursues the articles collected under the rubric "Opportunities" in the edited volume *Transnational Lives*, which claims that biographical research should focus on the mobility of its actors and not on their nationality.³⁸ Both volumes abjure any overall theoretical and methodological framework for the analysis and interpretation of the empirical studies. Madeleine Herren has suggested conceptualizing "transgression" as an approach to describe the specificity of the biographical subject.³⁹ She emphasizes that the crossing of national, political, professional, and social borders provided the subjects with an increased agency.⁴⁰ Current research emphasizes the "interest in individual lives"⁴¹ and discusses the applicability of "cosmopolitanism" as a valid tool to analyse such border-crossing lives.

For the study of Joseph Vivian Wilson, however, the concept of cosmopolitanism is problematic. In a speech given by Wilson in 1944 about the recruitment of personnel for the follow-up organisation of the League of Nations, he articulated a rather hostile attitude towards the idea of the League as a body of cosmopolitans and their occupation as international civil servants. In this speech he aligns the cosmopolitans as a group with "national misfits of all kinds" and forecasts that they will "press at the doors of the

34 Madeleine Herren, "Inszenierungen des globalen Subjekts. Vorschläge zur Typologie einer transgressiven Biographie", *Historische Anthropologie* 13 (2005): 1–18, 5. Regarding the role of international archives cf. Emma Rothschild, "The Archives of Universal History", *Journal of World History* 19/3 (2008): 375–401.

35 Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott, "Introduction," in *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present*, eds. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 1–14; Hillard von Thiessen and Christian Windler eds., *Akteure der Außenbeziehungen. Netzwerke und Interkulturalität im historischen Wandel* (Cologne: Böhlau Verlag, 2010); Johannes Paulmann, "Regionen und Welten. Arenen und Akteure regionaler Weltbeziehungen seit dem 19. Jahrhundert" *Historische Zeitschrift*, 296/3 (2013): 660–99.

36 Hausberger *Globalgeschichte*, 13.

37 For example cf. Rila Mukherjee, "Leo Africanus (1486/88–1535?). Ein andalusischer Exilant in Afrika und im Europa der Renaissance," in *Globale Lebensläufe. Menschen als Akteure im weltgeschichtlichen Geschehen*, ed. Hausberger, 28–45.

38 Deacon, Russell, and Woollacott, "Introduction," 7; for example cf. Kirsten McKenzie: "Opportunities and Impostors in the British Imperial World: The Tale of John Dow, Convict, and Edward, Viscount Lascelles" in *Transnational Lives: Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present*, eds. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 69–79.

39 Herren, *Transgressive Biographie*, 2.

40 *Ibid.*, 2.

41 Cf. Glenda Sluga and Julia Horne, "Cosmopolitanism: Its Pasts and Practices," *Journal of World History* 21/3 (2010): 369–74, 371.

international institutions” but that “they should be kept out.”⁴² Clearly, Wilson did not identify at all with the idealistic concept of cosmopolitanism nor did he accept it as an accurate description of his border-crossing life; indeed, he did his best to be perceived as a conventional diplomat and loyal bureaucrat, and thereby the use of the concept in a normative sense is at least not legitimized by self-attribution. However, the concept of cosmopolitanism still has considerable analytical worth. The sociologist Magdalena Nowicka points out that “research has identified and described (...) members of transnational communities as ‘cosmopolitans.’”⁴³ The secretariat of the League of Nations has been described as just such a transnational community because of its multinational composition.⁴⁴ Gerald Delanty has pointed out the importance of transnational space as part of what he calls the “cosmopolitan imagination.”⁴⁵ He argues that “[i]n this reconfiguration of borders, local and global forces are played out and borders in part lose their significance and take forms in which no clear lines can be drawn between inside and outside.”⁴⁶ Hsu-Ming Teo applied the concept of cosmopolitanism to the life of Rosita Forbes, a European explorer. Teo showed how Forbes used her position in various classes to exhaust the opportunities available to a woman in the early twentieth century,⁴⁷ which allowed her “to cross a remarkable number of national and geographical boundaries as well, as gender, racial, religious and cultural ones.”⁴⁸ Teo puts a strong emphasis on what she calls a “constant crossborder movement,”⁴⁹ a constant examination of boundaries. This also provides an enriching analytical perspective on Wilson’s career in which it becomes possible to describe his professional life not only as transnational but rather as ‘border-crossing career’⁵⁰; in other words, the overcoming and renegotiation of borders is not only a by-product of his career but also its distinctive characteristic. As a result Wilson is best described as a “professional border-crosser.” The analytical focus on the moment of transgression thus allows us to answer the question of ‘how’ he entered the backroom of the secretariat – and how this backroom provided him with increased professional agency.

42 Joseph Vivian Wilson, “Problems of an International Secretariat,” *International Affairs* 20/4 (1944): 542–54, 545.

43 Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco, “Introduction: Making Sense of Cosmopolitanism,” in *Cosmopolitanism in Practice*, eds. Magdalena Nowicka and Maria Rovisco, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 1–17.

44 Patricia Clavin, “Defining Transnationalism,” *Contemporary European History* 14/4 (2005): 421–39, 438.

45 Gerard Delanty, *The Cosmopolitan Imagination: The Renewal of Critical Social Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 7.

46 *Ibid.*

47 Hsu-Ming Teo, “Gypsy in the Sun: The Transnational Life of Rosita Forbes,” *Transnational Lives. Biographies of Global Modernity, 1700–Present*, eds. Desley Deacon, Penny Russell, and Angela Woollacott (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010): 273–85.

48 *Ibid.*, 284.

49 *Ibid.*, 284.

50 Regarding the analytical worth of career to biographical research, cf. Daniel Lambert and Alan Lester, “Introduction: Imperial Spaces, Imperial Subjects” in *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careerings in the Long Nineteenth Century*, eds. Daniel Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–31.

"He has worked very well": Wilson's Career in the League of Nations Secretariat

This section analyses the career of Wilson within the League of Nations and shows how his decision to become an international civil servant enlarged his professional agency, thus allowing him to become a backroom boy. Whilst the decision to move to England to study in Cambridge remained – as a British subject – an activity within the British Empire, joining the League of Nations not only meant crossing national borders but also essentially affected his legal status. The secretariat was likewise transformed during the interwar period: The beginning of the international crisis in the early 1930s stimulated an administrative reform within the secretariat that allowed Wilson, who used the 1920s to steady his position in the secretariat, to bring his career to its zenith. This micro-historical analysis of his professional advance in the secretariat provides a detailed insight into the scope of action the League's secretariat offered for its employees.

After graduating from Canterbury College, New Zealand in 1915 with first-class honours in Latin and Greek, Wilson eventually joined the army and participated in World War I as part of the New Zealand Expeditionary Force in France. Following his military service, he was accepted for a course of study at Trinity College, Cambridge – financially supported through a scholarship for New Zealand Veterans. In 1921, after finishing his studies with distinction,⁵¹ Wilson set the course for his whole professional life. Despite his excellent academic qualification, he decided against a career in academia, against returning to New Zealand, and against entering the British Civil Service; instead, he participated in the selection procedure for the Secretariat of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in September⁵² "and passed with firsts for Great Britain."⁵³ As a result of his performance in this test he became a member of the Diplomatic Division of the ILO-Secretariat in spring 1922 and thereby an international civil servant. Most likely the field of activities of this section appealed to him: The Diplomatic Division was responsible for organizing and hosting conferences and it worked closely with the representatives of the member states.⁵⁴

Apparently he estimated his career prospects in the international organisation to be higher than in the elitist environment of the British civil service. Unfortunately, the personnel file of Wilson in the ILO archive was destroyed in the late 1970s and thus it is impossible to make any secure statements about his career in this organisation.⁵⁵ Most likely he was not fully satisfied with his work at the Diplomatic Division as he repeatedly

51 "New Zealanders at Home" *Evening Post*, August 17, 1921, 9.

52 Application of J. V. Wilson, May 2, 1923, LoN 5908/1/3788.

53 Ibid.

54 Steve Hughes, "Come in from the Cold: Labour, the ILO and the International Labour Standards Regime," in *Global Governance: Critical Perspectives*, eds. Rorden Wilkinson and Steve Hughes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 165.

55 In the ILO Archives just his pension file is left. cf. Wilson, Mr. Joseph Vivian, Personal File of Member No. 481. ILO Archives.

tried to switch to a position within the League of Nations. Working in an environment that concentrated on questions of social policy and the protection of workers was not satisfactory for Wilson who most likely saw the playground of high diplomacy as a more appropriate field of activity. The delegate of New Zealand to the League of Nations, Sir James Allen, tried to support Wilson in this case with a letter to Secretary-General Eric Drummond:

There is on the staff of the International Labour Office a New Zealander, J. V. Wilson by name, who, whilst much interested in the work he is doing seems to be more attracted by that of the League. (...) he would prefer one (=an appointment) on the Political or Intellectual Co-operation section.⁵⁶

This advance by James Allen shows clearly that Wilson maintained contact to the national delegation of New Zealand during the general assembly every year. Furthermore, Allan's letter to Drummond indicates that politicians had vested interest in placing officials from their countries in the secretariat. For small countries in particular, those officials played a crucial role in liaison work. But due to arrangements between the ILO and the League of Nations secretariat, it was quite difficult to conduct such a transfer of personnel,⁵⁷ even though Eric Drummond was impressed "in view of his [Wilson's] exceptionally good qualifications."⁵⁸ Wilson did not switch to the League secretariat until July 1923 when, after several attempts, Eric Drummond offered him a position among his personal staff.⁵⁹ At twenty-nine years of age, Wilson became a member of the League of Nations secretariat; after a short transitional period in the Section for Social Questions and Opium, he continued to work as Eric Drummond's personal assistant in the administrative heart of the League of Nations secretariat.

Wilson was part of the Section for Social Questions and Opium Traffic for half a year as an interim period until the post in the personal staff of Eric Drummond was vacant. In this function Wilson's ambitions for a career in international diplomacy became obvious: With his ILO background an occupation in this section seemed rather well fitting, but his behaviour demonstrated that this field of work did not appeal to him at all – for whatever reason. The chief of this section, Dame Rachel Crowley, struck a rather harsh tone about his working spirit:

Mr. Wilson did most excellent work during the first three months with this Section. Lately, he seemed to lose interest, and he failed to complete, before leaving the Section, a piece of work which I had asked him specially to do. (...) Mr. Wilson will probably find it much easier to work with a man than under a woman, as he is very young for his age and resents criticism of any kind.⁶⁰

56 James Allen to Eric Drummond, September 5, 1922, LoN S 908/1/3788.

57 Eric Drummond to James Allen, September 7, 1922, LoN S 908/1/3788.

58 Ibid.

59 Eric Drummond to Joseph Vivian Wilson, July 5, 1923, LoN S 908/1/3788.

60 Mr. J.V. Wilson, Report on probationary period, January 28, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

Wilson tried to defend himself against these accusations without effect⁶¹ – the secretary-general decided to extend Wilson's probation term for another six months.⁶² This incident clearly indicates Wilson's attitude towards his work: He obviously saw an appointment in this section as a necessary evil and a step on his way to the Personnel Staff of Eric Drummond. It seemed that Wilson did not identify with fields of work like social politics or opium traffic. Instead, he used his appointment to strengthen his connections to the other sections and to demonstrate his abilities and his usefulness: He did voluntary work for the Information Section and kept himself informed about the work of the League by reading minutes of the Council.⁶³

In any case, in January 1924 Wilson transferred, as intended, to Eric Drummond's personal staff. While he served in this position there were no complaints recorded in Wilson's personnel files. The secretary-general found "his work entirely satisfactory in every way."⁶⁴

Most likely, the secretary-general may have appreciated Wilson's work and appearance as one who was socialised into British society just like himself and with whom he shared common experiences. In her dissertation, Katharina Erdmenger has demonstrated that the professional background of most of the League's servants with British origins was comparable with the education of the typical civil servant in Britain.⁶⁵ For example, a close colleague of Wilson and later under secretary-general Francis Paul Walters also read classics (at Oxford). Research has also emphasized that the British civil service tradition – in which Eric Drummond was deeply rooted – was a role model for the structure of the League's secretariat.⁶⁶ Therefore, the direct professional environment of Wilson valued his habitus and at the same time, due to the commitment to national heterogeneity of the League of Nations, his origins were not a handicap but an advantage in distinguishing him from the many British. Another common experience Wilson shared with his colleagues was military service in World War I. The formative influence of the war experience is especially visible in the transformation of military ranks into the civil secretariat: Under secretary-general Walters is often addressed as "Captain"⁶⁷ in informal secretariat correspondences. Thus, Wilson was a good fit in the circle of colleagues in Eric Drummond's personal staff.

In the years that followed, Wilson's professional career moved from strength to strength: He was promoted to 'Chef de Cabinet' of the secretary-general, and as A-Member of the

61 Observations on the report submitted by the chief of the Social Questions Section and Opium Traffic Section on the work of Mr. J. V. Wilson, February 27, 1924, LoN S 907/1/3788; Addendum, February 29, 1924, LoN, S 908/1/3788.

62 Eric Drummond to Joseph Vivian Wilson, February 18, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

63 Observations, February 27, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

64 Note, June 16, 1925, LoN S 908/1/3788.

65 Erdmenger, *Diener?*, 48–9.

66 *Ibid.*, 56; Edward Newman, "The International Civil Service: Still a Viable Concept?" *Global Society* 21/3 (2007): 436.

67 Cf. Eric Colban to Miss Howard, March 24, 1933, LoN S 902/1/3684.

secretariat he began to take on more responsibility and influence.⁶⁸ As a hinge between the secretary-general and the remaining sections, he managed to acquire a position where he could play an important role in the bureaucratic structure of the secretariat. In an internal evaluation of Wilson's work in 1929 concerning his annual increment, his duties were described as follows:

*Mr. Wilson's main duty is to assist in preparing for the Secretary-General's decision all official work submitted to him, except that which relates to questions of staff. This involves not only the study of questions sent down for decisions from the various sections, but also a certain amount of direct action, drafting of letters and so on in regard to matters which do not come under the field of any particular Section or which involve the personal or semi-official action of the Secretary-General.*⁶⁹

Wilson's career began to stagnate in the early 1930s partly for the previously mentioned reasons and partly because of Eric Drummond's appraisal that Wilson should stick with administrative tasks. According to Drummond, Wilson's character was not suitable for active political work although he was deemed an efficient bureaucrat.⁷⁰ Wilson was definitely not part of the first tier of the League's civil servants, but as an important actor of the second tier, he was involved in virtually every decision the secretariat made during his mandate. As a result his characteristic signature can be found on literally every file produced in the secretariat. But Wilson's advancement to the highest posts of the secretariat became more and more difficult since the highest posts in the secretariat were usually recruited from the five permanent Members of the Council, and when "there had been changes, through resignation, in each of these posts except the first, and in every case a Frenchman had been succeeded by a Frenchman, a German by a German, an Italian by an Italian, Japanese by Japanese."⁷¹ Such political considerations played an important role in the secretariat and made Wilson's career advancement more difficult: His application as Chief of the Document Service was refused in 1931.⁷²

However, the international crisis of the 1930s helped Wilson to reach his career zenith in the secretariat due to internal reforms: Secretary-General Eric Drummond decided to resign from his post after thirteen years and was succeeded by his deputy Joseph Avenol. Although his decision to resign was common knowledge for quite a while, the Manchukuo Crisis and the subsequent withdrawal of Japan from the League of Nations played a role in accelerating his decision.⁷³ Although Drummond tried to prevent the election of Joseph Avenol as new secretary-general, after the election of Harold Butler as Director of the ILO in 1932 he could not keep the highest position of the other large

68 Certificate as to grant annual increment, September 26, 1929, LoN S 908/1/3788.

69 Annual increment, J. V. Wilson, October 17, 1929, LoN S 908/1/3788.

70 Eric Drummond to Joseph Avenol, May 25, 1933, LoN S 908/1/3788.

71 Francis Paul Walters, *A History of the League of Nations*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 556.

72 Head of the Personnel Office and Joseph Vivian Wilson, October 2, 1931, LoN S 908/1/3788.

73 James Barros, *Office Without Power: Secretary-General Sir Eric Drummond, 1919–1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 381.

international organisation from being filled by a Frenchman.⁷⁴ The accounts of former League servants usually emphasize the smooth transition between Avenol and Drummond: "Under Avenol it (=the secretariat) maintained to the full the technical qualities which it had developed under Drummond."⁷⁵ However, on a personal level, the secretariat member and later League chronicler Francis Paul Walters expressed open antipathy toward Avenol after the war: "His leadership of the Secretariat had been marred by grave faults, especially in the last years."⁷⁶

For Wilson, this transition to Avenol was crucial: As a member of the secretary-general's personal staff he was particularly bound to Drummond. In an unusually insistent manner, Wilson asked Drummond to tell him if he was "to be transferred to some existing post (...), or to a new post, of what nature and with what nature and with what status."⁷⁷ But, along with the change at the head of the secretariat an administrative reform was conducted. Accounts of the administrative history of the League usually describe this reform programmatic as "the shift to the French system."⁷⁸ The former member of the information section, Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, who wrote the only comprehensive study of the League's secretariat in 1945, understood this process as a centralization of the administrative structure of the League. In contrast to the previous – British – system of internal and informal agreements, the new system tried to create an institution to supervise and coordinate the work of the growing league sections and organization.⁷⁹ The primary aim of this administrative reform was, in Ranshofen-Wertheimer's later assessment, "a synthesis which would combine the obvious technical advantages of the British filing and registry system with a stricter over-all centralisation and more thorough hierarchical organisation."⁸⁰

The most apparent effect of this reform was the establishment of the new Central Section in 1933. According to the League's Office Rules, the scope of activities of the Central Section was described as follows: "The Central Section assists the Secretary-General in his capacity as Secretary of the Assembly and the Council, and, generally, in the co-ordination of the work of the Secretariat."⁸¹ Joseph Avenol decided to assign Joseph Vivian Wilson as Chief of this Section.⁸² This promotion was connected with a considerable raise in Wilson's salary. The post of a Chief of Section was not among the highest ranks of the secretariat, but Ranshofen-Wertheimer emphasized that the Chief of the Central Section had the opportunity "to override opinions and decisions taken by directors in many instances."⁸³ Because of this centralization, the remaining Directors and Chief of

74 Walters, *History*, 557.

75 *Ibid.*, 560.

76 *Ibid.*, 557.

77 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Eric Drummond, May 25, 1933, LoN S 908/1/3788.

78 Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *International Secretariat*, 152.

79 *Ibid.*, 100.

80 *Ibid.*, 153.

81 As cited in: Anique van Ginneken, *Historical Dictionary of the League of Nations*, (Langham: Scarecrow Press, 2006), 55.

82 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Joseph Avenol, July 4, 1933, LoN S 908/1/3788.

83 Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *International Secretariat*, 101.

Sections of the secretariat lost much of their autonomy vis-à-vis the secretary-general who “acted through an increasingly powerful Central Section which assumed in many respects the rôle of the cabinet in the French meaning of this term.”⁸⁴ The choice of Wilson for this post was obvious – he had already performed most of the duties of the new section.⁸⁵ Aside from his administrative duties, many of Wilson’s activities in this position were comparable to those of diplomats in the interwar period: Wilson bargained and negotiated with delegates from many nations, and during the General Assembly he was able to act as a high-ranking official of the League of Nations.

In his new position as Chief of the Central Section, he even overcame the dependence on the acting secretary-general: As head of the Central Section, he was not part of the personal staff of the acting secretary-general, although he still worked in a position close to him. It was Drummond’s advocacy that helped Wilson to fill this position. The departing secretary-general recommended his service in a letter to Avenol in 1933: “(...) [T]herefore, I am certain that he would willingly agree to take up a post of an administrative character, for which I think also he is very well fitted, (...).”⁸⁶

In short, the environment of the League secretariat and the emerging crisis in the international system allowed Wilson to follow a career path that could not have been anticipated for a New Zealand-born subject in the system of the British Empire. A micro-historical analysis of Wilson’s career shows that the international organization of the League of Nations provided new career opportunities for employees from small and peripheral states in the interwar period. In his function within the secretariat Wilson was, besides administrative tasks, able to negotiate with the delegates and representatives of the League’s member countries, and thus avoided the obstacles which had originally dissuaded him from becoming a diplomat in the British service. The following section proceeds to analyse Wilson’s activities outside of the international secretariat. By studying the terms of Wilson’s annual leave it is possible to see how on the one hand he used his mission for the League of Nations to facilitate his career within the secretariat, and on the other hand he staged himself as an influential diplomat beyond Geneva in dominion-related circles.

“The First League Official to go There” – Wilson’s Journeys as a League Official

Wilson’s work in the secretariat was not limited to Geneva. His mission documents and travel expenses show that travelling and representation in foreign countries was an integral part of his work; he even used his annual vacation to do voluntary work for the secretariat. Wilson again crossed borders – and not just geographical ones. In fact, he staged

84 Ibid., 155.

85 Report of the Central Section, April 9, 1934, LoN 50/10535/9771.

86 Eric Drummond to Joseph Avenol, May 25, 1933, LoN S 908/1/3788.

himself as an international representative of the League's secretariat and thus stepped out of the backroom. The idea Johannes Paulmann has recently articulated in his article about globe-trotterism ("Weltläufertum") is central to this point: Travellers often aspired at private or social advancement through their voyages, especially after their return.⁸⁷ It is clear that Wilson used his voyages likewise to facilitate his career within the secretariat as well as to strengthen his networks in the political society of New Zealand. This idea of travelling as instrument to ensure professional and social advancement is an extremely interesting one in Wilson's case. Whilst travellers usually visit foreign countries on their voyages, Wilson in contrast came returned to his mother country not as visitor but as an official for the League of Nations. The analysis of his journeys allows us a deep insight into his behaviour aside from his daily work routine in the secretariat, as well as into the relation to his mother country. During his occupation at the League, Wilson left the secretariat five times for a longer voyage to his home country: in 1924/25, in 1927/28, in 1931/32, in 1934/35, and in 1937/38. These journeys produced large amounts of source material: For each there is a file with correspondences, reports, bills, and detailed information about his activities in New Zealand. Furthermore, the local newspapers usually reported on Wilson's arrival and stay. Therefore, the source material for this aspect of Wilson's professional life is considerably secure. This section analyses the role those journeys played in Wilson's career and investigates Wilson's self-staging.

All civil servants of the League were entitled to visit their home countries on a paid leave once per year. This so called 'annual leave' was introduced to ensure that there was equality between members from European and non-European countries as far as possible.⁸⁸ Wilson was an exceptional case for the secretariat's administration: The Staff Regulation estimated twenty-six days as the overall journey time for officials on annual leave. But for New Zealanders this was not a satisfactory solution since twenty-six days barely sufficed for the outward journey.⁸⁹ Therefore, a special arrangement was made for Wilson that would serve as a model for other servants from distant countries. His leave time was considerably elongated, but he could only go on leave every three years.⁹⁰

Nevertheless, his leaves seemed to pose a serious threat to his professional advancement since he usually left the secretariat from the end of October until the middle of March.⁹¹ This meant that right after the closing of the General Assembly of the League an important member of the secretariat dropped out of contact for months. The results and resolutions of the assembly had to be implemented during this time and the secretariat was quite a busy place. Therefore, his absence every three years meant considerable additional

87 Paulmann, "Regionen und Welten," 697.

88 Cf. Ranshofen Wertheimer, *Secretariat*, 299. Especially in the late 1930s this arrangement led to problems because the annual leave only allowed officials to travel to their mother countries. After the annexation of Austria into the German Empire there were several officials without citizenship. However, in Wilson's case there were no complications.

89 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Eric Drummond, May 15, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

90 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Professor Attolico, January 9, 1925, LoN S 908/1/3788.

91 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Eric Drummond, May 15, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

work for the other members of Eric Drummond's personal staff. Despite the sympathy the other officials had for Wilson's circumstances this was surely a threat to his career, which seemed to disqualify him for higher positions.

But Wilson developed a strategy to cope with this situation without abdicating travelling to New Zealand. In a letter detailing the exact arrangement for this first leave in 1924, he suggested using his absence for a considerable amount of networking activities, as he was "certainly (...) the first official of the League to go there."⁹²

Thus, he turned the disadvantage of the distance of his mother country to an advantage: New Zealand, as an important part of the British Commonwealth, was at the periphery of the League of Nations system and Wilson saw a necessity to work there for the international case: "Many people [are] well disposed towards the League."⁹³ The periphery position of New Zealand in the League system was made obvious in the brochure *The League of Nations: A Pictorial Survey* published by the League of Nations Information section in 1929. In it only a small part of New Zealand is actually visible, the largest part of the two islands is chopped off in the map. Eric Drummond agreed with Wilson's appraisalment:

*There is, as you say, a large amount of latent goodwill, but very little knowledge. I therefore think it is of great importance that you should, as far as possible, undertake some lectures on the League work while you are in New Zealand.*⁹⁴

Wilson even expanded his commitment: "I may find that I can append a few days usefully in one or two Australian cities explaining some aspects of the League's work (...)."⁹⁵ Drummond appreciated this proposal and even supported him:

*In these very distant countries we should take every opportunity of members of the Secretariat going on leave to do propaganda work, and therefore I am inclined in such cases to suggest that a fortnight's extra leave should be given.*⁹⁶

Perhaps Wilson showed this commitment because he was a convinced idealist and wanted to spread the ideals of the League of Nations and collective peace-keeping in his home country, but my study of Wilson suggests that he mostly tried to show his goodwill and commitment to the League of Nations in order to advance his career. Although he left the secretariat every three years, in this time he accomplished tasks which could not have been completed by most of the other League of Nations servants. In addition, if Wilson had already been a convinced and engaged internationalist, he would have already known what to do in New Zealand and who to contact to spread propaganda for the League. However, he needed to ask the Information Section for those contacts. Wilson, who staged himself as a capable advocate of the League of Nations case in Oceania, was

92 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Administrative Committee, June 6, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

93 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Eric Drummond, November 3, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

94 Eric Drummond to Joseph Vivian Wilson, November 6, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

95 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Eric Drummond, November 3, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

96 Eric Drummond to Pierre Comert, Minute Sheet, November 4, 1924, LoN S 908/1/3788.

actually dependent on assistance and contacts from the Lithuanian princess Gabrielle Radziwill who worked in the Information Section. She gave him the addresses of contact persons on New Zealand and equipped him with Information Section literature.⁹⁷

In the following years, this procedure was maintained and even expanded. Both secretary-generals, Eric Drummond and Joseph Avenol, were aware that Wilson's willingness to work during his annual leave was very useful, and they even began to send him to other countries while he was on his way to New Zealand: In 1927 he held a lecture in the Institute for International Affairs in Montreal⁹⁸, in 1928 in the Institute for Pacific Relations on Hawai'i⁹⁹, and in 1935 he visited the branch office of the League in Bombay.¹⁰⁰ Eric Drummond cherished his mission reports: "I think they clearly show the value of a certain amount of time being granted to members of the Secretariat who visit their homes in far distant countries on leave for education work in the country."¹⁰¹ Thus, Drummond ensured that the countries in the peripheries were visited by "a man on the spot" who could act as a broker between the local League of Nations Unions and the Geneva-based League.

The model of Wilson doing voluntary work during the annual leave became a successful one within the secretariat, especially in times of economic exertion as an Internal Circular of 1932 shows: "[I]n view of the urgent need for the strictest economy, it is desired that official missions, particularly those undertaken for purpose of liaison, should as far as possible be undertaken by officials who proceed to their mother countries on ordinary leave at the expense of the League."¹⁰²

Wilson used his activities in New Zealand to stage himself as an official representative of the League. He met important politicians and negotiated with them on equal terms: In 1925 he met the foreign minister of New Zealand, Sir Francis Bell, who was at the same time chair of the League of Nations Union,¹⁰³ and in 1935 he conferred with delegates from the Australian Foreign Ministry about the establishment of closer diplomatic relations between Australia and Geneva.¹⁰⁴ Although his employer was an international organization not a national government he was able to enjoy the same legal privileges as national diplomats.

The comparatively extensive media coverage of his visits shows that Wilson's activities in New Zealand and Australia were followed with broad interest and curiosity by the public and media representatives: "It is not often that on this side of the world the public are able to get an inside view of international problems as studied in Geneva," the *Evening Post* stated.¹⁰⁵ Most of his activities involved lectures and presentations at local offices

97 Gabriele Radziwill to Mr. Cunnings, January 27, 1925, LoN S 908/1/388.

98 Minute, October 1, 1928, LoN 30/62570/57547.

99 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Mr. Makay, October 5, 1927, LoN S 908/1/3788.

100 Pablo de Azcárate to Joseph Vivian Wilson, January 29, 1935, LoN 50/13629/1719.

101 Note, June 15, 1931, LoN 50/23488/17785.

102 Note by the Under Secretary-General in charge of internal administration, June 21, 1932, LoN 50/6655/1719.

103 "Ignorance and Apathy" *Evening Post*, February 10, 1925, 4.

104 "Personal" *The Argus*, March 2, 1935, 22.

105 "League of Nations" *Evening Post*, February 4, 1925, 9.

of League of Nations Unions in New Zealand and Australia.¹⁰⁶ His lectures were rather unspectacular: He presented the structure and aims of the League and talked about the language problems in the multilingual secretariat.¹⁰⁷ Most likely Wilson only passed on the slides and instructions he had received from the information section and added a few personal anecdotes. But Wilson did not restrict himself to propaganda work: He clearly saw himself as a diplomat – he represented the secretariat and its interest – but had no political agenda of his own. In 1927 he requested that the sections of the League of Nations inform him about important topics that he should discuss with governmental representatives because “it may be a year or so before Canadian or Australian members of the Secretariat visit Canada or Australia respectively.”¹⁰⁸

The long and extensive mission reports Wilson wrote about every visit to New Zealand after 1927 illustrate his desire to emphasize the dimension of his engagement. In those reports he listed meticulously his activities and the local political situation.¹⁰⁹ The sheer amount of lectures he held during the annual leave shows how much the role of representative for the League of Nations appealed to him.

However, it is also interesting to note that Wilson did not present himself as an expert: He even showed an open ignorance about topics like social welfare. In fact, the interwar feminist and member of Information Section Gabrielle Radziwill criticized the report from his annual leave in 1930/31 because he did not mention the social situation of New Zealand and asked: “Is it due to the fact that no such interest exists, or that no effort was made to awaken it (...)?”¹¹⁰ Wilson clearly demonstrated the practical worth of his travels for the secretariat. His activities in London,¹¹¹ Bombay, and Montreal even indicate that he tried not to limit his missions to New Zealand or Oceania. It seems that Drummond saw him as especially able in tasks concerning the British Empire: His socialisation in the British society of New Zealand and his education at Cambridge made it easy for Wilson to receive admission to the elitist circles in the British Empire, and his excellent French served him well in Montreal. Therefore, the League of Nations missions provided him with the opportunity to take over representative functions on the diplomatic stage.

“The Ultimate Backroom Boy”? Wilson’s Career after the League of Nations

In this third section I want to analyse the last stage of Wilson’s career: his resignation from the League’s secretariat and his entry in the diplomatic service of New Zealand. After terminating his contract as an international civil servant, Wilson decided to return

106 For example, “Peace on Earth” *Evening Post*, February 6, 1925, 3.

107 “The League Secretariat’s Work” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 19, 1925, 8. “Peace and Security” *The Register*, March 4, 1925, 10.

108 Confidential circular, October 27, 1927, LoN 30/63570/57547.

109 For example: Joseph Vivian Wilson, Mission report, May 29, 1931, LoN 50/23488/17785.

110 Gabrielle Radziwill to Joseph Vivian Wilson, December 14, 1931, LoN 50/23488/17785.

111 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Internal Control Office, October 24, 1927, LoN 30/63570/57547.

to the service of his mother country and to accept an eminently respectable occupation there. His decision to leave Europe was embedded in a period of rapid developments throughout the late 1930s. The everyday work life of the Geneva secretariat was extremely influenced by the political changes in Europe. Frank Paul Walters draws a gloomy picture of the situation in Geneva after the outbreak of war in Europe:

*For months before the war started the permanent services of the League had been living in Geneva in the state of mind of a man in daily expectation of sentence of exile, or death. They continued to carry on the normal work of their various departments, conscious all the time that it might at any moment come to an abrupt and even a violent end. They drew up plans for future meetings and future studies, knowing only too well that probably their meetings would never be held and their studies would never be completed.*¹¹²

However, as Ranshofen-Wertheimer emphasized: "An administration of a certain size, staffed with permanent officials, is a world in itself and that its activities become self-perpetuating."¹¹³ But the work of the League was becoming increasingly difficult:¹¹⁴ Mobility in Europe was no longer warranted, and the Swiss Government tried to urge the League of Nations to leave Switzerland because it feared that the Axis Powers could consider the activities of the League a breach of its neutrality.¹¹⁵ Already by 1938 several sections had been transferred to America.¹¹⁶ Secretary-General Joseph Avenol, who sympathised with the Vichy Government, was "less than half-hearted in regard of the League itself."¹¹⁷ In May 1940 he started to gradually disintegrate the League. He sent an Internal Circular that forced 160 members of the secretariat "to opt immediately between suspension of contract and resignation."¹¹⁸ Although Wilson was not one of these servants, he also decided to leave the secretariat. The deputy secretary-general, Sean Lester, noted this decision in his diary: "Walters, Loveday, Wilson and others, went off to leave their families somewhere safer."¹¹⁹ Joseph Avenol accepted his resignation from his duties on July 2, 1940.

After leaving Geneva in 1940 Wilson moved with his family to London. He managed to get a post as an assistant director at the Royal Institute for International Affairs in Chatham House.¹²⁰ He worked there from 1941–1944 and one of his projects was the publication *The International Secretariat of the Future. Lessons from Experience by a Group*

112 Walters, *History*, 801.

113 Ranshofen-Wertheimer, *International Secretariat*, 373.

114 Zara Steiner, *The Triumph of the Dark: European International History 1933–1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 175–9.

115 James Barros, *Betrayal from Within: Joseph Avenol, Secretary-General of the League of Nations, 1933–1940*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1969), 210; Walters, *History*, 801.

116 Walters, *History*, 809.

117 *Ibid.*, 810.

118 Internal circular 43 1940, May 15, 1940, LoN 18A/39002. The difference between suspension and resignation mattered in questions of pension and gratuity.

119 Diary of Sean Lester, May 29, 1940, LoN Pp 274, 433.

120 Templeton, "Wilson, Joseph Vivian".

of *Former Officials of the League of Nations*.¹²¹ For this survey he participated in a study group of former League civil servants. The other participants were Eric Drummond, Thannasis Aghnides, Eric Colban, Adrianus Pelt, and Francis Paul Walters. All had worked for the League's secretariat in high positions. Wilson summarized the argumentation of this project in a lecture he gave for the Royal Institute of International Affairs in 1944.¹²² Generally, the study group came to the conclusion that the reasons for the failure of the League of Nations were not administrative in nature, on the contrary, the administration of the League was held up as a role model for its successor.¹²³

In this speech Wilson's remarks concerning the personal composition of the international secretariat are of special interest. He emphasized the importance of the international loyalty of the staff but insisted likewise on national bonds for the League's secretariat: "It does not mean that he cannot, or should not, be a loyal citizen of his own country. Instead, it is only such a one whose international loyalty is likely to wear well."¹²⁴ His experiences in the secretariat showed him that an official could only work successfully if he had the support of his mother country behind him. This experience strengthened his (previously mentioned) opinion against cosmopolitanism. Wilson saw what happened to officials who had lost the support of their national states – as in the case of the Austrian Member of the secretariat, Egon Ranshofen-Wertheimer, who lost his citizenship after the Anschluss, a turn of events that complicated his work for the secretariat immensely.¹²⁵ Wilson emphasized the importance of nationality for international civil servants but made clear that the loyalty to the international organization must play a greater role: "In Geneva it was possible to encounter a tongue-tied Frenchman, a stupid Italian, a breezy Spaniard, an uncensorious Norwegian, a repressed Australian, and an egalitarian Englishman; but the majority conformed."¹²⁶

At this stage Wilson saw that his professional future lay most likely in international administration. His activities in the study group, as well as his numerous reviews of literature about international administration during his time in London, show that he wanted to keep a foot in the door of the international administration. Perhaps he saw a high post as an adviser in the post-war international organization as both desirable and attainable. This would not have been extraordinary as quite a few former League of Nations officials transferred their expertise to the staff of the early United Nations. It may be that this option even formed the main reason for the Wilsons deciding to remain in Europe during the war. Apparently, the third secretary-general of the League, Sean Lester, already indicated to Wilson that he might be considered for a post.¹²⁷ But due

121 Eric Drummond et al., *The international Secretariat of the Future: Lessons from Experience by a Group of Former Officials of the League of Nations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1944).

122 Joseph Vivian Wilson, "Problems of an International Secretariat," *International Affairs* 20/4 (1944): 542–54; 545.

123 Ibid., 548, 547, 551.

124 Wilson, "Problems," 546.

125 Madeleine Herren, "Netzwerke," in *Dimensionen Internationaler Geschichte*, eds. Jost Dülffer and Wilfried Loth (Munich: Oldenbourg Verlag, 2012), 126.

126 Ibid., 545.

127 Joseph Vivian Wilson to Sean Lester, February 6, 1944, LoN SLP 194 Jun 2VD.

to political developments in 1944, Wilson received a job offer that attracted him even more, as a letter from Wilson to Sean Lester reveals:

*As it is, things have taken a new turn for me in that I have accepted an offer by the New Zealand Government to return to New Zealand and take up a job as what I think they call Political Adviser in the Department of External Affairs. It is a very small Department, of course, and we cannot be expected to develop to the extent of Canberra or Ottawa, but still we have our problems too, and I am happy to be given this chance to help in solving them.*¹²⁸

The Foreign Ministry of New Zealand began to send permanent diplomatic missions to other nations during the early 1940s when it became obvious that they could no longer rely on the strength of the British Empire.¹²⁹ Wilson's role was to help prepare personnel and structures to develop official foreign relations in preparation for the ratification of the Westminster Statute in 1947. Because of his administrative experience as an international civil servant, he was an ideal recruit. The position as political adviser was his admission ticket into New Zealand's diplomacy world. In the Department of External Affairs he played an important role in the conception of the personnel and in the institutional foundation.¹³⁰ But his major interest was his engagement in international affairs from a national perspective: He was part of New Zealand's delegation to the San Francisco Conference and later he represented his mother country at the General Assembly of the United Nations.¹³¹

His decision to refuse the job offer made by Lester and to return to New Zealand substantiates the argument of this paper: At the moment when the limitations which prevented Wilson from becoming a diplomat ceased to exist, he used the first opportunity to enter the Foreign Ministry of New Zealand. When the de-dominionization of New Zealand entered a critical level he was no longer constrained and could return to his mother country.

Wilson concluded his professional career as the first ambassador of New Zealand in Paris – without a doubt a prestigious conclusion to a diplomat's career. This appointment preceded a short argument between Wilson and Secretary of State Alister McIntosh: "J. V. would much prefer to be Deputy Secretary to having Paris and he has been extremely angry with my over the whole business."¹³² This incident reveals the limitations of Wilson's course taken in life: While he had more practical experience in international admin-

128 Ibid.

129 David Capie, "New Zealand and the World: Imperial, International and Global Relations" in *The New Oxford History of New Zealand*, ed. Giselle Byrnes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 573–99, 574.

130 Alister McIntosh to Frank Corner, August 18 1953, cit. a.: Ian McGibbon, ed., *Unofficial Channels: Letters between Alister McIntosh and Foss Shanahan, George Laking and Frank Corner 1946–1966*, (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1999), 148.

131 "Zealand delegates and advisers at the International Conference at San Francisco" *Evening Post*, July 14, 1945, 10; Malcolm Templeton, *An Eye, an Ear and a Voice: 50 years in New Zealand's External Relations* (Wellington: Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 1993), 102; "Officials Return" *Evening Post*, February 25, 1952, 4.

132 Alister McIntosh to Frank Corner, June 20, 1955, cit. a.: Ian McGibbon, *Unofficial Channels*, 148.

istration and diplomacy than most other New Zealanders, he was not able to enforce his will. Wilson had stayed seventeen years in Europe and therefore had no experience with New Zealand's politics. It was probably because of this, as well as because of his excellent command of French and his advanced years, that it was decided to send him in 1956 first as minister than as full ambassador to Paris. This post was of extreme importance for New Zealand's diplomatic service because it was the only diplomatic mission in Europe at the time. Wilson was received in an audience with the British Queen in May 1956; afterwards he began his service in France and remained there until his retirement in December 1959.¹³³

Wilson looked back on a long professional life first as international civil servant and later as diplomat – a career that was hardly thinkable for a New Zealander before the ratification of the Westminster Statute. He died on December 29, 1977 at the age of 83 in a hospital near Wellington.

Conclusions

By analysing the professional career of the international civil servant Joseph Vivian Wilson this paper contributed to an investigation of the career opportunities the newly established international institutions of the interwar period offered for citizens of small states. The key to Wilson's career laid in the political context of the interwar period: The engagement of the Dominion of New Zealand in the League of Nations opened up a new career path for Wilson, which would have been not possible before. This micro-historical analysis of his activities within the secretariat has revealed the career opportunities of a New Zealander within the international bureaucracy and how the political situation of the interwar period, as well as the administrative developments within the secretariat, allowed him to reach his career zenith. The detailed reconstruction of Wilson's activities within the secretariat showed how Wilson was perceived by his seniors and how they reacted to his behaviour as well as to his New Zealand origins.

This paper has described Wilson's life as a global biography in which transgression is a pivotal aspect. By stepping across borders Wilson was able to enlarge his professional agency and to develop his career. Therefore, he can be best described as a professional border-crosser: Wilson's career was determined by three central moments of border-crossing: (1) The decision to leave the professional system of the British Empire and to enter the international administration allowed him to avoid the limitations that a New Zealander would have been exposed to in British society. (2) During his triennial leave he was able on the one hand to improve his standing within the secretariat and on the other to foster his networks in New Zealand by meeting with high-ranking officials. Through his activities as official representative of the League of Nations he was even able to go beyond his occupation in administration and act in a position similar to a diplomatic

133 "Personal" *Evening Post*, December 9, 1959, 5.

representative. (3) With the political transformation at the end of World War II, New Zealand decided to establish its own diplomatic service, and Wilson was an obvious and appealing recruit for this institution. He was able to return to New Zealand and to finally become a 'regular,' national diplomat.

The study of Wilson's career suggested that the League acted as a facilitator for the career of employees from peripheral states. To contextualize this case study it would be necessary to investigate the professional relations of the League's secretariat and British dominions in a more detailed way. What was the role played, for example, by the employees from British dominions working for the League in clearly subaltern positions like translators or typists?