



G. H. N. SETON-WATSON

GEORGE HUGH NICHOLAS SETON-WATSON

1916–1984

HUGH SETON-WATSON was born on 15 February 1916 in London, and died in Washington, DC, on 19 December 1984. He was of Scottish descent on his father's side, and English and Irish on his mother's. Central and Eastern Europe, to the study of whose history and politics he was to devote his adult life, seemed to mark him from the very beginning. His father was a distinguished authority on the countries that comprised the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and maintained close contacts with political leaders of the Czechs, Slovaks, Croats, Serbs, and Romanians. By explaining their history and championing their cause, he contributed indirectly to the post-First World War settlement in Europe. R. W. Seton-Watson had a profound influence on his eldest son, and generally did much to awaken and develop his passion for history and his interest in international politics. His mother worked for the relief fund set up in Britain during the First World War to help Serbian refugees. One of his godfathers, from whom he derived one of his Christian names, was the well-known Serbian spiritual leader Nikolai Velimirović, the future bishop of Ohrid and Žiča.

His earliest education was, as his father wished, cosmopolitan: he spent three years at the junior school of the French *lycée* in London and then, after an unhappy spell at an English preparatory school, moved to Winchester. There, thanks to several perceptive and broad-minded teachers, he developed rapidly, learning Russian and, in his spare time, helped by his bicycle, indulging in what was to become a life-long passion—bird-watching. So proficient and knowledgeable did he become that he could more fairly be described as an ornithologist. Later, during his travels, he would search for birds whenever he could—on the island of Skye, in the Danube delta, in Persia and Tunisia. From Winchester he went to New College, and crowned his University career in 1938 with First Class Honours in 'Modern Greats' (Philosophy, Politics, and Economics). Several of his Oxford tutors became close friends: among them were Richard

Crossman, Isaiah Berlin, and Kenneth Wheare. He rowed in his first year and engaged in another favourite occupation—mountain climbing.

The few years between Oxford and the outbreak of the Second World War were spent travelling in Central and Eastern Europe—he visited Czechoslovakia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Romania, Bulgaria, and Greece—often meeting and talking at length with his father's political friends, leaders more often than not of local agrarian parties, such as Dragoljub Jovanović and Julius Maniu. He was later to date his active awareness of world politics to his seventeenth year, when Hitler became Chancellor of Germany. Many years later a friend from those times told him the story—the truth of which he did not deny, though he had forgotten his part in it—of a visit paid to Winchester by the Nazi leader Baldur von Schirach, and of Hugh engaging in an argument with him.

The years of travel 'in the shadow of Hitler', as he later put it, strengthened his determination to understand the situations and problems of local societies. 'Conversations with men and women of each nation, of various political views and social origin', he wrote in the preface to his first book, 'give one in some ways a better picture than study of documents.' And in this lengthy and patient effort of listening and talking he enriched and refined those marvellous linguistic gifts which enabled him to communicate with so many in their own languages and to read and enjoy the literatures of many countries. This was achieved only by a great deal of what he himself described as 'plodding hard work'.

The war years widened and deepened his knowledge of the political affairs of Eastern Europe. From 1939 to 1941 Seton-Watson served as a temporary diplomat, first in Bucharest and then in Belgrade. In Bucharest, when he worked in the Press Department of the Legation, he complained of purposeless activity. In a letter home he wrote of having to transport photographs from Bucharest to Cluj and Timișoara and back and to collect blankets for 'Polish relief', a tedium relieved only by long conversations with Romanian friends. Olivia Manning, also in Bucharest at the time (1940), painted under the guise of one of the characters in her *Balkan Trilogy* a gently satirical picture of Hugh the polyglot.

By contrast, Hugh's life *en poste* in Belgrade lacked neither peril nor drama. On 27 March 1941, a group of army officers, headed by General Dušan Simović, overthrew the government of the Regent, Prince Paul, which had just signed an agreement with

Germany, by which Yugoslavia adhered to the Tripartite Pact (signed by Germany, Italy, and Japan). Ten days later, when the Germans invaded the country, the personnel of the British Legation was forced to leave Belgrade. Through Sarajevo and Mostar the party reached the Gulf of Kotor, in the vain hope of being evacuated by submarine. Overtaken by the Italians, Hugh angrily rounded on his captors in fluent Italian, calling them 'ladrone'. After a brief internment in Albania, he was taken, together with a group of British diplomats, to Foggia and Chianciano, and thence, through the good offices of the American Legation in Rome, was repatriated to Britain, via unoccupied France, Spain, and Gibraltar. By that time Seton-Watson had been recruited by the organization which came to be known as SOE (Special Operations Executive), whose main task was to establish and strengthen contacts with resistance movements in Europe and elsewhere. His first assignment was Istanbul, where he spent five months, finding time in off-duty hours to watch the behaviour of sea-birds and swim the Bosphorus. From there he was transferred to Middle East HQ in Cairo, where he remained, with intervals, for over three years (1941-4), working mainly on Balkan affairs. He was now what he later described as a 'chairborne soldier', reluctantly induced to wear uniform. He would often be seen looking and feeling very strange in battle-dress with major's crowns. His work was mainly concerned with analysing reports from occupied territory and briefing British officers sent to liaise with resistance movements. Much of it involved trying to make sense of the confused military and political situation in Yugoslavia. A fellow-officer from another service recalls how he 'was sent to SOE to meet Hugh Seton-Watson, who packed into an hour a brilliant exposition of how and why British support had switched from Mihailović to Tito'.¹

For a brief period in 1942, after Rommel's breakthrough in the Western desert, Seton-Watson and some of his colleagues were evacuated, through Suez, to South Africa. In Cape Town during the late summer, and back in Cairo in the following winter, he wrote his first book, *Eastern Europe between the Wars, 1918-1941*. Published in 1945, it revealed its author's political views and sympathies, as they had been shaped in his undergraduate days, affected by his contacts with peasant radical, student and other pre-war opposition groups in Eastern Europe, and strengthened in his early days in Cairo. The reasons which led

¹ Nigel Clive, *A Greek Experience, 1943-1948* (London, 1985), p. 22.

him to idealize, in this period of his life, the policy and aims of the Soviet Union were no doubt many. Among them was the belief, shared by many of his contemporaries, that Socialism was the only viable antidote to Fascism and that the Soviet Union, in its apparently uncompromising resistance to Hitler, stood alone for the promise of a better future; the experience of travelling before the war in Balkan dictatorial states; and an admiration for the Soviet army's performance in the war, coupled with the impression that the Communists were the most active element in European resistance movements. Despite these illusions, which Seton-Watson later recognized with frankness and courage, *Eastern Europe between the Wars* contains much of permanent value, notably its discussion of agrarian problems, ethnic minorities, and mixed populations. In his preface to the book's third edition (1961) he placed these illusions in a historical perspective, tracing them back to the hopes, shared at the time by many of his East European friends, in the post-war intentions of the Soviet Union: 'They were wrong, and I who sympathised with them was wrong, but their illusions and mine are part of history.'

Seton-Watson's final disillusionment with Communism and the Soviet Union began in 1945 when, transferred to similar work in London, he read the increasingly sinister reports of Soviet actions in Eastern Europe, and was completed during the next two years when he visited, as special correspondent for *The Times*, Yugoslavia, Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia, and Hungary. Looking back on those years, from the vantage-point of 1980, he wrote: 'The Soviet menace to peace and liberty seemed to me to be the most important single fact in world politics, and that is still my belief today.'

Demobilized in 1946, he was elected in that year Fellow and Praelector in Politics of University College, Oxford. In 1947 he married Mary Hope, daughter of G. D. Rokeling. They met in Budapest, where she worked as an assistant commercial attaché at the British Legation. Oxford became their home for the next five years.

In 1950 appeared Hugh's second book, *The East European Revolution*. Its main themes are the German conquests and rule, the history of the resistance movements and the gradual establishment by the Communist parties of total domination over Eastern Europe. This, he showed, was generally achieved in three stages. At first several political parties of the centre and the left compete for power with the Communists who already enjoy two advantages: the geographical proximity of the Soviet Union and

Communist control of the all-important Ministry of the Interior. In the second stage the non-Communist parties are increasingly dominated by the Communists, and opposition to them is tolerated less and less. Finally the Communist party achieves total control, and all non-Communist groups have been eliminated.² The book is also remarkable for its account of the origin of East European political parties, its discussion of the conflicts between Communist and non-Communist resistance movements in Yugoslavia and Greece, and for its wise observations on the pattern of resistance and collaboration. These qualities fully justify the author's claim that 'the academic tool box can be applied to current events'.

Meanwhile, teaching British and modern European history, political institutions and international relations at Oxford, Seton-Watson began to devote more and more time to the study of the modern history of Russia. This had two early results: his appointment in 1951 to the chair of Russian History at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in the University of London, and the publication in the following year of his book *The Decline of Imperial Russia, 1855-1914*. This study of Russia's internal history and foreign policy between the Crimean and the First World Wars is remarkable for its skilful treatment of political, social, and economic factors and for the insight afforded by the author's life-long interest in the problems of national minorities. Russia figures prominently in Seton-Watson's next book, *The Pattern of Communist Revolution* (1953). About one quarter of it is devoted to the history of the Soviet state up to the Second World War; and it also shows a growing concern with the history of Communist movements outside Europe, particularly in China. The approach remains essentially that of a social and political historian; Marxist theory is relegated to the background and is subordinate to his main purpose, which is to explore the relationship of Communist movements to social classes and to the balance of power within the countries concerned. The same qualities of clarity and good sense are apparent in his following book, *Neither War nor Peace* (1960), a substantial volume mainly concerned with the expansion of totalitarianism and anti-European nationalism after 1945, with special emphasis on Afro-Asian countries. These last two books firmly established

² For an assessment of Hugh Seton-Watson's 'three-phase model' see G. Schöpflin, 'The Pattern of Political Takeovers. How Eastern Europe Fell', *Encounter* (February 1985), pp. 65-9.

Seton-Watson's reputation as a leading authority on international relations in modern times.

His early books had already revealed his capacity to combine historical scholarship of the highest order with the *reportage* of current or near-current events. While still a don at Oxford, he used to spend a day a week in the office of *The Economist*, regularly writing a paragraph, or sometimes a whole article, on current events in Eastern Europe. This connection came to an amicable end soon after he moved to London, and was replaced by weekly participation in a study group that sought for evidence of power struggles within the leadership of the Soviet and other East European Communist parties. This 'Kremlinological group', as he called it, which included Leonard Schapiro, claimed several notable successes: thus it drew early attention to the progress within the Soviet power-structure of Khrushchev at the expense of Malenkov, and, from 1955 onwards, to the growth of politically explosive forces in Poland and Hungary. Travel in Soviet-controlled Europe was virtually impossible in the last years of Stalin's life, but, in the company of his wife, Hugh paid several visits to Greece, and one to Yugoslavia, writing on these occasions several articles for *The Economist* and *The Manchester Guardian*. In November 1956, in the company of Bill Deakin, Aylmer Macartney, and Max Hayward, he spent a few days in Austria, visiting Hungarian refugee camps in search of potential students who might be given grants to study at British universities. He observed in a letter that most of the refugees were young men between the age of fifteen and twenty-two, mainly factory workers, who had fought the Russian invaders until they had no ammunition left. There is no doubt that the report which this group made on their return home to the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals contributed to the decision of British universities and colleges to offer free places to some of these Hungarian refugees.

The School of Slavonic and East European Studies remained Seton-Watson's academic home until his retirement. He brought it much distinction by his teaching and his scholarship, and served it with total devotion and loyalty for thirty-one years. In the critical days of the seventies, when the future of the School seemed in jeopardy, he defended it with vigour—not unmixed with acerbity—against various attempts to abolish or amalgamate it. The School's international reputation gained much from the many occasions when he represented it on conferences abroad.

In July 1956 he paid his first visit to the United States, and in 1957–8 spent a semester as Visiting Professor at the Russian Institute of Columbia University. America, its people, its history, and politics came to mean a great deal to him, and his many visits to that country cemented friendships that were dear to him, while memories of cities and landscapes—especially New York, San Francisco, Seattle, Vermont, and California—brought him much happiness.

In the sixties and seventies he travelled a great deal, in Europe, Asia, America, and Australia (where he held for three months in 1964 a Visiting Professorship at the Australian National University in Canberra). Spring holidays were often spent on Skye, whose landscape he loved deeply and carried constantly in his mind.

In 1967 appeared his monumental work *The Russian Empire, 1801–1917*, part of the Oxford History of Modern Europe. The unobtrusive solidity of its scholarship, the skill with which the narrative unfolds and the material is organized, as well as the critical bibliography, are some of the qualities which make this volume of over 800 pages a major achievement of historical interpretation and synthesis. It remains the best treatment of the subject in the English language.

This proved to be the last of Seton-Watson's books on Russian history. His interest in the Soviet Union remained undiminished, and is manifest in his later writings. Yet his subsequent thinking on Russia reveals a certain disillusionment. Signs of it are already apparent in the preface to *The Russian Empire*, in a passage where, expressing his love of the country's literature (of Pushkin, above all), he admits to approaching its history with a lack of 'the warm feeling that comes from long experience and human contact', and to have written the book with 'much toil and with little satisfaction'. It does indeed mark a watershed in his scholarly life. After 1967 he reverted, with what seems to have been undisguised relief, to the two subjects closest to his heart: the recent history of Central and South-eastern Europe, and the study of nationalism.

The first of these was embodied in a project conceived and carried out by Hugh Seton-Watson jointly with his brother Christopher: a scholarly biography of their father. It was achieved in two stages. The first was marked by their publication in 1976 of R. W. Seton-Watson's correspondence relating to the Yugoslavs. The publication of these two volumes, covering the period from 1906 to 1941, was jointly sponsored by the British

Academy and the Institute of Croatian History of Zagreb University. They were followed, in 1981, by *The Making of a New Europe: R. W. Seton-Watson and the Last Years of Austria-Hungary*. The two authors set themselves three tasks: to offer a biographical study of their father, based on his private papers and published writings; to present new evidence on the last years of the Habsburg Empire and on the role played by Britain in the creation of its successor states—Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia, and Greater Romania; and to assess the extent of their father's personal influence on these events. The book is a major contribution to European history, providing new material on the policy of the Austrian, Italian, and British governments, on the national aspirations of Poles, Romanians, and Bulgarians, and on the activities of Czech and Yugoslav national committees abroad. Its final sentence suggests that Hugh Seton-Watson's vision of the future had acquired by then a degree of optimism which seemed largely absent in the middle period of his life:

The break-up of Austria-Hungary, like the break-up of the British Empire, had its tragic aspects; but the coming of age of the nations of the former monarchy, and the flowering, despite harsh seasons, of their cultures, are positive achievements of the human spirit, which one must hope that the nations which are emerging from the ruins of other European empires, and the nations which have still not emerged from the Soviet Russian Empire, will emulate.

No biography of R. W. Seton-Watson could fail to be much concerned with the history of nationalist movements; and in another major work, *Nations and States. An Enquiry into the Origins of Nations and the Politics of Nationalism* (1977), Hugh Seton-Watson dealt with this subject in a wider, global context. In several respects this book was a crowning achievement of a lifetime spent in studying the forces of nationalism in the world from the eighteenth century to the present day. It illustrates, more clearly perhaps than any other of his books, a basic quality of his mind: the ability to combine a sense of the concrete and the particular with a grasp of large, overall trends: 'both the processes and the individual events', as he himself described his apprehension of past and present. He deeply distrusted 'comprehensive and scientific theories', as he did all social and political panaceas. Yet his expert knowledge of Central European and Balkan history undoubtedly helped him to shed light on patterns of nationalist movements in other lands—in the Middle and Far East, in Africa and South America. Much in the phenomenon of

nationalism he found repellent: not least the 'floods of rhetoric and the debasement of human language' for which it has been responsible. Yet in the end he recognized the need, if our humanist tradition is to survive, to preserve national consciousness within a wider loyalty to the human community:

'The survival of human civilisation', he wrote in the concluding paragraph of *Nations and States*, 'depends on the recognition of both sets of truth: that neither absolute state sovereignty nor the abolition of national identities is possible; that there must be a balance between national cultures and interstate cooperation, no less than a balance between class interests and interclass cooperation within nations, if destructive civil wars and nuclear holocausts are to be avoided.'

In a brief intellectual autobiography, published in 1980 and entitled with characteristic modesty 'Reflections of a Learner',³ Hugh listed five loyalties central to his life: Scotland, the land of his forebears; England, where he spent most of his life; Europe; the English-speaking world; and Christianity. His religious faith was something very private, and undeniably genuine and strong. A little was revealed in these moving words, written in the last years of his life: 'Though beset by intellectual doubts, conscious of moral inadequacy and bewildered by the factional strife within the Church of England, I yet believe that the Christian Church has room for such as me.' On Europe he wrote repeatedly and with passion: a Europe far transcending the 'neo-Carolingian' polity of Charles de Gaulle and of the EEC, and comprising Britain, the lands of Central and Eastern Europe, as well as those of the Balkan 'heirs of Byzantium'. His last article, published posthumously, traced the growth, from Antiquity to the present day, of the idea of a European cultural community, an idea which owed much to an earlier allegiance to Christendom.⁴ His deep attachment to European unity could be felt in his reaction to some of the tragic events and processes of our times. The two events that affected him most were the Munich surrender of 1938 and the Hungarian revolution of 1956. By contrast—though he responded to it vigorously in articles, speeches and letters—the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 and the crushing of the Prague Spring moved him less: its results seemed to him too predictable. Of the 'processes', the two

³ *Journal of Comparative Politics*, xv, 512–27.

⁴ 'What is Europe, Where is Europe? From Mystique to Politique', The eleventh Martin Wight Memorial Lecture, *Encounter* (July–August 1985).

he singled out with special sorrow were the decline of Britain in the eyes of other nations, and of its own people; and the betrayal, as he felt it to be, of British universities by the public, by politicians, and by many academics who, accepting the barbaric view that universities can be treated as factories, and dons as employees, were guilty in his eyes of *trahison des clercs*.

A sensitive lover of literature in many languages, of paintings, of birds in their haunts and of mountain scenery, Hugh also loved great cities, which he remembered for their buildings, their situation, or their past glories. He was happiest in Budapest, Athens, and New York, with Belgrade and Istanbul as runners up. Those who accompanied Hugh on his travels treasure many happy memories of these expeditions—of his encyclopaedic knowledge, his curiosity, his capacity to be moved by historical associations, and his occasional unpunctuality. One of them recalls most vividly—on the occasion of an Anglo-Soviet historians' colloquium in 1960—a long walk with Hugh through the magnificent eighteenth-century park of Tsarskoe Selo, near Leningrad, filled with memories of Pushkin and Alexander I.

His gravity of manner and immense learning sometimes overawed those who did not know him well. His friends, however, knew that behind his impressive appearance lay diffidence, genuine humility, and joy of life. Yet he could be impatient when faced with human folly or pretentiousness, and would rise, when sufficiently provoked, to impressive heights of indignation. Those who attended a session, over which he presided, of an international congress of historians—a session devoted to the cheerless subject of the periodization of world history—will not soon forget the sight of Hugh's anger at a group of delegates from an East European country who rose one after the other to labour the identical point. 'Any speaker', came a stern ruling from the chair, 'who repeats any point already made by a previous speaker will be asked to sit down.' The repeat performances promptly ceased.

Hugh's achievements were recognized in a number of ways. He became a Fellow of the British Academy in 1969, an Oxford D.Litt. in 1974, and a CBE in 1981. In September 1983, shortly before his retirement, a symposium in his honour was held at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies. Its subject was 'History and Historians in Central and South-Eastern Europe'. It was attended by many of his former students and colleagues, and gave him much pleasure.

He owed much to the constant support of his wife, and was

fortunate in having a family who shared many of his interests. To them his devotion was total, as was his loyalty to his friends.

DIMITRI OBOLENSKY

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