



THOMAS WILLAN

## Thomas Stuart Willan 1910–1994

THOMAS STUART WILLAN began his career at Manchester University on 29 September 1935, and retired to an emeritus professorship on 30 September 1973. He was a gentle and reserved man with a quiet and dry, but ready sense of humour. Students were impressed with his interest in them and found him helpful, and his close colleagues had a good friend. Tall, he wore a trilby hat when hats were long out of vogue, smoked a pipe, and was addressed by everyone as Willan. He would be the first to admit that he quite failed to save the trilby as a fashion item. Long after the widespread use of surnames as a companionable form of address had passed, he still used that style in the Manchester common room with his friends and colleagues; new members of staff learned to accommodate this fashion, as I did when appointed in 1969. His especial friends at Manchester in my time were W. H. Chaloner, W. O. Henderson, and J. S. Roskell. Bill Chaloner did not smoke, but the others were inveterate pipe smokers. Well into his retirement he enjoyed conversation after lunch, especially on the intricacies of sources; such occasions continued to help other, younger scholars. Even in these later years he was easily recognisable from the 1946 drawing that provided the frontispiece for his festschrift.

Willan was born at Hawes in Yorkshire on 3 January 1910, the son of a gentleman farmer, Mathew Willan. He was educated privately at first. After his father's death he attended Queen Elizabeth's School in Kirkby Lonsdale, Westmorland. Like many before him from Westmorland he went to Queen's College at Oxford University in 1928, and thence to a brief teaching appointment at Dundee in 1934–5. He never married. He died at Manchester on 4 June 1994. He would

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often reveal, in conversation and in his writings, an affection for the north of England. As a Yorkshireman, Willan settled well in Lancashire: he chaired the committee of the Lancashire Bibliography for nearly two decades from 1954, and served on the Council of the Chetham Society from 1969 until just before his death. But his first published work was on Yorkshire, on seventeenth-century parliamentary surveys, and it appeared in the *Yorkshire Archaeological Journal* for 1933. The strength of the family connection is made clear in his 1941 edition of a survey of the manor of Wensleydale (Yorkshire Archaeological Society, Record Series, CIV, pp. 1–81), from documents owned by his cousin J. H. Willan, and using materials in the care of his brother, J. J. Willan, as clerk of the rural district council. However, transport and then trade, and not landownership, were to be Willan's major career interests.

When the young T. S. Willan was awarded his MA and D.Phil. at Oxford in 1935 Sir John Clapham, in the first two volumes of his *Economic history of modern Britain*, had played down the idea of an industrial revolution and emphasised the continuity of economic development. In contrast, Paul Mantoux had published his *The industrial revolution in the eighteenth century* at the start of Willan's undergraduate career. Willan was supervised by Sir George Clark and presented his thesis, on 'The English coasting trade and inland navigation from 1600 to 1750', three years after he had graduated BA in 1931. Willan's research fitted well into the contemporary debate on economic change, and it was quickly published—in seven papers between 1936 and 1938, and, primarily, in two books. In the first of these, *River navigation in England 1600–1750* (Oxford University Press, 1936, reprinted 1964), he showed the extent to which entrepreneurship and investment had improved river transport in England in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. He thereby played down the significance of the canal and transport revolutions of the late eighteenth century, which were seen as part cause and part result of an industrial revolution said to begin in the later eighteenth century. The second book arising from his thesis, *The English coasting trade 1600–1750* (Manchester University Press, 1938), placed even more emphasis on continuity. Although Willan was careful never to claim too much from the tricky port book material which he used, his work indicated the dimensions, variety, and, most difficult of all, the volume of trade. The coastwise traffic in corn and in coal had already received some attention, from N. S. B. Gras and from J. U. Nef, but neither had said much about river trade. Rivers had received scant notice in W. T. Jackman's *The development of*

*modern transportation in England* (1916), though more than the coasting trade. These were major gaps in historical knowledge, which Willan set out to fill. They offered opportunity to participate in grand arguments on economic change, and to develop the history of transport: '... the coasting trade must be given its proper place in the economic life of the community which it served'.

Willan never espoused the first of these two opportunities. He was not a participant in great debates and controversies. Instead, T. S. Willan became a renowned name as a specialist historian of trade and transport. Even as such an authority his reviews avoided controversy. He would point to errors and omissions in a book, but he reviewed the book that the author had written, rather than imposed his own approach to the topic. He did depart from this standpoint in a number of notices on railway books for the *Economic History Review*, which evinced a, gentle, incredulity that anyone was interested in such minutiae of railway history. Nor, despite the high reputation which his lectures in many fields of history enjoyed with Manchester undergraduates, did he synthesise general texts. Much of his wide lecturing repertoire was built up during the war years, when, unfit for active service, he remained at Manchester. Although he spent time fire watching, he afterwards claimed that he taught every history course in the department. He also boasted that he was the longest serving assistant lecturer ever! The war meant that he was not appointed lecturer in history until 1945. This wide teaching experience helped to build up the post war reputation he enjoyed amongst students as a clear exponent of material, which he interlaced with a dry but appreciated wit. He continued to publish and his edition of documents, with an introduction, on the navigation of the Great Ouse came out in 1946. Willan highlighted the difficulties of war-time scholarship with a typically diffident warning to the reader that the volume had been prepared without access to the full resources of the Public Record Office!

One of the stories Willan told was of childhood journeys in rural south Westmorland in a pony and trap, and perhaps those memories fuelled his early interest in transport history, which he never abandoned. When, a quarter of a century after the publication of *River navigation*, W. H. Chaloner wrote a bibliographical introduction to update the reprint of Jackman's 1916 book, a quarter of the publications he cited on river navigation, including books on the Ouse, and on the Weaver, were by Willan. A book on the River Don navigation followed in 1965, so that Willan remained the leading scholar in the

field. In 1968 Willan's own introduction to the reprint of his *Coasting trade* modestly made the same point. There had been no more general studies, and very few specialist publications, though he emphasised the work of R. Davis on the shipping industry. Davis reciprocated the acknowledgement in 1972 when he explained that the work of Willan and of Nef had enabled him to omit coastal shipping from his book, and concentrate on the overseas business. After Willan's retirement, one new major project on river trade did develop. The University of Wolverhampton sponsored a project on the Severn valley, on which Willan himself had written. The bibliographies in C. G. A. Clay's excellent general survey, *Economic expansion and social change. England 1500–1700* (1980) provide a tribute to Willan's lasting pre-eminence in the field which he made his own in the 1930s.

Alongside his work on transport Willan, at the end of the war, turned to investigate merchants and foreign trade, another major theme of his research. The roots of his emphasis on merchants might be detected in his first books. *River navigation* had a sketch of the barge-men, some of whom owned barges, and even cargoes; and there was a chapter in the *Coasting trade* on the organisation and personnel of the trade. In the Manchester tradition, he developed in parallel with his new research what was to be a long running special subject for final-year students on the economic history of Elizabethan England. His research concentrated on the rather esoteric connections with eastern Europe, and with north Africa. If these were minor dimensions of trade, they were amongst those which '... represented a dynamic element in [England's] ... commerce ...'. In the case of the Russia Company the joint-stock organisation allowed for sleeping money brought in from outside the merchant class, and so provided insights into the accumulation of mercantile capital. In *The Muscovy merchants of 1555* (MUP, 1953), Willan used the many London merchants who subscribed to that company as a sample from which to distil a social history of the mid-Tudor London merchant. More than a third of the book was devoted to detailed biographies of the 201 members of the company, 155 of whom were aldermen or merchants of London. By no means all the profits these men made were removed into landed society. Willan was impressed by the number and proportion of merchant businesses which survived the death of the head of the family. It was the less wealthy of these merchants, or those whose wealth remained in personal estate, whose families were the most likely to continue in trade. Those members who transformed their family into landowners, and withdrew from

trade and from London society were the more wealthy, but they were also the exceptions. Willan, with typical modesty, saw his work as 'some contribution' towards a history of Tudor London's merchants. But reviewers were aware of the importance of what he had written. The organisation and trade of the company was dealt with in *The early history of the Russia Company 1553-1603* (MUP, 1956), a lucid but detailed exposition of the mixing of trade, diplomacy, and economic activity so typical of the period, yet so hard for the historian to unravel. Similar themes surrounding trading companies were treated in *Studies in Elizabethan foreign trade*, (MUP, 1959), though there were informative contrasts. Whereas the start of trade with Russia and the founding of the Russia Company were contemporary events, the Barbary Company was founded some thirty years after trade with Morocco began. Willan was thus able to evaluate the role of the monopoly Barbary company in the light of the unregulated trade that preceded incorporation. Furthermore, although two of the three non-merchant members were the earls of Leicester and of Warwick, and the third was their ally, so that there was high level government representation, the Barbary company membership lacked the massive superstructure of government officials which characterised the Russia company. The Barbary members provided Willan with another section of London merchants to analyse which he did in the longest section of the book. Trade with Morocco proved to be a 'nursery' for some members of the East India Company founded at the end of Elizabeth's reign. Whereas Willan's was almost the sole name in the investigation of river and even coasting trade, in his studies of trade, trading companies, and their members he was working alongside such names as R. Davis, F. J. Fisher, R. W. K. Hinton, and G. D. Ramsay.

Willan became professor of economic history in 1961, in succession to Arthur Redford. As the new occupant of the chair he faced a number of challenges. Economic history was a section of the History Department in the Faculty of Arts, but also had a separate existence as a department in the Faculty of Economic and Social Studies. As the English university system increased in size in the 1960s this dual, if complex, identity was a useful intellectual diversification which allowed economic history to recruit students from differing backgrounds. The History Department's expansion brought with it new and young colleagues who bolstered the view of some senior members that the department should not be managed only by professors. The department took a lead in establishing formal democratic structures

that, as departmental boards, were subsequently provided for by the University's charter. Non-professorial members of staff carried out major administrative tasks such as admissions. If Willan did not lead such changes, he worked comfortably enough with them. The economic history section contained a number of strong, scholarly personalities each determined to follow his own path in teaching and research. The number of specialists on the industrial revolution led to the exaggerated criticism that that was the only history Manchester's economic historians knew. Under Willan the expansion, in numbers and in interests, of the economic history section encompassed such new and diverse views of the past as African history and social history, to add to established interests in European economic history. He made appointments to diversify teaching and research in English economic and social history away from the industrial revolution. He gave vital encouragement to the establishment of a Certificate in Local History by the Department of Extra-Mural Studies. There was, however, a touch of conservatism in his steady hand as when he allowed the title of the department's lectureship in social history to lapse in the early 1970s. At that time he took faculty office as chairman of the higher degrees committee. This post often led on to appointment as Dean of the Faculty, but, so the story goes, once Willan knew he was in mind for the deanship he decided to retire early, in order to continue publishing.

In fact, his period as professor was far from barren in terms of publications. In 1962 he produced an edition of the 1582 book of customs rates, and in 1965 a collection of documents relating to the navigation of the River Don, both published by Manchester University Press. Neither of these saw Willan entering into new fields. However, his study of *An eighteenth-century shopkeeper: Abraham Dent of Kirkby Stephen* (MUP, 1970) did mark a shift in the direction of his work towards merchants' account books, their business activities and credit arrangements, though such records had figured briefly in *Studies in Elizabethan foreign trade*. Willan continued the study of accounts in two of the chapters of *The Inland Trade* (MUP, 1976). He suggested, in detail, how seventeenth-century London and provincial wholesale trade worked. These chapters were buttressed by studies of provincial retailing in England, including an innovatory examination of tradesmen's tokens issued between 1649 and 1672. One simple but significant conclusion from this work was that there were over three hundred places that, at first sight, were too insignificant to be even market towns, but which nevertheless were home to a shopkeeper of sufficient standing to

issue trade tokens. In this well-received book Willan also went back to the roots of his scholarship and surveyed the scanty evidence for Elizabethan inland trade, by river, and along the coast, and by road. His journeys on Canadian dirt roads when visiting his brother had given him some insight, he felt, into Elizabethan road surfaces. Willan stayed close to his interest in tradesmen in what proved to be his final research interest, a series of source-based studies of the unincorporated, and therefore ill-documented, town of Manchester. 'Manchester clothiers in the early seventeenth century', *Textile History*, X, 1979, pp. 175–83; *Elizabethan Manchester* (Chetham Society, 3rd series, XXVII, 1980), pp. ix + 163; and 'Plague in perspective: the case of Manchester in 1605', *Transactions of the Historic Society of Lancashire and Cheshire*, CLXXXII, 1983, pp. 29–40, resulted from his enquiries. All of this work on Manchester post-dated the bibliography of Willan's writings (excluding his reviews) printed in the festschrift presented to him in 1977. The contributors to *Trade and Transport. Essays in economic history in honour of T. S. Willan*, ed. W. H. Chaloner and B. M. Ratcliffe (MUP, 1977, pp. x + 293) came from one Canadian, and four British universities besides Manchester. This was a Manchester festschrift: colleagues, friends, and students united to present varied essays impinging on Willan's interests across a wide timespan for 'a man who inspires respect and affection'. Final recognition of the lasting impact of his work came in 1991, when he was among the first to be elected by the British Academy to their new category of Senior Fellowship.

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*Note.* I should like to acknowledge help from colleagues at Manchester in preparing this Memoir, and to say that I benefitted from talking with Mrs Marjorie Cox, MA (an immediate post-war colleague), and Miss Phyllis Giles, MA, and Professor Donald Woodward (both former Manchester students). Miss Mary I. Burrow, of Hawes, wrote to me about the early days of her longtime friend. They are in no way responsible for how their recollections appear here.