



CHARLES WILSON

Charles Henry Wilson

1914–1991

CHARLES HENRY WILSON, eminent as an economic historian and doyen of British historians of business was born on 16 April 1914 at Market Rasen, a small country town in rural Lincolnshire.¹ His family were modest in means: his father was a tailor in the town and his mother, the youngest of eleven children in a farming family near Peterborough, had spent twelve years at an orphanage in London, having lost both her parents at the age of five. There she learned French and German as well as becoming a proficient pianist. Both parents were extremely supportive of their three children, promoting their interest in education and culture despite relative poverty. Charles Wilson owed much to his mother—in particular his interest in music—while one of his elder brothers, Percy, preceded him to the local school and to Jesus College Cambridge, becoming a schoolmaster and then an Inspector of Schools. Charles went first to the local Methodist elementary school, then to De Aston Grammar school, leaving Market Rasen for Jesus College as an undergraduate in 1933, having won an ‘open’ exhibition (less well-remunerated and less

¹ I have drawn considerably from an appreciation of Charles Wilson’s academic work by Professor D. C. Coleman and the more personal memoir of Mr Maurice Cowling (delivered at a memorial service at Jesus College, Cambridge on 2 Nov. 1991). I also received help from Mrs Alena Wilson, Professor S. Salsbury, Mrs Marion Raymond, and Angela Schenk of the European University Institute. A preliminary version of this memoir was published in the *Journal of European Economic History*, 22 (1), 1993—P. Mathias, ‘Charles Wilson, 1914–1991. Retrospect for an Historian’.

prestigious than a scholarship). It was a hard route—he spoke later of rural Lincolnshire being a ‘picture of poverty, squalor and (for my mother, herself an orphan and heroine of the [story]) misery overcome’.² Charles Wilson took first-class honours in both parts of the Historical Tripos, and then subsequently in the English Tripos, becoming President of the University Music Club and an accomplished viola player (as many of his friends will recall with delight). His distinction as a musician was recognised by an invitation to play with the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Holland when there for his research. Subsequently he found himself a member, and finally Chairman, of the Board of the Carl Rosa Opera Company in the 1960s, (uncited in his *Who’s Who* entry) for which he fought a losing battle for funding from the Arts Council. This diversity of interests and talents was characteristic of Charles Wilson throughout his life as a scholar; one of the secrets of his personal charm and attractiveness.

Staying on for a fourth year was originally designed to improve his chances in the Civil Service Examination but this ambition was quickly overtaken by longer-term academic plans. In these he was encouraged by Bernard Manning (Senior Tutor of Jesus, medieval historian of strong congregationalist commitments), Kenneth Pickthorne (Tudor historian of traditionalist views, Fellow of Corpus and the last holder of the university parliamentary seat, sitting in the Tory interest) and particularly by Edward Welbourne. Welbourne was Senior Tutor of Emmanuel (later Master), an economic historian of inspired (or maverick) views, who came from Market Rasen, having been a friend of the Wilson family and also a pupil at the grammar school. More is said of their intellectual influences on Charles Wilson below but, initially, Welbourne’s lectures and deep interest in the historic presence of the Dutch in East Anglia were instrumental in persuading Charles Wilson to learn Dutch and commit himself to Dutch economic history. He spent his two initial post-graduate years in the Netherlands laying the basis for his first major research project (nominally supervised by J. H. Clapham). A research fellowship at Jesus in 1938, (the first ever awarded by the College), enabled him to hastily complete the manuscript of *Anglo-Dutch Commerce and Finance in the Eighteenth Century* before the outbreak of war (published in 1941 by Cambridge University Press).

² Letter of C. H. W., undated, to a publisher (probably Weidenfeld) describing the scope of his proposed autobiography (seen by courtesy of Mrs Raymond).

By then Whitehall had claimed him for the Admiralty, after a short time in the navy, where he learned much about the relations between bureaucracy, policy-making, and government. For the last two years of the war he organised the Cabinet and Parliamentary business of A. V. Alexander, the rough-hewn Labour First Lord of the Admiralty, who much impressed him. It proved to be a fascinating and educative interlude in an academic career, as for many of Charles Wilson's contemporaries. He wrote much of the charming vignette *Holland and Britain* (1946)—with prominent chapters on law, religion, music, art, and literature—in the intervals of work, or even (he claimed) on his daily journeys to work across London. The *Dutch Republic* (1968) was another admirable, more sustained, exercise in popular history. The natural fluency of his writing enabled him to move easily between history at different levels of analysis.

With established status in Anglo-Dutch history came an invitation (through G. N. Clark) which was to change the course of Charles Wilson's professional career—to write the history of Unilever, conceived as a large-scale, professional, independent, academic study with appropriate research assistance—the first of its kind in Britain for a major industrial company and multinational business. There were precedents, of course, not least in the United States, where a multi-volumed (and multi-authored) history of Standard Oil was in progress, and in England one or two large-scale histories of banks, written with academic authority had appeared. Clapham had himself written the history of the Bank of England.³

In 1947, just before G. N. Clark moved back to Oxford on his election as Provost of Oriel, from being Regius Professor of Modern History in Cambridge, he was asked by Geoffrey Heyworth (later Lord), Chairman of Unilever, for advice about a possible history of this major Anglo-Dutch business. Heyworth, rare amongst businessmen, believed that something was to be gained from a better understanding of the past, of how a business had developed in its wider context. Apart from his publications on Anglo-Dutch history in the seventeenth century Clark had supported the idea of 'business history' in his inaugural lecture as professor of economic history at Oxford in 1931 and had become chairman of

³ e.g. Sir Theodore Gregory, *The Westminster Bank through a Century* (Oxford, 1936), 2 vols. pp. 396, 355.; Sir John Clapham, *The Bank of England* (Cambridge, 1944) 2 vols. pp. 305, 460. See also C. Wright and C. E. Fayle, *A History of Lloyds* (1928), pp. 475. Fayle was a professional historian who had written the volume on seaborne trade in the official history of the Great War.

the newly formed Council for the Preservation of Business Archives (now the Business Archives Council) in 1934.⁴ G. N. Clark declined Geoffrey Heyworth's invitation for himself but brought Charles Wilson into the discussions. The result was a highly successful and influential pioneer work in modern British business history.

The *History of Unilever* was mega-industrial history; in research funding and publishing terms on as large a scale as its multinational sponsor.⁵ The coverage was huge: several hundred companies, with original roots in England and the Netherlands, but quickly operating world wide, in several industries (soap, margarine, oil-milling, being the original base), with complex operations in services, transport, and retailing. The work force totalled about a quarter of a million spread over four continents, and the turnover in 1949 was over £500m. Even the logistics of the primary sources proved formidable, with 30,000 files of William Lever's business correspondence as a starting point. A consistent historical philosophy lay behind the study, which was to characterise all Charles Wilson's subsequent work: '... historians have often written', he observed, 'as if growth and material progress were a natural and inevitable process needing no propulsion from human enterprise . . . In economic history, as elsewhere, a man is limited by circumstances, yet at the heart of the economic progress there is human intelligence, human character, ingenuity and enterprise . . . but of the men who organised the great industries, who studied the application of invention on a large scale, raised the capital, followed or created the markets and—above all—shouldered the risk, we heard little.'⁶ In the circumstances of the day, in the early 1950s, this carried with it a strong political message.

Having quoted Marshall's acknowledgement of the material progress brought by business enterprise, Charles Wilson concluded 'It is my hope that this study of a few of the great *entrepreneurs* whose genius helped to provide that abundance may lead to other similar studies and that these will do something to redress the balance of our history and focus atten-

⁴ P. Mathias, 'The First Half-Century: Business History, Business Archives and the Business Archives Council', *Business Archives*, No. 50 (1989), pp. 1–16.

⁵ *The History of Unilever: a Study in Economic Growth and Social Change* (1954), 2 vols. pp. 335, 480. These volumes were reprinted, with volume III, as a paperback by Cassell in 1970. The original Dutch edition of 1954, with volume III, was also reprinted in hard back and paperback, by Unilever NV in 1984. The translator was Dr Jane de Iongh. Charles Wilson subsequently edited and contributed to *Geoffrey Heyworth: a Memoir* (1986).

⁶ *The History of Unilever*, vol. I, Author's Preface, p. vi.

tion on the process by which wealth was created as well as on those by which it was shared out'.⁷ It was as much—perhaps more—concerned with the creative impact of individuals and the politics of entrepreneurship within the firm as it was about dehumanised economic, demographic, financial, or market trends. Notably the book was sub-titled 'A Study of Economic and Social Change'. When the two volumes were published (at publisher's risk) by Cassell in 1954, their reception immediately demonstrated that Charles Wilson had set new norms and levels of expectation in business history, the implications of which are still with us. No other book did more to legitimise business history in Britain as a subspecies of main-line history—and economic history—as a genus of equal potential status (and demanding equivalent standards of professional assessment) with any other aspect of historical study. The first edition (of 10,000 copies) sold out and was re-printed. A Dutch translation was also published. The research was mobilised through a team of research assistants in London and Rotterdam: the task could not have been done by Charles Wilson alone, who was a lecturer in the History Faculty throughout these years, Fellow and Director of Studies in History at Jesus and also Bursar—a major college office. Nevertheless, the text bore the unmistakable stamp of Wilson's fluent and stylish prose, especially notable in the portrait of William Lever himself.

Commitments in business history continued with a further volume on *Unilever, 1945–65* (1968), but this did not achieve the authority of the first two volumes. The story of the last twenty years, written on the heels of the present, had to be largely anonymous so its impact was that of a sustained, though very readable, market report rather than of critical interpretative history. W. J. Reader, the principal research assistant for the first volume of the main history (covering the English companies), continued with Volume III, and was working on the contemporary development of Unilever until shortly before both their deaths—an even more fraught venture which was not completed. Meanwhile, Charles Wilson had written, jointly with W. J. Reader (who had become a prominent business historian in his own right with *The History of ICI* (2 vols. 1970, 1975)) the history of Robert Napier, the Scottish engineering business, published as *Men and Machines* (1959). His final commitment in business history was a study of the multiple stationers, W. H. Smith 1792–1972, under the title *First with the News* (1985).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. ix

In the *History of Unilever* (1954) business history was effectively identified with entrepreneurial history. Other aspects of analysis, major economic themes such as cost-structures, the quantitative exploration of productivity growth, profitability, return on capital, investment, and the like were not followed up. Labour relations, the details of technical change, management organisation were also not emphasised. Quantitative precision did not receive as high a priority as with some later business histories. Perhaps the scale was too large and the different businesses brought together in 1929 as Unilever too heterogeneous to construe their development in this way. It was easier with firms which had grown more organically than by merger and take-over (Courtaulds or Guinness or Pilkington rather than Unilever or ICI). Firmly-based narrative of growth and change, strategies, products and markets, analysed with great perception and intelligence, were the hallmarks of Charles Wilson's business history, written with flair and insight. He did not deploy specific analytical frameworks, or specific economic theory (explicit or implicit). He admired Marshall and Cunningham, but distrusted much of the economic history of Keynes and the left-wing economists in the Cambridge faculty of his own day.

Commitments in business history, coupled with his recognition of the importance, for good or ill, of those in command of enterprises (the *History of Unilever* had just been written), made Charles Wilson a sympathetic visitor to the Research Center in Entrepreneurial History at Harvard in 1954, where the heritage of Schumpeter was being actively developed. From this visit came his article 'The Entrepreneur in the Industrial Revolution', (*History*, vol. 62, 1957), much reprinted subsequently, which opened up this debate in the more empirical terms of exploring actual business roles. His insight there still stands, linking issues of production to that of markets: one of the basic skills of the entrepreneur, he considered was 'the possession of a sense of market opportunity combined with the capacity needed to exploit it'. Charles Wilson and senior Unilever executives developed a high mutual respect—recognising each others' professional efficiency and practical achievements—as was the case with other businessmen whom he grew to know in the course of analysing their firms. This was one aspect of his insights into the practical world as an historian and appreciation for those—whether politicians, administrators, or businessmen in history—who wrestled with practical endeavour. Another source of such awareness was Charles Wilson's own experience (which gave him great satisfaction) as Bursar of Jesus from 1945–55—a critical decade in the evolution of his views and

values. As Bursar he was responsible for the varied financial commitments of a relatively wealthy Cambridge College: the internal financing of fees, salaries, kitchens, the upkeep of buildings, and college trusts etc.; with wide-ranging external financial administration of the stock-market portfolio, college farms (with rents and improvements to be negotiated with tenants), urban property development in Cambridge, planning applications, and the like. This proved to be another major source of insight for him as an historian.

In the course of these initial post-war years and research commitments, Charles Wilson became a political conservative, following a mildly radical allegiance as a student (and having voted Labour in the post-war election of 1945), although he never moved in professional party circles. He became a supporter of both the Institute of Economic Affairs and the University of Buckingham, both institutions in their different ways embodying the principles of the free market.

* * *

Charles Wilson first came to prominence internationally in 1949, with an important re-interpretation of established views on 'mercantilism' (an orthodoxy centred on the work of the eminent Swedish economic historian Eli Heckscher): 'Treasure and Trade Balances: the Mercantilist Problem', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 2 (1949).⁸ This set the scene for the later publications at the confluence between economic, political, and strategic interests. His concern with the political issues which underlay 'mercantilist policies' made him distrust the historical reality of the disembodied, conceptualised entity dubbed 'mercantilism' (despite agreeing to write a pamphlet for the Historical Association under that title in 1958, to interpret the phenomenon for students). Charles Wilson noted that Keynes had commented in the *General Theory* that the classical economists had misjudged mercantilists by scorning their concern with bullion and the acquisition of bullion by means of a favourable balance of trade. But, more directly, he was aware of the contemporary crisis from 1947 (and the temporary commitment to the convertibility of

⁸ His first publication was 'The Economic Decline of the Netherlands' *Economic History Review*, 9 (1939), reprinted in E. M. Carus-Wilson (ed.) *Essays in Economic History*, vol. I (Economic History Society, 1954).

sterling) and subsequently, of the decimation of Britain's foreign-currency reserves, the 'dollar gap' and the intractable problem of the sterling area needing to offset regional deficits in hard-currency trading areas. He had the perception to transpose awareness about a contemporary issue to enlarge understanding about an analogous historical situation. The argument was that British policy-makers in the seventeenth century were not so stupid, given the intractable deficits they faced in the Baltic trade, in their concern with precious metal flows, whatever classical economists might assume about the self-adjusting mechanisms of a multi-lateral trading system.

This genuine new idea about 'mercantilism', stemming from awareness of the actual empirical problems facing politicians and merchants in the past, set off lively controversies and re-energised even the aged Heckscher, who asserted once more the misapprehensions of the mercantilists.⁹ Undeterred, Charles Wilson gave battle again with new evidence, and was generally regarded as having the best of the contest by demonstrating that, whatever subsequent theory and practice in a transformed international economy, 'the practical usefulness of bullion in international trade in the mercantilist period' was a necessary basis for current policy.¹⁰ Another dimension of his historical awareness concerned the resilience of private charity (much funded by merchants) supporting social action and public policy, published as 'The Other Face of Mercantilism' *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, 9, (1959).¹¹ Charles Wilson's deep knowledge of the interplay of economic and political aims in Anglo-Dutch affairs in the seventeenth century was next illuminated in *Profit and Power* (1957). Based on a course of lectures for the Cambridge History Tripos, it surveyed the complex web of relations which brought about the first two wars between England and Holland. In this he again invoked Keynes and the pronouncements of the 1940s to demonstrate that the ideas and policies of the seventeenth century, though not necessarily economically correct, were rooted in the circumstances of the time. In both *Profit and Power* and in *Mercantilism*, as well

⁹ E. F. Heckscher, 'Multilateralism, Baltic Trade and the Mercantilists', *Economic History Review*, 2nd Series, 3 (1950). cf. Heckscher, *Mercantilism*, ed. E. F. Soderlund, 2 vols. (1935).

¹⁰ Charles Wilson, 'Treasure and Trade Balances: Further Evidence', *Ibid.*, vol. IV (1951). See also 'Mercantilism: some vicissitudes of an Idea'. *Ibid.*, vol. X (1957).

¹¹ See also 'A Measure of Humanity? Clio and Philanthropy' in *Studi in Memoria di Federigo Melis* (Florence, 1978).

as in his textbook, *England's Apprenticeship 1603–1763* (1965), he presented the reign of mercantilism as belonging primarily to the century from 1660 to 1760. His concern to seek explanations in immediate circumstances was admirably practical but the results were not always consistent. In *Profit and Power* it was Sir George Downing who, in the 1660s, figures as the 'father' of mercantilist practice in England. In *England's Apprenticeship* on the other hand, that same practice is a set of policies which emerged from the economic depression of the 1620s and '30s. When he came to write the much more wide-ranging study of European mercantilism, 'Trade, Society and the State' for the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* he pushed its beginnings back into the sixteenth century. Indeed, he went still further, observing that the apparatus of state economic control 'was in fact medieval in origin'.¹²

These various writings on the early modern period—monographs, textbooks, learned articles—remarkably illustrate Charles Wilson's strengths and weaknesses. He wrote with consistent flair and fluency; his lucid prose was well-stocked with apt quotations culled from a widely-read and civilised mind. He had the true historian's gift of understanding the ways of thought of those who figured in his enquiries, be they merchants from Amsterdam or politicians from the English shires. The other side of the coin was his remoteness from, indeed hostility to, those sorts of formal knowledge which enquire into the nature of economies and societies.¹³ He did not like the social sciences at all, rejecting what he called the 'sociologized history of our own day which is less concerned with individuals and more with men as members of social groups'.¹⁴

Some years later a similar insight to that about mercantilism produced an influential countervailing view about late-Victorian England. Historical debate about the 'Great Depression' of 1873–96 had concentrated on the economic ills of falling profits, sagging export values, higher

¹² *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, IV (1967) p. 496. See also 'Mountains of Gold and Iron: a note on War and Economic History in the seventeenth century' in *Fatti e idee di Storia Economica Nei Secoli XII–XX. Studi dedicati a Franco Bolandi* (Bologna, 1976).

¹³ He did show a lively interest in contemporary economic thinkers and commentators of the early modern period, such as Thomas Mun. See 'Hugo Grotius and his world' in *The World of Hugo Grotius 1585–1645* (Amsterdam and Maarssen, 1984) and 'Geronimo de Ustariz, un Fundamente Intellectual para el Renacimiento Económico Español des Siglo XVIII', in *Dinero y Credito* (Siglos XVI al XIX (Madrid, 1978)).

¹⁴ 'The other face of Mercantilism', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th series, IX (1959) p. 100.

unemployment, evidence of failures to compete and innovate in certain industries. But from his work on the constituent companies which subsequently merged as Unilever in various consumer goods industries, with associated developments in multiple retailing, Charles Wilson knew a significantly different story about the same decades. On the basis of a resilient home market, enhanced by falling prices, great expansion, much innovation and economies of scale came to largely hidden sectors of the economy: brewing, distilling, mass production confectionery, biscuits, bakery, and other food-processing industries such as margarine; newspapers and printing, soap, cheap drugs and pharmaceuticals; the newly commercialised pleasures of the urban masses. All these showed another face of Britain. This article 'Economy and Society in late Victorian Britain' (*Economic History Review* 2nd series, 18, 1965) stimulated much reassessment of the complex trends of that period.

Charles Wilson often did not capitalise upon these insights by following up his original articles with more substantial research—he was busy elsewhere. This was true about a wider comparative international theme he launched in 'Taxation and the Decline of Empires—an Unfashionable Theme' in *Economic History and the Historian* (1969).¹⁵ His style was to make bridgeheads of great originality into such themes: a characteristic of the sort of stimulus he could give at other levels in discussion, whether to colleagues or to students.

The paradox of Charles Wilson's eminence as an economic and business historian is that he did not regard himself as identified with such specific—or limited—historical roles. He was not 'just' an economic historian: but an historian in the widest sense. The absence of a specific department of economic history at Cambridge discouraged such disciplinary frontiers. His range of perceptions within economic and business history derived from these wider historical interests and commitments, coupled with his awareness of commitments in the contemporary world. Relationships between political power, the pursuit of wealth in trade and industry, strategic imperatives, economic and geographical parameters, the 'distortions' brought by personal ambitions and bureaucratic necessity—above all, the impact upon events of powerful individuals—characterised all his work; and what better arena in which to explore such

¹⁵ This was originally published in *Bedragen en Mededelingen van het Historisch Genootschap gevestigd te Utrecht*, vol. LXXVII (Utrecht, 1963). *Economic History and the Historian* was a collection of his articles.

complex relationships than Anglo-Dutch relations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. This was a consistent theme: in his first two books (mentioned above): in *Power and Profit* (1957); *Mercantilism* (1958); *Queen Elizabeth and the Revolt of the Netherlands* (1970). The latter book, originating in the Ford Lectures at Oxford delivered in 1968–9, shows Charles Wilson at once relaxed and self-confident in judgement, writing political history with great vigour. The theme was clear; ‘As so often in history what looks like economic interests powerful enough to swing politics in their wake turn out in reality to be a puny thing, politically vulnerable to the slings and arrows of outrageous politics’.¹⁶ The range of awareness was always present: he saw in the long struggle for independence an essential tragedy of the Southern Netherlands: ‘We need to invoke politics as well as strategy’, he wrote in conclusion, ‘tactics and topography to explain how a society once one of the wealthiest, most powerful and most virile in Europe, simply disappeared from sight. . . .’¹⁷

Amongst an earlier generation of economic historians the approach of William Cunningham, with its emphasis upon the influence of politics upon economics rather than the other way round, perhaps came nearest to Wilson’s own vision of historical causation, as exemplified in, ‘Taxation and the Decline of Empire’. One significant exception to this generalisation is to be found in his study of international competition in the cloth trade in the seventeenth century, which is based upon the comparative analysis of costs and techniques.¹⁸ The wider vision of history also characterised the text books: *England’s Apprenticeship, 1603–1763* (1965, 1988); *The Age of Expansion: Europe and the World, 1559–1660* (with other authors; ed. H. Trevor-Roper, 1968); *The Dutch Republic and the Civilisation of the Seventeenth Century* (London, Verona, 1968); *The Transformation of Europe, 1558–1648* (1976); *Introduction to the Sources of European Economic History, 1500–1800* (with G. Parker, 1977). At the same time he had been an editor and contributor for the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vols. IV and V (with E. E. Rich, 1967, 1977), the *New Cambridge Modern History*, vols. VII and XI (1957, 1962) and co-editor of the *Economic History Review* (with R. M. Hartwell), 1960–7.

¹⁶ *Queen Elizabeth and the Revolt of the Netherlands* (1970), p. 17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

¹⁸ ‘Cloth Production and International Competition in the Seventeenth Century’, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, 13 (1960).

* * *

Within Cambridge and beyond, Charles Wilson had a distinctive, robust intellectual style which put him out of sympathy with certain dominant trends, both local and international, at least until the latter years of his career. His chief mentors as a young man, Bernard Manning, Kenneth Pickthorn, and Edward Welbourne (none of them 'main-line' Cambridge historians) set his course but local roots in a conservative rural society remained strong in his consciousness. Jesus College was, in his generation, a highly conservative institution in the Cambridge kaleidoscope, in general as well as in historiographical terms: it was neither high-church, ideological Tory or professed liberal and Whig—least of all radical as in some other parts of the town, but a traditional, Anglican, rather rural conservatism prevailed. As an undergraduate there after the Second World War, the College seemed to me to be living in rural separateness on the edge of the University precincts, with its own identity (and its own battles) beyond the various Cambridge establishments.

Charles Wilson reacted against prevailing liberal trends in the 1930s agreeing with Edward Welbourne that the Historical Tripos was an exercise to keep the Whigs of Trinity in the true faith, although he had a personal admiration for G. M. Trevelyan. He returned several times to quote with approval Trevelyan's view that the springs of national genius and human achievement resisted analysis. As a seventeenth-century historian he was well aware of the deployment of history as a weapon in the battle of contemporary *methodenstreit*; being put on his guard against historicism more from the work of Herbert Butterfield in Peterhouse (particularly in his little book *The Englishman and his History* (Cambridge, 1944)) which was about real political issues,¹⁹ than from the more formalised philosophical treatises of such as Karl Popper and Isaiah Berlin.

Charles Wilson had no sympathy with the Fabian left-wing orthodoxies of economic and social history in the ascendant pre-war and immediately post-war with the work of the Webbs, the Hammonds, G. D. H. Cole, R. H. Tawney, E. J. Hobsbawm, M. H. Dobb, Christopher Hill, nor with some of Keynes's views as an economic historian.²⁰ He was sceptical of the 'Manchester free-trade school' represented by George Unwin,

¹⁹ H. Butterfield, *The Englishman and his History* (Cambridge, 1944).

²⁰ See his review of C. Hill in 'Economics and Politics in the Seventeenth Century' *Historical Journal*, 5 (1962).

almost as much as he distrusted the Christian Socialism of Toynbee or Tawney.²¹ He became independent, empirical, traditionalist, increasingly sceptical of the efficiencies of the state; doubtful about the formulation of policies in accordance with grand conceptual (and usually *soi-disant* Marxist) interpretations of the historical process. 'Retrospective omniscience and a Whiggish acceptance that whatever was was right,' he wrote, 'are the twin rocks between which the historian must steer.'²²

Inaugural lectures are the public confessionals of professors and Charles Wilson's two main *credos* for history are to be found in his inaugural lecture in Cambridge as Professor of Modern History, in succession to Herbert Butterfield, in 1964; and an even less restrained coda which he offered a decade later in Brussels, after he had left Cambridge on secondment to the European University Institute in Florence.²³ He showed a strong preference for large books rather than short articles. The confident giants of Victorian historiography, he thought, had given way to a world of 'diffident and untrustful pygmies', their great volumes had been replaced by 'snippets in learned journals and many a scholar earns a reputation on the strength of five thousand words'. Indeed he saw the irony of Acton and Creighton as founders of the *English Historical Review* becoming 'academic gun-runners' with the journals of the future subversive of the historical certainty, which rigorous research was supposed to reveal. 'Here [in the learned article] was the perfect sniper's weapon'. He himself, however, saw fit to co-edit the *Economic History Review*.

He inveighed against the fate of social and economic history (and here was the voice of Edward Welbourne again) being taken over to guard the historical flank of the eternal truths of Fabian socialism. Attempts to rescue history from its 'sterile preoccupation with mere politics' by social history invoking the lives of real people he saw as losing its appeal under the advance of explicit theorising (as was also the case with economic history): 'not even the militants seem able to breathe the old life and passion into their elaborate and labyrinthine analysis, upon which the dead hand

²¹ For his hostility to Canon V. A. Demant's, *Religion and the Decline of Capitalism* see *Economic History and the Historians* (1969), pp. 62–72, 128–39, 140–155.

²² *Queen Elizabeth and the Revolt of the Netherlands*, p. 5.

²³ *History in Special and in General* (Cambridge, 1964); 'The Relevance of History' *Mededelingen van de Koninklijke Academie voor Wetenschappen* (Klasse der Letteren). Brussels, Jaargang XXXVI (1975), No. 1.

of the sociological vocabulary lies heavy'. He could never accept a monolithic conceptual schema nor a methodology which sought explanation in one type of variable, least of all the economic. Of Marxist interpretations based upon the concept of class struggle he commented that '... history has been as obstinate in yielding up its secrets before them as a modern fortress attacked by peasants armed with pitchforks'. However, he was usually complimentary to E. H. Carr as an historian, if not as an historiographer.

His own work, as indicated, always saw interconnections and counterpoints between religion and business, politics and economics, men and circumstances. Having written so much about seventeenth-century European conflicts, he was always conscious of how present-day assumptions downgraded the importance of religion, whether in present reality or historical conflict, despite his own lack of any religious conviction. 'In the conditions of twentieth-century thought, by turns sceptical, atheistical, materialist and gullible, it is difficult for most people to grasp the character and importance of religion in earlier ages'.²⁴ That historical significance, 'relevance' or professional interest should be confined to periods subject to the elaborate quantification of systematic data—with everything pre-1870 written off as 'myth and fairy tale'—invoked particular scorn.

He then reacted, too strongly, against what he saw as the progressive take-over of economic history by such quantitative techniques and a conceptual apparatus which hid the simplified assumptions of neo-classical economics behind obscurantist econometric expertise. No economic historian worthy of the name, he argued, should ever have been taken in by theories of economic growth denying assumptions of increasing returns to scale, presuming market perfection, whether in information or competitive operation, concerned only with aggregate rates of investment rather than considering a qualitative assessment of the investment which embodied technical change, and taking law and politics for granted. The interplay between men and their context was of the essence, and increasingly Charles Wilson found it more congenial to concentrate on the human actors in the story. 'To reduce great dramas to graphs and curves', he wrote, 'to purge them of human values, is merely to substitute one kind of myopia for another. It is to deny the basic principle that history is a

²⁴ 'The Immigrant in English History' in *Economic Issues in Immigration* (Institute of Economic Affairs, 1970), pp. 1–16.

true counterpoint between man and his circumstances. Worst of all it is to make history not only dull but silly.²⁵

For Charles Wilson the more strident advocates of 'cliometrics' in the 1960s were making methodological claims which virtually redefined economic history; the only 'real' economic history was now to be the 'new' economic history. He wanted no truck with 'counterfactuals' which he had got over many years before, without benefit of econometrics, in the unquantifiable conundrum of 'Cleopatra's nose', and considered that the morbid fascination with counterfactuals sprang from a 'kind of amateurish boredom with reality'. All this was painting the subject into a corner; re-defining it in a limited way which dehumanised the discipline to reduce its subject matter to those themes which were amenable to the new methodology, making it an exercise in determining the causal interplay of purely economic variables, an historical branch of applied economics. Quite apart from deterring all those without formal expertise in quantitative methods and the new conceptual apparatus, de-naturing the subject in this way produced, in his view, unreal analyses of causation. Charles Wilson was not against quantification—he could interpret a time series and read business accounts more shrewdly than most—but he rebelled against the methodological implications of the trend in economic historiography. For this reason, amongst others, he welcomed his appointment as Professor of Modern History in Cambridge whereas he was seen by his colleagues in Cambridge, as elsewhere, as the natural successor to M. M. Postan (who was to retire in 1966) in the Chair of Economic History.

* * *

With such resonant views of what he saw as false gods—and Charles Wilson rather enjoyed such denunciations, which grew less inhibited as the years passed—what were his own positive beliefs about the uses of history? His affirmations as well as his scepticism became more specific with time. 'As I grow older and bolder and lose the caution of youth', he wrote in 1975, 'I am a little less diffident about the lessons of history.'²⁶

His eclectic vision of history was research-based, dependent on

²⁵ *History in Special and in General*, op. cit., p. 8. For a further elaboration of the point see 'Aciertos y Errores en Las Decisiones Personales en la Historia: Tres Ejemplos—Isabel I. de Inglaterra, Cromwell y de Witte', *Las Individualidades en la Historia* (Pamplona, 1985).

²⁶ 'The Relevance of History', p. 17.

primary sources, and certainly not without analytical vigour. He argued against ‘looseness of thought and expression’, with social historians being the most guilty in this respect, more particularly when ‘flying broad and general charges against whole classes of men . . . of whose outlook and activities they happened to disapprove’. Historical research could not produce definitive, value-free, objective, non-timebound, scientific certainties. Nor was history a cumulative revelation of progress. Material progress he undoubtedly affirmed—in this sense he reversed accusations of progressive amiseration with the evolution of capitalism, whether commercial or industrial. Economic development had convincingly overcome the fate of early-modern Europe with up to half the population ‘unemployed and exposed to recurrent crises of poverty and disturbance precisely because capital investment was wilfully capricious’. ‘It could be convincingly argued’, he concluded, ‘that it was not *factories* but the *absence* of factories that caused the trouble.’²⁷

Rather it was the intellectual and cultural trends of the ‘political nation’ which gave him doubts about progress, more specifically for the twentieth century. This was an age of ‘instant news and instant amnesia’. Far from being an era of disbelief it was, on the contrary, doubtful if there had ever been an age when there was wider or looser propensity to believe. He thought the mass media had become ‘instruments for inducing belief’.²⁸ Against such forces the individual human mind ‘robbed by nineteenth-century rationalism and twentieth-century technology of its protective covering of customary behaviour and religious belief is naked and powerless as a child’. Hence the importance he attributed to an awareness of history: it could provide a particular and sceptical perspective that comes from studying social phenomena in relation to time. Such value was certainly not to be found in the study of recent history or economic history alone; nor was it a simple lesson to learn. All too easily history could be used as a vehicle for enhancing prejudice, confirming mistaken current orthodoxies. His own credo is best expounded in an extended quotation in his own words:

²⁷ ‘The Relevance of History’, p. 7. Here were more echoes of Welbourne, who railed against the Fabian vision of ‘dark satanic mills’ by trumpeting: ‘Palaces of light—with all their gas lamps blazing the valleys of Lancashire had never seen anything so spectacular’.

²⁸ ‘Relevance . . .’, pp. 11-12. *Parliaments, Peoples and Mass Media: a Report on the Geneva Symposium organised by the Inter-Parliamentary Union in Dec. 1968* (published for the IPU by Cassell, 1970). Charles Wilson was the writer of this report, which linked verbatim extracts from the speeches of a highly diverse group of delegates into a coherent whole, with his own commentary.

It needs a blend of professional experience, common sense, detachment and breadth of scholarship which few of us possess to winkle . . . out [the lessons of history]. Yet I have come to believe that they are there, can be detected, and up to a point understood. To say 'history teaches' suggests to my mind a deceptively easy, almost automatic, process by which he who runs may read. I would prefer to say that the historical dimension is one dimension (and a vital one) of social knowledge. Those who are without it must lack a major weapon with which to fight contemporary ignorance, though, of course, they may have other weapons which the comprehending student of history lacks. I happen to believe, however, that a constant sense of the past and its relevance has never been more important than it is to our rudderless generation.²⁹

His views on university teaching remained firmly elitist and traditional. At the centre of undergraduate intellectual development, he saw the tutorial/supervision with its twin, and complementary, disciplines of writing in relatively short compass about a major historical topic every week of term and then defending the essay in dialogue with one's college supervisor. That, at least, was the start of the process. I remember supervisions which certainly began with the essay-topic but then led a life of their own, prompted by telephone calls from the college stock-broker (a Mocatta whose family had been in the business in London since the seventeenth century), or Unilever executives ('never think a Dutchman phlegmatic, they are consumed by raging internal passions') or an aged college farm tenant ('his family is a pillar of the Methodist church; no glass of the demon drink has ever crossed his lips yet he and his forebears prospered through every agricultural depression, and paid their rent, by malting-barley contracts with the London brewers!')

For lectures he had greater doubts, seeing the imparting of information as a fundamentally uncritical process: splendid new lecture halls were platforms where 'professors more numerous and pontifical than ever lecture at growing thousands of university students doomed to a life of passive obedience. . . . No wonder that the victims of this kind of academic tyranny band themselves together in students' unions against their Masters.'³⁰ This was Charles Wilson's dark response to university expansion (where more, for him, immediately meant worse) and the radical interlude of 1968–73. Classes and seminars were no solution either, for undergraduates at least, but a miscegenation with neither the usefulness of a lecture in imparting a body of formal knowledge nor the intellectual

²⁹ 'Relevance . . .', pp. 8–9, 12.

³⁰ *History in Special and in General*, p. 23.

stimulus of personal dialogue in a supervision. His views grow more extreme with age in these respects.

* * *

After eleven years in the Cambridge chair, moving increasingly away from economic history, Charles Wilson was appointed (on secondment for the first four years) to the European University Institute in Florence, from 1975 to 1981. As the first professor of History and Civilisation, and the first head of the department, he played an initiating role. He was always a committed European, in the English political sense. His appointment in the Institute coincided with a certain disenchantment with Cambridge: he felt (perhaps exaggeratedly) that he had become rather marginalised in the faculty. He twice failed to be elected Master of his College; and in the aftermath of divorce from Angela Marshman, whom he had married in 1939, and remarriage Cambridge had become socially a rather claustrophobic village. So he eagerly took the opportunity of a fresh commitment in a different country in a new institution, of which he greatly approved. Charles Wilson did much for the Institute; but the Institute at this time also did much for Charles Wilson.³¹

His position at the Institute endorsed his standing as an historian of Europe in the widest sense, whether in his publications as a business historian, as an economic historian or—as he wished himself to be identified—as an historian *tout court* but all embracing. He had also been for many years a Governor of the British Institute in Florence [1980–91] and an enthusiastic member of the Comitato Scientifico of the Istituto Internazionale di Storia Economica ‘F. Datini’ at Prato (1971–84; then member of the Comitato d’Onore) almost from its inception, and made lively contributions to many annual *Settimane di Studi*.

* * *

Charles Wilson’s final years were not tranquil. To pessimism about trends in academic life and his chosen discipline was added an accumulation of

³¹ The *Who’s Who* entry gives ‘1976–79, Vis. Prof. 1980–81’, but the records of the Institute document his appointment as: 1 Sept. 1975–30 Aug. 1976 (part-time; this was before the Institute opened for courses in Oct. 1976 and was taken up in various preparatory activities); 17 Sept. 1976–31 Aug. 1980 (full-time); 31 Oct. 1980–5 Dec. 1980; 4 months in the Spring of 1981 (both part-time appointments).

personal matters. By the early 1980's his second marriage of 1972 (to Alena Kouril from Czechoslovakia) was ending. He began to visit Australia to work on Australian history and renewed his links with Marion Raymond, whom he had known well in Cambridge before the war. He found happiness in Sydney and retained his zest for writing, despite failing health. He joined a circle of congenial economic historians at the University and at St Stephens college (particularly Stephen Salsbury). The early settlements in Australia formed the initial focus of his interest: he contributed an article on this to a festschrift in 1986, his penultimate publication before the last book *Australia 1788–1988: the Creation of a Nation* (1987).³² This was more an affectionate melange of history, than a solid bi-centennial history—a tribute to a country in which he had come to rest and where he died on 1 August 1991. His life came full circle, as he left instructions that his ashes should be scattered on the shore near Sydney where settlers from Market Rasen had arrived in 1788. That historical macrocosm mirrored what became his own personal odyssey.

* * *

Many honours came to Charles Wilson over the years: a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1966; a Litt.D. at Cambridge; CBE in 1981. The festschrift presented to him in 1984 included contributions from England, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Italy, and the United States.³³ He was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the Royal Danish Academy (1970) and the Royal Belgian Academy (1973); a vice-president of The Royal Historical Society (1981–6); he received honorary degrees at the University of Groningen (1964) and at Leuven (1977). His services to Dutch history were recognised in his appointment as Commander, Order of Orange-Nassau (1974). He also served on many advisory committees, nationally and internationally.³⁴

³² 'Convicts, Commerce and Sovereignty: the Forces behind early settlement in Australia', in N. McKendrick and R. B. Outhwaite (eds.), *Business Life and Public Policy: Essays in Honour of D. C. Coleman* (Cambridge, 1986).

³³ D. C. Coleman and P. Mathias, *Enterprise and History: Essays in Honour of Charles Wilson* (Cambridge, 1984).

³⁴ These included being British Government Representative on the Anglo-Netherlands Cultural Commission (1956–72); participant and rapporteur for the Inter-Parliamentary Union Symposium (1968); member of the Advisory Committee on the Public Records (1972–7); member of the Editorial Board, *Journal of European Economic History* (1975–91); member of British Academy

He was the most approachable and informal of persons, never standing on his dignity; genial, gregarious, congenial, as a companion—with a gift of mimicry which much enhanced his skill as a raconteur.³⁵

PETER MATHIAS

Fellow of the Academy

delegation to the European Science Foundation (1980); member of the Advisory Committee, Business History Unit, LSE (1981–); Vice President Royal Historical Society (1981–); member of William and Mary Tercentenary Trust (chairman of Historical Committee) (1986).

³⁵ This was reflected in his interest in Tennyson and Lincolnshire. See ‘Mirror of a Shire: Tennyson’s Dialect Poems’ *Durham University Journal* (Dec. 1959), which was based on the text of his BBC Third Programme broadcast on 2 Aug. 1959.

