



*Photograph by Andrew Paterson, Inverness*

SIR WILLIAM WOODTHORPE TARN, 1939

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1869-1957

**W**ILLIAM WOODTHORPE TARN was born on 26 February 1869, the elder son of William Tarn of Fan Court, Surrey, and 94 Lancaster Gate, London. He was educated at Cheam and then at Eton, where he was at first to be entered as an Oppidan. But when the headmaster of Cheam doubted if he could have won a place as a King's Scholar, his father insisted on his trying, and he was duly elected to College. At Eton he owed much to his Classical tutor Mr. A. C. Ainger and to the encouragement of Mr. Luxmoore. He showed himself versatile in his studies, for he won Prince Consort Prizes for French and German, the Tomline Prize for Mathematics, and was placed in the Select for the Newcastle Scholarship in Classics. Provost M. R. James remembered him as having been Captain of the School for a record period of time. In 1888 he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, as a pensioner and was elected scholar in the next year.

At Trinity he was fortunate in being taught by such scholars as Archer-Hind, J. D. Duff, R. D. Hicks, J. P. Postgate, Verrall, and, above all, Henry Jackson, to whom he owed a lively and lasting interest in Greek Philosophy, in which he specialized with success in Part II of the Classical Tripos after taking a high First in Part I. At the same time he made himself a good oarsman, rowing in the Third Trinity boat in the May races from 1889 onwards.

Then, after a happy and distinguished career at Cambridge, he had to make his choice of a profession. He might well have become a candidate for a fellowship, but his father, who had recently died, had wished him to go to the Bar, and this he did. He was entered at the Inner Temple and studied in the Chambers of Mr. Spencer Butler, brother of the Master of Trinity and a leading Chancery Barrister of the day. On being called in 1894 he began what soon became a promising career.

Tarn had acquired many interests from his youth up. One long vacation he travelled widely in the mainland of Greece on foot and round the islands in a tiny coasting steamer, and he often visited the Continent with his mother. Every year his father would take a shoot in the Highlands, where Tarn kept him company. In the end he was accounted one of the six best

game shots in Great Britain and held the Scottish record for a day's bag of grouse shot over dogs. He was also a keen and skilful fisherman. In the family house in Town his father was an amateur and patron of music, and his son was taught to be a good pianist and accompanied many great singers at musical evenings.

Once Tarn was established at the Bar, his life might well seem to be mapped out for him. In 1896 he married Flora Macdonald, third daughter of John Robertson of Orbst in the Isle of Skye, to his great happiness. They had one child, a daughter, who now lives in the family house at Orbst. In London he had friends and relatives on his father's side within reach, and in the Highlands he now had connexions with whom he would exchange visits when he could spare time from a growing legal practice. He was a member of the Leander Club for many years and at times rowed in Leander crews at Henley. One topic which now attracted his interest was the way Greek ships were rowed, and he wrote about this, as about other Classical subjects, in occasional papers. In this he was fortunate in the friendship of G. F. Hill and other scholars, who helped to keep his Classical interests alive. But his career and prospect of distinction seemed to lie in the Law, in which he could enjoy the constant use of his keen mind, his shrewd judgement, and his precise memory.

Then came a period of physical and emotional strain. A long and dangerous illness of his wife, whom he tended with anxious devotion, and the stress of hard work at the Bar undermined his strength, so that, in the summer of 1905, he had a serious breakdown in health. He was advised to abandon, or at least intermit, his legal career and withdraw from London.

It may have been hard to reconcile himself to this break in his career, the more as at that very time he was offered the legal work of one of the Government Offices, but the choice was made and for good. After a winter of treatment and convalescence in the Mendips, and a pilgrimage in search of a house, he settled at Mountgerald near Dingwall, where he engaged in the peaceful avocations of a country gentleman, contentedly pursuing the observation of birds and beasts, of which he already had a wide and accurate knowledge. Then, as his health returned, the intellectual interest which he had found in Law revived in the leisurely study of Hellenistic culture and political history. During the previous twenty years this side of Greek history had engaged the attention of British scholars more than ever before, and it was in this field that Tarn won and maintained for forty years or

more a pre-eminent position. To the elucidation of the evidence he brought the precision and acumen of his legal training, an unflagging enthusiasm and wide learning, to which he added literary gifts of a high order when he was moved to bring them into play. He had not lost the interest in Greek philosophy which Henry Jackson had inspired in him as an undergraduate, and his first book, *Antigonus Gonatas*, dedicated to his teacher, contained a brilliant chapter 'Antigonus and his Circle', which is proof of this. The preface to this work is characteristic of him in its candour and generosity, and I may venture to recall the admiration which the book aroused in me, as in others of my generation. It was published in 1913 just before the world of scholarship was divided by war, in which he found other employment for his gifts.

On the declaration of war Tarn was refused by the Army because of his sight, and after a year in which he devoted his skill as a carpenter to meeting special needs of the Red Cross, he was engaged on work for the Intelligence Division of the War Office for the rest of the war. How this came about is not without interest. Tarn would write weekly summaries of events as he saw them to a brother-in-law serving with Lovat's Scouts at Salonika, and his letters were passed round among senior officers in the eastern theatre of war until at last Bonar Law became aware of them. The result was an invitation to remove to London and prepare material discreetly based on the most esoteric information, which was then circulated to foreign newspapers as from a special correspondent on military and economic matters. He also wrote brief pamphlets to be dropped by aircraft over Germany and the enemy lines. It is pleasing to reflect how many people throughout the world read these specialized writings of an ancient historian and country gentleman prepared in a quiet room in Whitehall for the good of their souls. The one reward he wished and received was the appreciation of those few who were in the secret, which was well kept by himself and them.

When the war ended Tarn returned to his hospitable home at Mountgerald to be visited by the Highland kinsfolk of his wife and by old friends made at Eton, at Cambridge, and while he was at the Bar. The Isle of Skye, his wife's country, had a special charm for him and he would visit it every year to shoot over an estate that was at his disposal for the purpose. He made the coast near Orbst, where he had met his future wife, the scene of a fairy story which he wrote for the delectation of their daughter. In that book, *The Treasure of the Isle of Mist*, he appears

in the character of the Student, in which his deep domestic affection was revealed as of a lover of books and of that romantic coast. It was published in 1920 and had a vogue in Great Britain and the United States and became a classic in its kind. Many children and grown-ups for many years were at home in Skye through its pages. It may be added in this context that, a generation later, he wrote a second fairy book to please his granddaughter and a treatise on *The Woodcock* for the information of his grandson, in whose promise as a shot and student of nature he took great pride. Throughout all his life he retained his interest and skill in music and was well read in the English authors who were specially to his taste, as is occasionally revealed in his prose style. He had also a strong and precise memory not only of historical sources but of Greek literature, especially of Homer, Euripides, and Plato. His daughter remembers how, as she nursed him through the crisis of an illness during the last year of his life and as he became light-headed in delirium, he would recite Homer to himself as he had done to her when she was a child.

With all these activities he would combine his historical scholarship. It became his habit to move to London for part of each winter and gather material for his work in libraries and in discussion with scholars. Then he would return with a pile of neatly written notebooks to his own house and write at leisure and after mature thought. He had no need to seek academical employment and no desire to limit his freedom in order to attain a high position in a university. English scholarship has owed much to men who were able to make their leisure the ally of their learning and their learning the companion of their other activities. Of that group, now so small, he was an outstanding example.

Tarn's most productive period lay in the years between the two Great Wars. In a good hour it was decided to invite him to contribute to the *Cambridge Ancient History*. And his ready acceptance of the invitation was for me a most fortunate event, for I was then concerned with that undertaking. One day came a letter to say that when next I was in the north I would be welcome at Mountgerald, where he could offer me 'a little rough shooting, if I cared for that sort of thing . . .'. In the next summer I was able to drive over from Kingussie to his new home at Muirtown, a mile or two north of Inverness. As I came up the drive at Muirtown he was sitting in an old-fashioned Norfolk jacket on the steps that led to his house. I was presented to Mrs. Tarn, the most gracious of hostesses, to his daughter, and to the

guests who had gathered for the Northern Meeting, and I was soon struggling to hold my own with him at chess in a corner of the tennis court. Next morning I followed Tarn up the hill behind Muirtown to watch him shoot a brace or two of grouse for the pot. In the afternoon his car took us for a drive along Loch Ness, and then there was a little time for ancient history before dinner. After dinner there was gossip in the drawing-room until he was induced to play to us, first Beethoven and then reels while I was put through my paces against the ball of the next evening. After this we went to his study to talk shop till well into the night. It was the first of many visits, of many kindnesses which he showed to me during the next thirty years.

To return to the *Ancient History*, Tarn wrote five chapters for volume VI and four for volume VII which covered the formation and heyday of the Hellenistic world. They would arrive on the appointed day and of the agreed length, all written in his own hand as legible as they were lucid. All were marked by a skilful interpretation of men and events. Long study had made the personalities of that epoch come alive to him, and he added to his narrative of war and diplomacy a just appreciation of the culture, the politics, and economic forces that prevailed at the time. How strong was his grasp of these economic forces had been already attested by an essay on the 'Social Question in the Third Century' included in a small collection *The Hellenistic Age* that was published at Cambridge in 1923.

The most striking of these chapters, those describing Alexander the Great, were infused with a glow of admiration that amounted to hero worship. It has been said, and not wholly without reason, that Tarn's judgement might, now and then, be deflected by the application of standards too traditionally ethical for the times of which he wrote. I remember Rostovtzeff, who had never met Tarn, writing to me something like this: 'He is a very learned man and a most acute judge of evidence, but for interpreting the Hellenistic period he has one disadvantage—he is dominated by the instincts of an English gentleman.'

Tarn's own standards of value and of conduct were, indeed, aristocratic, and in those figures of antiquity he admired, above all Alexander, he was tempted to make them attain his standards even if part of the evidence pointed another way. So too there was an element of hero worship in a doctrine, which was very dear to him, that Alexander was the true begetter of the idea of the Unity of Mankind which went beyond the alliance or fusion of Macedonians, Greeks, and Iranians under his kingship. Tarn

maintained this doctrine with force and eloquence and, though it has not wholly survived criticism, it was not unworthy of him as an ideal.

Tarn was later to return to Alexander. The economy of the *Ancient History* did not permit of the detailed debate of very many matters on which scholars are bound to choose between possible variations of factual conclusions and, still more, of interpretation or judgement moral as well as political and military. The evaluation of the sources could be stated, but not established without much analysis and argument. Those readers of these chapters who knew the evidence and the problems, could, as it were, see the muscles moving beneath the skin and were aware of the intensive criticism and shrewd insight which lay behind his narrative. But to leave it so was to limit Tarn's contribution to historical scholarship, and, twenty years later, he was invited to add to a republication of the Alexander chapters a substantial volume of essays and studies on the sources and on particular problems. He accepted the invitation, for which he was prepared by the records of much research and thought which had not ended with the writing of the chapters. Thus his work on Alexander was fully presented to the judgement of his colleagues, and, even if it did not command assent at every point, it is not easy to think of a greater achievement, within its range, by an ancient historian of our time.

During the years that Tarn was engaged upon these chapters for the *Cambridge Ancient History* he had completed a masterly presentation of the whole period in all its aspects which fully justified its title *Hellenistic Civilisation*. Its publication in 1927 attests the width of his interests and learning, and it has not been superseded except by its Third Edition (1952), to which reference will be made later. Tarn's association with the *Ancient History* continued after a brief interval, when he contributed to volume IX a chapter on Parthia in which he combined Chinese and Greek sources in a balanced survey.

In the next volume he wrote parts of the chapters on the period from the death of Caesar to the death of Cleopatra, in which the figure of the last of the great Macedonian queens stands out with especial clarity and brilliance. In these chapters he joined forces with the late M. P. Charlesworth, and I had reason to know how diligently and fair-mindedly they worked together. I may be permitted to quote here a passage from a letter he wrote to me on Charlesworth's death, which has been quoted elsewhere in the memoir of his colleague that appeared

in volume xxxvi of the *Proceedings*, for it is revealing of both of them alike.

I am very proud and touched that he should have remembered our collaboration over volume X. It was certainly a very happy time for me: he was the nicest person to collaborate with that one could imagine, and though it was a quite new kind of collaboration I think we only disagreed once. I still remember that day vividly; it was one point only; I came down to Cambridge overnight with a 'neutral draft', breakfasted with him, and then for 3 hours we went over my draft word for word like 2 lawyers, till at last we had a text with which neither of us quite agreed but which we could both sign without violating our consciences too badly. Then (do you remember?) you came in to lunch, and Charlesworth drove us to Ely Cathedral and all talk ended and we sat watching the sun through the stained glass. Not many other men would have thought of Ely being what we needed or what *I* needed. I have always remembered that day as one of the high lights of my life—a golden day—and I am very glad he remembered it too.

And as I first read these words I remembered, as I remember still, such other 'golden days' in far-off Inverness.

There was one other substantial piece of work in which Tarn was to seek a collaborator. The time came for a revised version of his *Hellenistic Civilisation*, as years had elapsed since the second edition. On the part which dealt with the Seleucid Empire he had already done much work, but as he was by now unable to travel afield to libraries to complete the review of other evidence, he sought the assistance of Mr. G. T. Griffith, insisting that the credit for the new edition should be shared between them as equals.

The prospect [Mr. Griffith has written], of collaborating with Tarn, when it was first presented to me, seemed a little formidable, because of his seniority, his eminence and his remoteness. I had met him only two or three times, and had got that impression of him personally that one can easily get too, I think, from his writings, an impression of a forthright character who preferred not to stand any nonsense. He had also earned some reputation as a controversialist who did not easily abandon any position that he had once taken up. The process of collaboration was conducted entirely by correspondence (I never met him again) spread over three years . . . As additions and changes suggested themselves to me, a list of them had to be sent to him for his comment and decision, and I do not recall a single instance in which his reply gave me the impression that on any topic his mind was closed. On the contrary, my suggestions received always as much consideration as they deserved (sometimes much more) and in nearly all cases the changes were accepted.



Not all scholars would have acted in this matter as Tarn did, but when, on occasion, we talked together of the progress of the new version, it seemed to him, and to me who knew him, the most natural thing in the world. For he was not one of those who find it easy to believe that new evidence only exists to prove them right.

Tarn's earliest contributions to learned journals indicated the direction of much of his later work. In 1901 a paper on 'Patrocles and the Oxo-Caspian Trade Route' had references to the sources for Alexander, in 1902 'Notes on Hellenism in Bactria and India' looked forward to his later work on that topic (p. 261), a series of papers between 1905 and 1907 were concerned with warships, fleets, and battles, to be followed by a succinct account of the Roman navy in the *Companion to Latin Studies* which Professor Thiel, a very good judge, has described as still the best thing written on this topic. Thereafter he made a special study of the military establishment and campaigns of Alexander and his successors. His most notable single contribution to the history of the art of war is to be found in his lectures at Trinity College on the Lee Knowles Foundation, which were published in 1930 under the title *Hellenistic Military and Naval Developments*. This small book was at once extremely interesting to the general reader, for it was written *con amore* and with an easy command of the scattered evidence, and more enlightening to the specialist than anything that has been produced before or since on these matters. The conclusion of the First Lecture may be quoted to illustrate these qualities of simplicity and insight:

I have given a brief outline of some of the principal changes which took place in warfare, and I should like to end with a moral tag, as one used to do in the Victorian period. It is this, that it may always be worth while studying Macedonian warfare, not for the sake of warfare, but just for the sake of seeing the distinction, in difficult circumstances, between a man who, as we say, does his best, and the man who means to get the thing done and does it.

He possessed, as his writings often showed, a gift of discerning and describing strategy and of evaluating generalship and the means of making war and winning battles. On the size of fleets and armies he showed in all his writings a shrewd judgement; and his conclusions have won general assent. One topic on which he was to hold opinions of almost theological firmness was the oarage of Greek triremes, a question which is still more open to controversy than many scholars besides himself are inclined to believe. On this topic he was at times to betray a touch of

impatience unlike the care it was his habit to take in seeing all sides on controversial questions. He possessed great dialectical skill but was careful not to use it to excess. His advice on points of scholarship was often sought and never refused, and his notes on books or dissertations submitted to his judgement show how diligently he studied them and how ready he was to be of assistance to the writers.

As he grew older Tarn was precluded by ill health from constant meeting with other scholars, but he conducted a wide correspondence to make up for this. And he was at great pains to seek out evidence wherever it was to be found. When he embarked upon his *Greeks in Bactria and India*, a pioneer work in which much material had to be marshalled and combined for the first time, this activity is revealed by two boxes of correspondence of the years 1935 to 1937 with British and foreign scholars on the Eastern evidence. The same is true, on a rather smaller field, in his preparation for his chapter on Parthia which has been mentioned above. And when he had written a work he continued to take note of instructed criticism and new evidence, as appears from the *marginalia* in his own copy of each book and especially from the *Addenda* to be found in the Second Edition of the *Greeks in Bactria and India*. For he was well aware that in that work there were many matters which might need to be reinforced or modified by other work, so that it must await the verdict of that old common arbitrator Time. But even where some of his conclusions may require revision, it remains an adventure of scholarship of great grasp and lasting value. And towards the end of his life he contributed a brief survey of Greek and Roman history to the first volume of a composite work *The European Inheritance*, in which he set himself with success to do justice to the Romans, who had been no friends of his as he worked on the later part of the Hellenistic Period.

It was only natural that his many achievements as an historian should find their due recognition. In 1928 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy, and between 1946 and 1953 he became a Foreign Member of the Royal Dutch Academy, the American Philosophical Society, and the German Archaeological Institute. The University of Edinburgh conferred upon him its doctorate, and in 1939 he received the distinction which he prized most highly of them all, an Honorary Fellowship of Trinity. Finally, in 1952 he was knighted in recognition of his services to Ancient History.

For many years his house had been the centre of much

hospitality, but after the death of his wife in 1937 and with the approach of old age which took from him his old activity and thinned the ranks of his friends, Tarn lost something of his old zest for life. But he had much affection to give and to receive. Summer after summer until 1952 he would travel to Skye and find a kind of rejuvenation in his daughter's house. And when he returned to Muirtown, he could look forward to return visits. His granddaughter was by now at school in Inverness, and I shall not forget how the years fell away from him as he hurried to greet her as she alighted at the steps of his house. And even when he became very frail and burdened with suffering he still found pleasure in the occasional company of his friends who came to see him. I may venture to recall the last visit I paid to him. Another friend of his, Professor Nock, and I were staying with his daughter in Skye and we discovered that he would be just well enough to receive us. So we travelled to Inverness and then took a car to his house giving the driver strict instructions to return for us after forty minutes. For most of that time he was gay and full of talk, until after half an hour he visibly tired and his thoughts wandered away in vague memories. He roused himself to bid us good-bye with his old kindly courtesy, and so we left him.

In the last two decades of his life Tarn found little to please him in the way the world went, and though he was generous in praise of any action he admired, his instinctive reaction to social changes and economic pressure on men of his class was critical. Such sacrifices as he found himself obliged to make were made without complaint, and he denied himself to find the means to give unobtrusive help to many whom he regarded as having a claim upon him. In the smallest affairs of life he was punctiliously considerate, and he demanded more of himself than of the kindness of others. He was fortunate in the devoted care of a family servant and as he came to live in the past he had memories to cherish and, in the present, family ties which gave him great comfort. But in the end, life became a burden to him and after long illness patiently endured he died peacefully in his own house on 7 November 1957 in his eighty-ninth year.

F. E. ADCOCK.