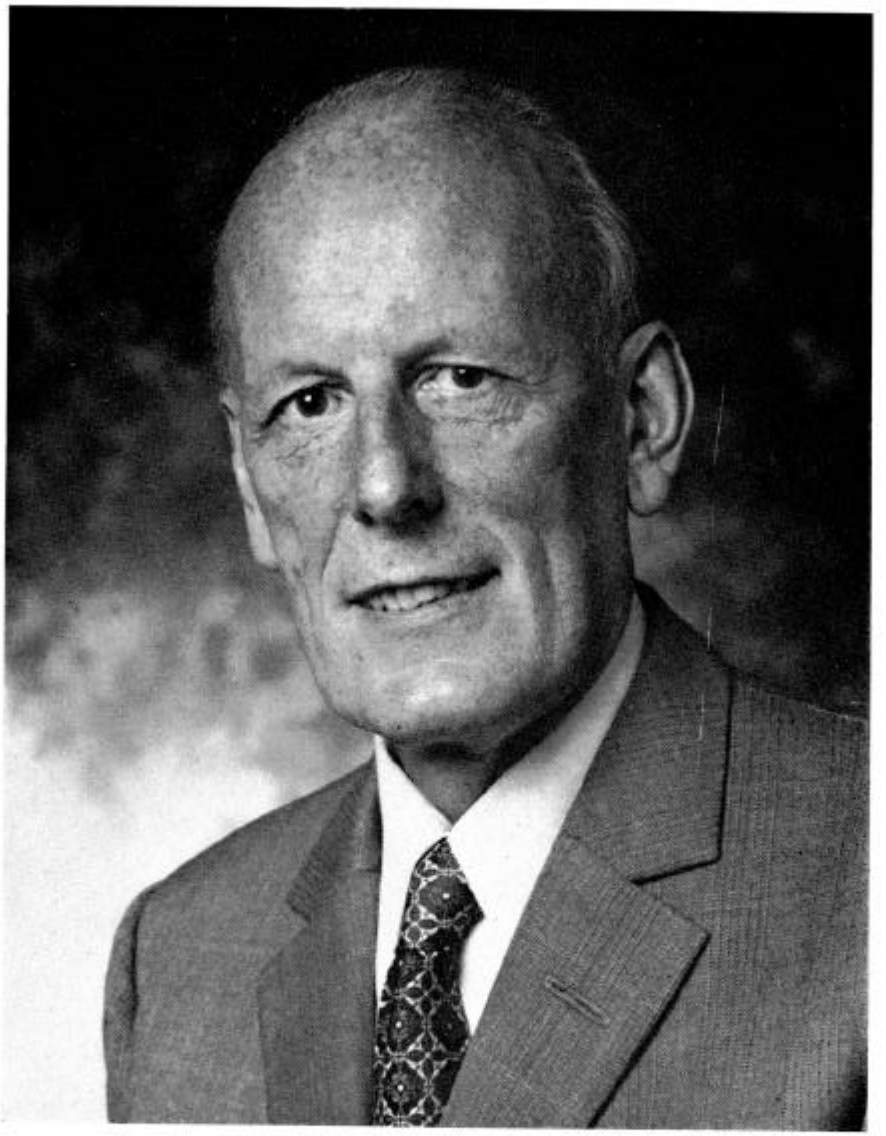
PLATE LII



RALPH DAVIS

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1915–1978

AS a consequence of the Second World War a number of scholars entered the academic world at an age well above that which has become customary in recent years. Ralph Davis was one of that band, being 35 years old when he was appointed to his first academic post, an assistant lectureship in economic history at the University of Hull (University College, Hull, as it then was) only a year after graduating. Military service had not, however, been the sole reason for his late entry. Born in April 1915, and educated at Stroud Green elementary school and Hornsey County School, he left at 16 and began to learn accountancy. He succeeded so well that in 1950 when he went to Hull he turned down the offer of an accountancy partnership worth several times the stipend of an assistant lecturer. He turned it down because he preferred the less well paid opportunity of doing something which he wanted to do. And what he wanted to do was to gratify an urge to study the history of ships, shipping, and maritime commerce. He had gone into the Army early in the war and spent several years in the Royal Artillery. Already in 1942, whilst serving in the UK, he had taken the Intermediate B.Sc. (Econ.) as an external student of London University. At the end of that year he was posted to India. On demobilization in 1946 he became an evening student at the London School of Economics, working as an accountant during the day. His years in HM Forces had not made him eligible for one of the Further Education and Training grants upon which many ex-servicemen returned to university, because he was already qualified and in a professional career. So in 1948–9, for his final year in the B.Sc.(Econ.), when he became a full-time undergraduate, he financed himself out of savings and some part-time accountancy work. The gamble paid off. He got a First, specializing in modern economic history; was awarded a University Post-graduate Scholarship; and started working for a Ph.D. on the organization and finance of the English shipping industry in the later seventeenth century. The selection of specific topic owed much to his supervisor, F. J. Fisher (from whose critical acumen he undoubtedly benefited),

I would like to express my gratitude to Dorothy Davis and to Robin Craig for their assistance in compiling this memoir.

but the general area of enquiry reflected Davis's own interests which had hitherto been submerged under other preoccupations —accounting, politics, war, and undergraduate study.

The demands of teaching and lecturing at Hull meant that it was not until 1955 that his successful submission of his thesis earned him the Ph.D. From this root there sprang both his most important book and an equally important series of articles. *The Rise of the English Shipping Industry*, when it finally appeared in 1962, quickly received both the plaudits of reviewers and the gratitude of fellow teachers of English economic history. Here, for the first time, was an analysis of one of the most crucial elements in the growing wealth of England before the Industrial Revolution. Too often the preserve either of technical enthusiasts, awash with the minutiae of rigging and naval architecture, or the romantics, bemused by the wonder of the oceans, the historical performance of this major sector of the English economy had been neglected. In his book, Davis drew upon several different sorts of records (making, in particular, excellent use of the papers of the High Court of Admiralty) to investigate ships and shipowners, the pay and conditions of the crews, the organization and finance of the industry, and the structure of different areas of British overseas shipping activity in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The series of articles were far more than a mere by-product of the research for the thesis and the book. Two of them, published in the *Economic History Review* in 1954 and 1962,[1] together constituted the first attempt to provide a significant quantitative analysis of the changing pattern of English overseas commerce between the Restoration and the War of American Independence, and they have been subsequently reprinted and their findings incorporated in textbooks. Others included, in 1956, a valuable index of mercantile activity in the eighteenth century,[2] in 1961 an analysis of English participation in Mediterranean trade in the seventeenth century,[3] and in 1966 a characteristically pragmatic study of the growth of English tariffs.[4]

[1] 'English foreign trade, 1660–1700.' *Economic History Review*, 2nd series VII (1954) and 'English foreign trade, 1700–1774' *Economic History Review*, 2nd series XV (1962).

[2] 'Seamen's sixpence: an index of commercial activity, 1697–1828', *Economica*, November 1956.

[3] 'England and the Mediterranean, 1570–1670' in F. J. Fisher (ed.), *Essays in the Economic and Social History of Tudor and Stuart England* (1961).

[4] 'The rise of protection in England, 1689–1786', *Economic History Review* 2nd series XIX (1966).

Davis's work was notable for a remarkable lucidity of thought and expression, a quality which soon became evident to readers and was quickly praised by reviewers. He never succumbed to the plague of wordiness or the blight of jargon, diseases apparently endemic in the social sciences and not unknown among economic historians. His immunity from such ailments came from his practical and direct cast of mind, fortified by his accountant's training. Complex commercial documents were quickly reduced to their central issues; seemingly indigestible statistics were deftly analysed and lucidly presented. Behind a limpid and apparently artless prose lay many hours of work in the PRO or amongst the business papers of long-dead merchants. Despite a brief, early foray into the history of a manufacturing business[1] these analytical interests in the practical work of shippers and shipowners, merchants and factors, remained at the centre of his published work. His interest in philosophical speculation, the problems of method, or the history of ideas varied from the lukewarm to the non-existent. But maritime trade in all its aspects fascinated him.

To many who had only a superficial knowledge of him, Davis appeared as remote and austere. His tall, spare figure, rather gaunt face and penetrating blue eyes did not instantly encourage intimacy; and the spare figure was sometimes accompanied by equally spare utterances which correctly suggested that he did not suffer fools gladly. Yet beneath it was not only a warm and friendly and down-to-earth person who enjoyed joking about the absurdities of life, especially in their academic manifestations, but also something of a romantic. His interests sprang from a schoolboy love engendered, or at least stimulated, by reading an illustrated book about ports and ships, 'for boys of all ages'. And in this sense, and this sense alone, his enthusiasm remained boyish. Charter-parties, bills of lading, or the cargoes of cats, cogs, and flutes: such things mattered, yet he never lapsed into the sort of antiquarianism which is only too often the counterpart of like enthusiasms. An interesting little example of both facets of this cast of mind can be seen in an introductory passage to a short historical survey of Hull's overseas trade which he wrote for the East Yorkshire Local History Society[2] in 1964. He suggested that any citizen of that town who wished to

[1] *Twenty One and a half Bishop Lane: A history of J. H. Fenner & Co. Ltd., 1861–1961* (Privately printed, 1961).

[2] *The Trade and Shipping of Hull, 1500–1700* (East Yorkshire Local History Society, 1964).

reflect on 'the splendours of Hull's mercantile past' should go to a particular local vantage point, contemplate the lines of dock and the big freighters coming in from America, Russia, Africa, and Australia, and then cast his mind back three or four hundred years to a time when another scatter of very much smaller craft would also have been coming in, bearing cargoes from the Baltic, Rouen, Cadiz, Antwerp, and the Barents Sea. The prose of this opening paragraph had a flavour more romantic than he normally allowed himself, but he quickly followed this invocation of the past with a sentence which struck a different but equally authentic Davis note by announcing briskly that 'the misty pleasures of contemplation must be replaced here by the relative solidity of statistics'.

This little pamphlet was in the nature of a farewell to Hull for in the same year he was appointed to the newly created Chair of economic history at the University of Leicester. He was to stay in Leicester for the remaining fourteen years of his life, happily established with his wife and family in their house in London Road. He had married, in 1949, Dorothy Easthope, a fellow undergraduate at LSE, and they had three adopted children. His wife—whose *A History of Shopping* was published in 1966 and who soon became active in local government and politics in Leicester—was a source of enduring strength and happiness to Ralph. His own political activities he had long entirely abandoned. Before the war he had been an enthusiastic member of the Communist party in London, combining in a curious duality the life of professional accountant with that of left-wing activist. With first the war and then university, these political interests and commitments ended; maritime history took their place; and in Leicester he derived an ironic pleasure from acquiring a new identity as 'the husband of Councillor Mrs. Davis'.

Before he made the move to Leicester he had already started work on his next major project, a study of eighteenth-century English commerce in the eastern Mediterranean. It was published in 1967 under the title of *Aleppo and Devonshire Square*. The business papers of some merchant families engaged in the Levant trade formed the central core of his source material, and once again a deceptively easy style concealed much careful research and analysis. Meanwhile, the new Chair demanded an inaugural lecture and this he gave in 1965.[1] It was a cool appraisal of the role of the social sciences in helping to answer

[1] *History and the Social Sciences* (Leicester, 1965).

the sorts of questions posed by the economic historian, and it presented economic history as being essentially concerned with the task of understanding 'the pressure of economic forces to overcome the social obstacles to change'. This brief definition of his subject reflected a growing personal interest in the impact upon society of economic forces, and it was an interest which was evident in his next major book, *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies* which was published in 1973. He set out to demonstrate the operation of economic forces and the extent to which the capacity to resist change exhibited by political and social structures was thereby broken down in different countries. The countries in question were Portugal, Spain, France, England, and the Netherlands, and their settlements in North and South America; and the period ran from the late fifteenth century to the onset of the Industrial Revolution in England. The book was a contribution to a textbook series and hence a survey rather than a piece of original research; but it demonstrated more evidently than did any of his other writings his width of interests and reading as well as his customary clarity of exposition.

Because of its nature this survey deliberately avoided the use of statistics. This was a departure from the Davis norm, for the basic framework of all his original work was quantitative. His approach followed the tradition of Sir John Clapham and T. S. Ashton in using the assumptions and methods of neoclassical economics and in seeking precision by measurement. His work relied on statistics but it did not move into econometrics; he did not set up and test models in the manner of the so-called 'new economic history'. His knowledge of the statistical sources of English overseas commerce was unrivalled, and he spent many years analysing them and seeking to remedy their defects. Indeed, his last major interest, which was something of a labour of love, was to extend his work on eighteenth-century British overseas trade statistics in such a way as to be able to provide detailed and accurate series covering the period of the Industrial Revolution. His own work on the Customs sources from 1697 to 1774 had lent considerable authority to them, at least for certain purposes, despite their known deficiencies. But the deficiencies in the data after 1774 were more serious and existing attempts to rectify them he rightly regarded as inadequate. So, with the aid of SSRC-financed assistance, he set out to provide a usable set of figures, with realistic values, by commodity and by area. He sought these

accurate and detailed statistics, not simply as an extension of his earlier work, but in order to examine the role of overseas demand in the course of the Industrial Revolution. He saw the latter as deriving its dynamic force from the revolution in the cotton textile industry, a view which, though admitting it to be old-fashioned, he reiterated in the last chapter of *The Rise of the Atlantic Economies*. The result of these labours was *The Industrial Revolution and British Overseas Trade*[1] in which was provided a set of detailed, revalued statistics of British imports, exports, and re-exports for the years 1784–1856, as well as an analysis of the contribution of overseas trade to different achievements of the Industrial Revolution. This was his last work, occupying a good deal of time in his later years; the book was published posthumously, some six months after his death.

It was an appropriate memorial to one who had spent so much scholarly labour on the history of British foreign trade. Yet it may also have given, indeed reinforced, the wrong impression that this was his only area of interest. This was far from the truth, particularly as he grew older. If ships and their distant journeyings attracted his curiosity, so, increasingly, did the economies of those distant places. He rightly believed that most English economic historians were much too parochial; and that the historical fact of industrialization having been pioneered in this particular bit of north-western Europe had perpetuated a lack of concern with a wider world. It was with a hope of rectifying this myopic view that he introduced at Leicester a course in modern Japanese economic history. In a different way, it was made manifest, or indeed even stimulated by, his own liking for travel which he tried to gratify in the face of relatively limited opportunities. He returned to visit India after his war service there; work on *Aleppo and Devonshire Square* was accompanied by a trip to Turkey and Syria, characteristically taken on a cargo ship; he gave lectures in various countries, including Italy, Canada, and the USA. He much wanted, in his later years, to embark upon research into the history of Indian trade; but other demands on his time and the awareness of failing strength put the realisation out of reach.

In the course of his academic life, Davis took an active part in the running of various professional bodies. He was Chairman of the International Committee for Maritime History; a member of the Council of the Economic History Society; and a Trustee of the National Maritime Museum. His election to the Fellow-

[1] Leicester, 1979.

ship of the British Academy in 1973 was a much-merited recognition of his achievements. The Chair which he occupied at Leicester carried with it the headship of a new department, in the first instance of economic history, later widened to economic and social history. He successfully built up the department and then increasingly found himself involved in university administration. He was a cool and skilful committee man and in 1976 became Pro-Vice-Chancellor of the University. No sooner had this appointment been made than he found himself acting Vice-Chancellor, as a consequence of the resignation of Sir Fraser Noble. He filled this office throughout the session 1976–7, and earned much respect as Chairman of the Senate and by his general conduct of University affairs. But by the summer of 1978 he was a sick man. He carried on with his work, correcting the proofs and checking the statistics of his last book. On 30 September, he died of cancer.

D. C. COLEMAN