

# DONALD CAMERON WATT

Donald Cameron Watt

17 May 1928 – 30 October 2014

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1990

by

KATHLEEN BURK

Donald Cameron Watt gained a first-class degree in PPE at the University of Oxford in 1951, where he developed an interest in the origins and progress of the Second World War. After a brief period as a documents' editor—an activity he continued throughout his academic life—he joined the London School of Economics in 1954 to teach international history, where he remained for the rest of his career; he was promoted to a chair in 1972 and became Stevenson Professor in 1981. He published widely in contemporary history, emphasising the roles played by key individuals, for example by exploring decision-making within the various levels in the British foreign policy-making elite. His magnum opus, *How War Came: the Immediate Origins of the Second World War 1938–1939*, appeared in 1989 and won him the Wolfson History Prize in 1990; his other books included *Personalities and Policies: Studies in the Formulation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century* (1965) and *Britain and the Suez Canal* (1956).



DONALD CAMERON WATT

Donald Cameron Watt, Stevenson Professor of International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science from 1981 to 1993, was in one sense a figure of continuity, but in another a figure who developed and propagated a new approach to international history. He worked in a field which had traditionally been seen as one of importance, that of the interrelationship of states, but he emerged in an historiographical period when that field was seen as of less interest than others. Furthermore, much more emphasis was placed on historical forces and less on the free will of historical figures. His approach could perhaps be summed up by the title of his inaugural lecture, 'What About the People?' He did not deny that there were forces beyond the control of an individual or a government or a country, but he felt strongly that forces were the context, not the determining aspect, of decision-making, and that more emphasis should be placed on the ideas, backgrounds, relationships, misconceptions and misperceptions of decision-makers. He thought it vital that multiple archives should be used and, indeed, that as wide a range of sources both public and private were necessary in order even to approach whatever was the truth. Importantly, he had the humility to believe that his students and colleagues should challenge his ideas: he believed neither in schools of history nor in the desirability of acolytes.

Watt was born on 17 May 1928 at 9, Horton Crescent, Rugby, Warwickshire. His father, Robert Cameron Watt, was a housemaster at Rugby School, an independent boys' school, and later Rector of Edinburgh Academy.<sup>1</sup> His mother, Barbara Hannah, was Canadian and the daughter of the Bishop of Ontario. She and Robert met in 1926 at the Christmas Ball at the Royal Military College in Kingston.<sup>2</sup> Watt called his father an inspirational teacher, who was 'renowned for his remarkable ability to inspire pupils in spite of the illegibility of his handwriting on the blackboard and the almost inaudible manner in which he mumbled his way through lessons'.<sup>3</sup> Although Watt's own blackboard skills were never really tested, he certainly inherited his father's habit of inaudibility when speaking to groups. He ran an innovative MA on the Law of the Sea, which was massively oversubscribed, and when he mumbled, the students complained that they could not hear him. A microphone was brought in and attached to the lectern; he took one look at it, announced that he never used them, and moved to the side so that it could not pick up his voice.<sup>4</sup> It is unclear why he thought that it was irrelevant that many could not hear what he was saying.

During his entire career, Watt was driven by the need to understand the breakdown of Europe after Versailles, the rise of Nazi Germany and the origins of the Second

<sup>1</sup> He is not listed as an alumnus on Rugby's website—nor, for that matter, on Wikipedia's.

<sup>2</sup> M. G. Fry, Jr. (ed.), *Power, Personalities and Policies: Essays in Honour of Donald Cameron Watt* (London, 1992), Foreword by Fry.

<sup>3</sup> *The Times*, 4 February 2015; not the actual words of Watt but summing up his feeling.

<sup>4</sup> Brian Holden Reid to the author, 22 November 2018.

World War. This had its origins at Rugby, as he wrote in the Preface to his masterpiece, *How War Came: the Immediate Origins of the Second World War 1938-1939*: ‘the drive to write this book began on September 2 and 3, 1939, when, as an eleven-year-old schoolboy, I helped my father and his colleagues fill sand-bags in one of the great sand quarries outside Rugby... . It grew enormously in strength two years later when, lazing in the summer on the banks of the school close, with the scent of new-mown grass in the air, I read for the first time an account of the British retreat to Dunkirk. How could a British army have come to find itself in so near-disastrous a position? How could things have been allowed to go so far?’<sup>5</sup>

When he was conscripted after the end of the war, he was driven to know more, and he ‘wangled, connived, volunteered and out-competed’ his fellow conscripts to win a posting to Austria as a member of the Intelligence Corps, where he became an acting sergeant in Field Security, concerned with de-nazification and ‘with keeping an eye on the wilder and madder edges of the political spectrum, firstly among the inhabitants of Styria, [and] then among the tides of refugees from south-eastern Europe’.<sup>6</sup> What he learned from these experiences was that Central European politics produced a wide range of attitudes, both admirable and vicious, that he could not have imagined in his schoolboy days. He met all types of people, from a Croat deeply ashamed of the wartime activities of men claiming to represent Croatia to an ultra-nationalist doctor from South Tyrol to a village gendarme who called a plague on the houses of all politicians, no matter for which side they claimed to act. He also discovered a keen interest in official documents. His primary duty was to assess Nazi documents, and at one point he posted some secret documents to himself, presumably to save them from destruction, although one kind soul suggests that this was an early symptom of his chronic absent-mindedness.<sup>7</sup> In any case, the documents were intercepted by army security and, as a result, he was court-martialed. Luckily, he was only reprimanded and not reduced in rank.

In 1948 he went up to Oriel College, Oxford with a scholarship to read Philosophy, Politics and Economics, taking a First in 1951. Twentieth-century history was not yet recognised in Oxford as a fit subject for study by undergraduates, with the most modern Special Subject entitled ‘Great Britain and the Making of the Ententes 1898–1907’. He felt himself lucky to have tutors who had had service experience in the war, whether in the Special Operations Executive or at Bletchley Park, which housed the work of the decrypting of German official messages. In particular, he was grateful to

<sup>5</sup>D. C. Watt, *How War Came: the Immediate Origins of the Second World War 1938–1939* (London, 1989), p. ix.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>B. Holden Reid, ‘Watt, Donald Cameron 1928–2014’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/odnb/9780198614128.013.108084> (accessed 23 January 2019).

Christopher Seton-Watson, who had been elected to a Tutorial Fellowship in Modern History and Politics at Oriel even before completing his undergraduate degree at Oxford (he received a 'war degree'). Seton-Watson, who was ten years older than Watt, had served in the Royal Artillery in Belgium and France (he was evacuated from Dunkirk), Greece, Egypt and Italy, ending the war with a Military Cross and Bar. His specialty was late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Italian politics, writing the classic book *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism 1870-1922*,<sup>8</sup> in which he dealt with some of the questions for Italy—why and how came Italy to Fascism?—that Watt would want to understand for Germany. The hours spent discussing the beginning and end of the war as well as the general history and politics of modern Europe with Seton-Watson were intensely stimulating.

It must be said, however, that his Oxford period was not all work. He was and remained interested in poetry, writing some himself, and in 1950 he co-edited *Oxford Poetry* with J. B. Donne, which was published by Blackwell in 1951. It is also likely that he sang. He had spent part of his schooldays as a boy chorister at King's College School, Cambridge, and later, a fine baritone, he auditioned for both Sadler's Wells and Covent Garden, but was unsuccessful. In later years he sang at friends' parties, reportedly everything from opera to musical theatre and, rumour whispered at the time, to country and western.

Instead of a musical career, then, he began one as an editor of documents. He joined for a three-year stint the team organised and run by Sir John Wheeler-Bennett as assistant editor of *Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945*, containing the captured archives of the German Foreign Ministry, which he helped to screen and then to edit for publication; the British team worked alongside French and American editorial teams. He was the first historian to read the German Foreign Ministry archives for 1933–1937 (later to be Series C). He also 'devilled' on the volumes covering March to September 1939. It is certainly the case that he had a deep bath in documents which would form the basis of much of his future work. Indeed, he got more than an inkling as to how inadequate his Oxford education had been when trying to understand what had happened. After his three years, he wanted a permanent post, and he was appointed Assistant Lecturer in International History at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) in 1954, where he spent his entire academic career. (In 1954, International History at the LSE consisted only of the Sir Daniel Stevenson Professor of International History, W. N. Medlicott, and two junior lecturers, one of whom was Watt.) He was promoted in due course to Lecturer, Senior Lecturer and then Reader in 1966. In 1972 he took up a chair in International History, and in 1981 succeeded to the Stevenson chair, probably the premier chair in the field in the UK.

<sup>8</sup>C. Seton-Watson, *Italy from Liberalism to Fascism 1870-1922* (London, 1967).

One reason why he wanted a permanent position was that he was married. He had met Marianne Ruth Grau, a Jewish refugee from Germany and a schoolteacher, at the Oxford Operatic Society and, after the completion of his degree in July 1951, they were married in Oxford on 20 December. They had a son, Ewen; but however the marriage began, it deteriorated. Marianne could never escape from the traumatisation of her experiences in Germany. Divorce proceedings were begun, but in 1962, before they were completed, she committed suicide. Later the same year, on 2 December, Watt married Felicia Cobb Stanley, an American librarian whom he had met whilst studying in Washington. By all accounts she brought stability, as well as a stepdaughter, Cathy, and a multitude of cats, into his life.

Professor W. N. Medlicott was the convenor or head of department when Watt joined it. Watt thought highly of him, writing in the short biography that he wrote for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* that ‘Medlicott became the leader in Britain of that transformation of the history of foreign policy and of diplomatic history into the discipline of international history... . He was a pioneer in the widening of old-style diplomatic history to include issues of trade, [military] strategy, and economic warfare.’<sup>9</sup> He very much encouraged Watt to write a book, but the latter was diverted into other and, in this context, less productive directions. Months after the Suez Crisis in November 1956, he edited *Documents on the Suez Crisis* (he had already published *Britain and the Suez Canal*).<sup>10</sup> From 1961 to 1972 he edited the Survey of International Affairs for the Royal Institute of International Affairs at Chatham House. From 1985 to 1997 he was general editor of the multi-volume *British Documents on Foreign Affairs* that published the complete 150 years of the Foreign Office Confidential Print Series; he himself dealt with seven of the eventual thirty-five volumes. In 1978 he had accepted a commission to write the Official History of the Ministry of Defence after 1945, on which he worked at the same time, but this was a fiasco. The public story, repeated in most obituaries, was that Watt was intensely frustrated by the reluctance of Whitehall to give him access to the documents that he wanted to see and so he decided to quit. This may well have been the case, but there is an additional layer. Instead of one volume he produced three, including one entirely off the subject, a volume on the Committee of Imperial Defence. (The Committee of Imperial Defence—CID—had been formed in 1902; when the War Cabinet was established on the outbreak of war in September 1939, it absorbed the CID.) It was thought that parts of his history could be rescued, but the historian who read it thought that

<sup>9</sup>D. C. Watt, ‘Medlicott, William Norton (1900–1987)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/66374> (accessed 23 January 2019).

<sup>10</sup>*Documents on the Suez Crisis, 26 July to 6 November 1956*, selected and introduced by D. C. Watt (London, 1957); D. C. Watt, *Britain and the Suez Canal* (London, 1956).

publishing it would damage Watt's reputation, not least because it was written in a very tedious style. Watt asked a colleague in the field whether he could rescue it, but it was not thought possible, and the matter was dropped.

It is worth noting at this point, because it supports the argument of Watt's intense frustration with the Ministry of Defence, that Watt was one of the group of historians in the campaign, successful in 1967, to convince the Wilson government that the fifty-year rule against access to government archives should be reduced to a thirty-year rule.<sup>11</sup> By its implementation, archival research into the 1930s became possible, clearly of great benefit to Watt himself (at least until he tried to work on material which officials considered should be kept secret). I myself indirectly benefited from this access a decade later. Whilst writing a DPhil thesis on the First World War, there was only one occasion when a file that I wanted to read was already out to another researcher. Rather, most of those with whom I talked at the Public Record Office (now The National Archive) seemed to be working on the 1930s or the Second World War, partly because reading these newly-opened files encouraged the hope of making exciting discoveries, every research student's dream.

During Watt's early years as a lecturer, he did produce a number of articles, dealing with three separate countries, amongst which were 'Anglo-German naval negotiations on the eve of World War II',<sup>12</sup> 'Die bayerische Bemühungen um die Ausweisung Hitlers, 1924',<sup>13</sup> 'German strategic planning and Spain, 1938–1939',<sup>14</sup> 'The Rome–Berlin axis, 1936–1940: myth and reality',<sup>15</sup> and 'American strategic interests and

<sup>11</sup> The effort was begun in 1963 by a group of senior historians, many connected with the Cabinet Office or the Historical Branch of the Foreign Office Research Department, to obtain a revision of the 1958 Public Records Act. The campaign was fuelled by the apparent ease with which ex-ministers could gain access to the papers arising from their own periods in office to produce what were widely believed to be partial, if not partisan, defences of their official activities. Their individual protests were so abruptly rejected by Macmillan before his retirement from office in 1963 that the historians were driven to lobby the Cabinet Office collectively. The subsequent debate within the government and the Cabinet Office took place against the background of two general elections, and any such change was dependent upon the agreement of the committee of Privy Councillors drawn from all three parties. Debate lasted for four years, until the Public Records Act of 1967 changed the fifty-year rule to a thirty-year rule: D. C. Watt, 'Foreign affairs, the public interest, and the right to know', *Political Quarterly*, 34 (1963), 121–36; D. C. Watt, 'Contemporary history in Britain, problems and perspectives', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 3 (1969), 515–25; D. C. Watt, 'The historiography of appeasement', in A. Sked and C. Cook (eds.), *Crisis and Controversy: Essays in Honour of A. J. P. Taylor* (London, 1976), p. 120 for the lobbying.

<sup>12</sup> D. C. Watt, 'Anglo-German naval negotiations on the eve of World War II', *Journal of the Royal United Service Institute*, 103 (1958), 201–7.

<sup>13</sup> D. C. Watt, 'Die bayerische Bemühungen um die Ausweisung Hitlers, 1924', *Vierteljahreshaft für Zeitgeschichte*, 4 (1958), 270–80.

<sup>14</sup> D. C. Watt, 'German strategic planning and Spain, 1938–1939', *Army Quarterly*, 80 (1960), 220–7.

<sup>15</sup> D. C. Watt, 'The Rome–Berlin axis, 1936–1940: myth and reality', *Review of Politics*, 22 (1960), 519–43.

anxieties in the West Indies, 1917–1940'.<sup>16</sup> But he also produced two articles which attracted the terms 'seminal'<sup>17</sup> and 'watershed',<sup>18</sup> and which were seen as transforming the study of appeasement: 'Appeasement reconsidered: some neglected factors',<sup>19</sup> and 'Appeasement: the rise of a revisionist school?'<sup>20</sup> It was the second of these articles in particular that encouraged research on British policy in the 1930s to follow new directions.

To begin, Watt set out the 'orthodox' view: first of all, Hitler had come to power with certain long-term aims, and his actions betrayed 'a considered and premeditated drive to achieve German hegemony in Europe', and, secondly, that 'an England upset by Hitler's initial actions [was] determined after the summer of 1934 on taking the nationalist steam out of the grievances believed to inspire Hitler's policy by a policy of concessions'. He pointed out that the two theses had been advanced, and defended, by nearly all Britain's leading historians who happened to be interested in the recent past. He also pointed out that each part of the thesis depended on the veracity of the other. Since 1960, he continued, both parts of the thesis had come under critical attack, singling out the relevant publications of Medlicott and A. J. P. Taylor.<sup>21</sup> He accepted large parts of both of their arguments, although he also set out where he thought that they were wrong. But importantly, he argued that what was needed was much more evidence: he listed what historians and journalists did not know and made clear what this lack implied.<sup>22</sup> This was published in 1965, and it is clear from this article, if no other evidence were available, just what drove him to take part in the attempt to change the fifty-year rule. Indeed, he wrote that he had in fact begun in the late 1960s to write the book which, twenty years later, was published as *How War Came*, but that he then put that draft aside. His reasons then were that there was no serious French evidence, that it was impossible to make sense of the activities of the Soviets, and that he was completely dissatisfied with the received version of American policy.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>16</sup>D. C. Watt, 'American strategic interests and anxieties in the West Indies, 1917–1940', *Journal of the Royal United Services Institute*, 108 (1963), 224–32.

<sup>17</sup>S. Aster, 'Appeasement: before and after revisionism', *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 19 (2008), 443–80, quote on p. 451.

<sup>18</sup>R. J. Caputi, *Neville Chamberlain and Appeasement* (Selinsgrove, PA, 2000), p. 99.

<sup>19</sup>D. C. Watt, 'Appeasement reconsidered: some neglected factors', *Round Table*, 53 (1963), 358–71.

<sup>20</sup>D. C. Watt, 'Appeasement: the rise of a revisionist school?', *Political Quarterly*, 36 (1965), 191–213. This was first read at the Anglo-American Conference in London in 1964. Watt, 'The historiography of appeasement', p. 126, fn 1.

<sup>21</sup>W. N. Medlicott, *The Coming of War in 1939* (London, 1963); and A. J. P. Taylor, *The Origins of the Second World War* (London, 1961). See pp. 199–207 of Watt, 'Appeasement: the rise of a revisionist school?', for his assessment of their arguments.

<sup>22</sup>Watt, 'Appeasement: the rise of a revisionist school?', pp. 192, 193, 194, 197, 213.

<sup>23</sup>Watt, *How War Came*, p. xi.



Of equal importance with his work in setting out a different way of looking at the period of the 1930s was his development of a new methodology to do so. He first presented it in September 1960 to a conference of the European Association of American Studies in Italy, then took it home, extended it, polished it, entitled it 'America and the British foreign policy-making elite from Joseph Chamberlain to Anthony Eden, 1895–1956' and published it in January 1963 in the American journal, *The Review of Politics*.<sup>24</sup> Watt's rationale for his new approach was that when looking at British attitudes to the USA, he noticed that they fell into two main divisions, both of which had drawbacks. First of all, there were studies, usually by American historians, of movements in British mass public opinion; secondly, there were studies of the radical and politically 'non-conformist' elements in British political society.<sup>25</sup> Both were inadequate to the task of understanding various developments in Anglo-American relations, the first because the 'social structure' of British political power does not rate mass opinion very highly and the second because in the sixty-one years covered by the article, radical elements controlled British foreign policy for only eight years and disputed its control for only another six. In any case, what he was interested in was not so much the ideas and activities of A. J. P. Taylor's 'proponents of an alternative foreign policy':<sup>26</sup> he wanted to know about the proponents of the orthodox foreign policy, the one that those in charge developed and implemented.

So, if his focus is the British foreign policy-making elite, who are they? How does he define them? Briefly, as members of a social group defined by its political functions; that is, what are the political processes by which foreign policy is made in Britain, and which organs and offices of government are involved in it? And then, who inhabits each position? First of all, there is the political level, the relevant members of Cabinet and their subordinates. Below the political level is the administration, in particular the senior personnel. First in importance is the Foreign Office, with its hierarchy in London and the Embassies. If there are strategic considerations, the Ministry of Defence and the three Services are relevant, whilst for economic and financial considerations, the official group must include the Treasury, Board of Trade, and Bank of England. After 1931 there was the Dominions/Commonwealth Relations Office, and until 1947 the India Office. His information came from British political and diplomatic

<sup>24</sup>D. C. Watt, 'America and the British foreign policy-making elite from Joseph Chamberlain to Anthony Eden, 1895–1956', *The Review of Politics*, 25 (1963), 3–33.

<sup>25</sup>An example of the first was A. Rappaport, *The British Press and Wilsonian Neutrality, 1914–1917* (Palo Alto, CA, 1951); an example of the second was H. Pelling, *America and the British Left, from Bright to Bevan* (London, 1956).

<sup>26</sup>A. J. P. Taylor, *The Trouble Makers: Dissent Over Foreign Policy, 1792–1939* (London, 1957), is cited by Watt, but he neglects to give a page reference for the quote, and I have been unable to locate it without re-reading the entire book.

memoirs, British and American diplomatic documents, *Who's Who* and the *Foreign Office Lists*. Then there are outside pressures: party foreign policy-discussion groups and ginger groups, both inside and outside Parliament; the editors and principal writers of the 'quality' press; and the Crown and its most intimate advisers.

The importance of this particular article of Watt's is not necessarily his arguments with regard to the content; rather, it is that it began his development of a new way of deconstructing the foreign policy world to see what made it tick, and then to use this analytical structure to study British and others' foreign policy. His methodology demonstrated much further development in his first book, *Personalities and Policies: Studies in the Formulation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century*, which was published in 1965.<sup>27</sup> It is really a book of thirteen essays, rather than a continuously organised and argued book, but it begins with a stronger analysis than the article as to what he is writing about, stating that the first two essays in fact develop the ideas that he had first discussed in the article. His thesis is that Britain is essentially an oligocratic society—not oligarchic, since the point is the exercise of power, not its possession. This is a society in which power is exercised by a minority of citizens grouped together in a cluster of smaller groups, which groups are consistent enough over time to be treated as both political and social phenomena and for the characteristics of their social organisation to be an essential element in the manner in which they perform their social functions. In any state, even in direct democracies, the nature of the exercise of power ensures that it is only exercised by a few. In Britain, they form a continuous and recognisable grouping. Their hallmark is the limitation of membership by approval.

It is notable, according to Watt, that this grouping is a good deal less responsible to and responsive to the main movements and currents of mass public opinion than are their counterparts in other countries. This aspect of his argument is of its time. First of all, he says that the major organs of communication are the correspondence columns of the 'quality press', the clubs and institutes of London's intellectual political society, and the BBC's Third Programme, which included substantial talks as well as classical music, but which became Radio 3 in 1970, in the process losing the talks. But the most obvious recent change in the relationship of the elite with mass public opinion, and in the felt need to take account of it, has been the rise of a tumultuous social media. Watt, sadly, did not live long enough to include them in his argument, as he would surely have done.

Watt divides this elite into four categories in a more structured manner than in the article. The first category is the Political, which is made up of the elected politicians

<sup>27</sup>D. C. Watt, *Personalities and Policies: Studies in the Formulation of British Foreign Policy in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1965).

(and presumably peers?) who participate in the making and selling of foreign policy. These remain those whom he listed in the article. The second category is the Diplomatic, which is primarily the Foreign Office (soon to be the Foreign and Commonwealth Office), where the flow of work both up from the junior levels to the senior and down from the senior to the junior unites these two levels in a way seldom replicated in other departments; the embassies and legations abroad are also intertwined with the Foreign Office itself. These officials are then united with their political heads. Not surprisingly, this is normally the most powerful group in this particular elite. The third category is Bureaucratic, which interweaves, depending on the topic, the primary officials. For example, for economic or financial topics, the members might be the Permanent Under-Secretary to the Treasury, the Cabinet Secretary, and the senior officials of the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Board of Trade; for the post-1945 period, a number of other positions are important whilst some were eliminated. Finally, the fourth category is the Military; this is of importance particularly in wartime coalitions or peacetime alliances. The sources of external pressure on the above remain as set out in the article: the quality press, foreign policy discussion and ginger groups, from both inside and outside Parliament, and the Crown and its advisers.<sup>28</sup>

His suggested method is to read as widely and deeply as possible in all available public and private papers, biographies and memoirs, newspapers and magazines such as *The Listener*, and to talk to people. He tries to see, almost person by active person, what they thought, how and with whom they spoke, what the personal as well as the institutional reactions were, what ideas and suggestions were being exchanged and by whom, and what, if any, were the results. This all takes place within the general political and international context. A problem, of course, is that asserting that this is the best, the only, method does not make it so, but it is certainly plausible. It is also ferociously labour-intensive—how could one deal with a war in this manner, for example? It does depend on the availability of public and private papers for research, so that it relegates very contemporary history to the margins—or, as historians a generation ago used to insist, the results were journalism, not history. His defence is that, whilst of course the results would be tentative, nevertheless there is no better way, because it ‘approximates more than any other to the reality of the processes by which foreign policy is formulated in the open oligocracy that is Britain’—and besides, the so-called definitive study is an ‘academic fantasy’.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, the best is the enemy of the good.

In 1982, Watt succeeded to the Stevenson chair. The following year, he gave his inaugural lecture, ‘What About the People? Abstraction and Reality in History and the Social Sciences’, in which he clearly set out his approach to the writing of

<sup>28</sup> Watt, *Personalities and Policies*, pp. 1–15.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

international history to a wider academic audience. First of all, he points out that diplomatic and then international history arose out of ‘disaster studies’, i.e., the detailed studies, based on published government documents, of the Franco-Prussian War, the First World War, and then the failure of appeasement. As such, he points out, this approach was ‘bedeviled by the search for “guilty men”’.<sup>30</sup> (He had earlier referred to this as the ‘sin theory of international relations’, in that, to understand the problems of a given foreign policy, it is enough to diagnose the underlying sins of those who had conducted that policy: once the sinner was identified, the remedy became clear’.<sup>31</sup>) With the rise of the social sciences, there are political and international historians, such as he himself, who look to them for aid. But these historians do not turn to social scientists who base their work on quantification, on those who count, but rather to those who are concerned with the behaviour of the individual in society, with his immediate social environment, with the conventions and modes which govern the social behaviour of the individual, and with the individual’s relations with, and perceptions of, external events and phenomena. Fundamentally, the social scientists try to find generalities, whilst historians are necessarily interested in particularities. As he wrote, ‘the historian of international relations, particularly when concerned with the disaster studies aspects of his field, engages himself in studying in depth, over time and in the round, the character and mind of those certain personalities who have been identified as playing key parts in the chain of events and circumstances leading up to the moment of disaster’.<sup>32</sup>

It can be extremely misleading, he suggests, to depend only on official documents, particularly when they look to be comprehensive. The historian has to differentiate between the decision-makers in title and based on constitutional rules and regulations and the decision-makers in reality. He has to look closely at the people involved, going beyond these documents. In sum, ‘history without real people is a distortion of reality’.<sup>33</sup>

All of this, his long-standing interest in the origins of the Second World War and the new methodology he had developed, came together in his masterpiece, *How War Came: the Immediate Origins of the Second World War 1938-1939*, which was published in 1989. He makes his approach to the subject immediately clear:

<sup>30</sup> D. C. Watt, ‘What About the People? Abstraction and Reality in History and the Social Sciences’, An Inaugural Lecture (London, 1953), p. 4.

<sup>31</sup> Watt, ‘The historiography of appeasement’, p. 111.

<sup>32</sup> Watt, ‘What About the People?’, p. 5.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 18.

This is not a story of men whose activities are determined by large, impersonal forces.<sup>34</sup> The forces are there, but the stuff of history is humanity. Impersonal forces only figure in this narrative in so far as they formed part of the perceptions of the individual actors. History is lived through and, for the fortunate, survived by people. Their actions, their failures to act, their hesitations, their perceptions, their judgments, their misunderstandings, misperceptions and mistakes act and interact upon each other across political, social and cultural divisions.<sup>35</sup>

Over nearly two decades, he had worked to understand what had happened. He assiduously compiled documents from every government involved, small as well as big. He tried meticulously to ascertain the personal qualities and flaws of diplomats and their superiors. He read virtually every political, diplomatic, military and press biography or memoir that he could find. He made detailed calendars as a means of discovering what his actors were doing, where, when and with whom. He made flow charts. He wrote and re-wrote. He made it clear that ‘people count in history as individuals and are not puppets jerked about by impersonal forces’.<sup>36</sup> They are responsible. And when he had finished, he had produced a book of stunning breadth and depth, one written in such prose that reading it is a pleasure. It is a classic of international history.

One reason that the book reads so well is that he followed his own advice as given to his PhD students, which was to read detective stories as guides to good writing. His own favourites included the political thrillers and spy novels of Eric Ambler. One of his former research students wrote that Watt ‘compared the work of the international historian to that of the detective. Both involved the careful reconstruction of elaborate timetables and decision-making flow charts and an analysis of the behavior of people under stress.’ Both should provide a compelling narrative ‘studded’ with rich personality portraits. This, he said, was the most suitable way to write international history.<sup>37</sup> Certainly *How War Came* does just that, setting the scenes, sometimes day by day and hour by hour, analysing people and sometimes groups of people, how they

<sup>34</sup> As Joseph Maiolo notes, he was ‘critical of Marxist historians such as Timothy W. Mason, who portrayed Hitler’s decision to attack Poland in 1939 as a “function” of a larger socio-economic regime in “crisis” rather than the fulfillment of an ideologically framed intention’. J. Maiolo, ‘Personalities, policies, and international history: the life and work of Donald Cameron Watt’, *Diplomacy and Statecraft*, 26 (2015), 207.

<sup>35</sup> Watt, *How War Came*, p. xiii.

<sup>36</sup> Harvard historian Gaddis Smith, in his review of *How War Came*—*New York Times*, 3 September 1989. Elsewhere, Watt suggested that ‘Since the historian is usually concerned not with a single individual but with the interplay between a limited but identifiable group of individuals, the approach employed must be multibiographical or prosopographical’: D. C. Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain’s Place 1900–1975* (Cambridge, 1984), p. 4.

<sup>37</sup> Maiolo, ‘Personalities, policies, and international history’, p. 207.

looked, what they wrote and said, how they interacted. He was not afraid of casting aspersions or praise where they were, in his opinion, deserved. The Hungarians caught many of the former:

Contempt for the Magyars among the great powers and fear among the minor ones made an odd reward for individuals so determinedly proud, so exclusively ethnocentric as the Hungarian leadership. But watching their single-minded obsession [with Romania] throughout the summer of 1939, their discussions of possible bacteriological warfare against Romania, and the constant menace of war their troops represented in a Europe filled with tender of all kinds, it is difficult not to feel that the destruction by the war of the social system on which their power rested was richly deserved.<sup>38</sup>

Indeed, he could get very personal, as when he refers to ‘the restless peregrinations of Count Csàky, the Hungarian Foreign Minister (who, like some small-time crook, sure that a major criminal operation was about to occur somewhere, kept rushing around trying to edge his way into the deal)’. He had total contempt for Ribbentrop, the German Foreign Minister, and gives many examples of his ego and incompetence.<sup>39</sup> On the other hand, he admired the Turks.<sup>40</sup>

But Watt also cautioned against ‘the illusion of certainty and completeness ... No scholar is free from biases and social conditioning. No set of sources is complete. The mountains of files in twentieth-century government archives obscure the yawning gaps in the record as well as the importance of what was not recorded in official sources and, indeed, what was not recorded at all.’ And in international relations as they are conducted, what is causation? ‘Disorder, instability, result not from the malfunction of a single component but from a change in one or more relationships.’<sup>41</sup> Is this likely to be recorded in all of its aspects in the official record? The idea that one can produce the definitive work in a subject based on all the evidence, whatever that means, is, Watt asserted, ‘Germanic dogma’.<sup>42</sup>

His conclusion was that ‘In the end the war was Hitler’s war. It was not, perhaps, the war he wanted. But it was the war he was prepared to risk, if he had to. Nothing could deter him.’ The inhabitants of the states of Europe which fought suffered horribly because of Hitler and his obsession to start and win a war and continually to expand the power and glory of Germany. The belligerent that suffered the least was the United States, ‘the only untrammelled victor’ in the war. This, given his analysis of

<sup>38</sup> Watt, *How War Came*, p. 283.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 470 for the quote; the anti-Ribbentrop theme runs throughout the book.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 275–6.

<sup>41</sup> D. C. Watt, ‘Some aspects of A. J. P. Taylor’s work as diplomatic historian’, *Journal of Modern History*, 49 (1977), 21.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

President Roosevelt, was not altogether due to Roosevelt's leadership. On the contrary, at least in the period of appeasement,

Lacking a clear lead, American opinion remained divided and confused. Roosevelt, apart from infrequent outbursts of public oratory, had done nothing practical to rally his allies, to win over the waverers or to remove the deep distrust which a majority of Congressmen, already aware that there was nothing to stop him running again for President in 1940, so great was his domination of his party, felt towards him. He was a man who preferred stealth to openness, who encouraged division even among his own supporters, and who looked for and complained of the lack of courage and leadership in Britain and France; in the field of American foreign policy he had yet to supply or demonstrate these qualities himself.<sup>43</sup>

As he summarised the relevance of Roosevelt's character on the international system, 'It does not bode well for the peace of the world when the President of the United States allows himself to be manoeuvred into appearing as an inept and ignorant fool.'<sup>44</sup> Few leaders escaped Watt's criticisms. They, not 'forces', bore the greatest responsibility for the outbreak of the war. In the 1980s, 'most historians regarded diplomatic/international history as an intellectual backwater' which had relatively little to contribute to new questions about and new ways of writing history.<sup>45</sup> Watt hoped that his book would change some minds.

The book was, in fact, an academic as well as a popular success. In 1990 it won the Wolfson History Prize, awarded annually for the book which best combines excellence in historical research with readability for a general audience. The same year, he was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy. In the USA, the book was the *New York Times*' Book of the Year in 1990. All in all, for Watt it was a gratifying year. That, however, was the last monograph that he produced; in fact, it was the last book of his own. In 1965, he had published his first book, *Personalities and Policies*; the same year came *Britain Looks to Germany: a Study of British Opinion and Policy since 1945*;<sup>46</sup> in 1968 came *A History of the World in the Twentieth Century. Part I: 1899–1918* (Parts II and III were produced by others);<sup>47</sup> in 1975 he published *Too Serious a*

<sup>43</sup> Watt, *How War Came*, p. 268.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 264. A number of American historians might contest Watt's assessment, or at least Roosevelt's sole responsibility for his actions or lack of them. One who thought that this was the case was Gordon Wood, who wrote in his review of the book that 'Aside from being another example of Watt's weakness for the all-purpose put-down, this seems at the very least ungenerous': 'Making way for Hitler', *New York Review of Books*, 12 October 1989.

<sup>45</sup> Maiolo, 'Personalities, policies, and international history', 207.

<sup>46</sup> D. C. Watt, *Britain Looks to Germany: British Opinion and Policy towards Germany since 1945* (London, 1965).

<sup>47</sup> D. C. Watt, *A History of the World in the Twentieth Century. Part I: 1899–1918* (London, 1967).

*Business: European Armed Forces and The Approach to the Second World War*,<sup>48</sup> which was very closely based on the Lees Knowles Lectures he had given in 1973 at Cambridge; in 1984 came *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain's Place 1900-1975. A Study of the Anglo-American Relationship and World Politics in the Context of British and American Foreign-Policy-Making in the Twentieth Century*,<sup>49</sup> largely based on the 1981 Wiles Lectures in History which he had given in Queen's University, Belfast, with the addition of three further essays, each based on a separate case study; and finally, *How War Came* in 1989.

What about further research and writing? He seemed to be a bit at sea, but this is not unusual in an historian who has spent a substantial proportion of his or her career on a single period and has finally written the book as always planned. He thought about extending his book on Anglo-American relations, *Succeeding John Bull*, but this did not happen. However, he was not idle. One must not forget the work on *British Documents on Foreign Affairs*, on which he worked until 1997. He also wrote many articles, essays, conference proceedings and reviews on a range of topics. Importantly, he was crucial in establishing the new field of intelligence history. He set up an Intelligence Study Group at the LSE, a very important forum since the subject 'was still in its infancy and needed nurturing'; it remains active and strong, although it now meets at the Royal United Services Institute. A major factor is that it combines both academics and practitioners, the latter predominantly former members of MI5 and MI6, which was 'an incredibly adventurous format in the 1980s'. There was something of a crackdown in 1986–7 after the trial over the publication of *Spycatcher* in Australia, 'but the essential format did survive and intelligence practitioners continued to write and then even speak'.<sup>50</sup> I myself took along a friend who, passing as a diplomat, had been the station chief in Kenya and then in Iran in the 1970s, and he was rather appalled at what was being revealed. Had he known, Watt would probably have been delighted.

What did upset him was his reluctant part in the trial of David Irving, which took place in London from 1996 to 2000. The American historian Deborah Lipstadt had published in 1994 her book *Denying the Holocaust: the Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* in which she had labelled Irving a 'Holocaust-denier', and Irving sued her for libel.<sup>51</sup> Irving argued that he was 'an honest, serious and objective historian', claiming

<sup>48</sup> D. C. Watt, *Too Serious a Business: European Armed Forces and the Approach to the Second World War* (London, 1975).

<sup>49</sup> D. C. Watt, *Succeeding John Bull: America in Britain's Place. A Study of the Anglo-American Relationship and World Politics in the Context of British and American Foreign-Policy-Making in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, 1984).

<sup>50</sup> Professor Brian Holden Reid to the author, 4 December 2018. Christopher Andrew was also involved from the beginning and Richard Aldrich joined soon after the Group was established.

<sup>51</sup> D. Lipstadt, *Denying the Holocaust: the Growing Assault on Truth and Memory* (London, 1994).



that he ‘had shown, through the application of the usual methodology of historical investigation, that, among other things, Hitler had no knowledge of the Holocaust’.<sup>52</sup> In 1965, Irving had collaborated with Watt in the publication of a lengthy German intelligence document on British policy during the twelve months leading up to the outbreak of the war, and Watt had been very impressed with his work, later describing Irving as having an ‘encyclopedic knowledge’ of German wartime documents.<sup>53</sup> Because of their earlier collaboration, Irving called on Watt to give evidence as to his high quality as an historian; when Watt refused, he was subpoenaed. Watt told the court that ‘as the author of *Hitler’s War*, Irving deserved to be taken seriously’.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, he gave evidence against Irving at the trial, saying that some of Irving’s assertions were prejudiced and not based in fact, that ‘he can be seduced by the notion of conspiracies’.<sup>55</sup> Watt found the whole experience distressing.

What was Watt like as a man? The answer is, complicated. An historian who knew him well summed him up as ‘formidable but kind’.<sup>56</sup> The following description rings absolutely true for those who knew him as more than a byline: by 1972, when Watt took up his chair in international history,

[H]is persona had assumed its inimitable form. He dressed smartly but always unconventionally, with longish hair, large prominent spectacles, and a taste for bright colours and startling ties emblazoned with all manner of wildlife or kaleidoscopic patterns.<sup>57</sup> [The invitation to his Memorial Service on 11 February 2015 stated that ‘In view of Donald’s distinctive taste in neckwear the dress code on this occasion is bright tie or scarf’.] His speaking voice sounded thin and dry, emitted from a slight movement of the middle lips. He was an imaginative though demanding teacher who did not spare sharp criticism, and some students were frightened of him. He supervised a large cohort of research students [in one random year, he took on fourteen new ones in addition to the veterans], and the most able were devoted to him; but he could be maddening, dismissive, or neglectful. He was nevertheless convivial company, and a warm humorous heart beat beneath the formidable exterior.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>52</sup> ‘Slugging through the mud’, *The Economist*, 15 April 2000.

<sup>53</sup> D. C. Watt, ‘History needs David Irving’s’, *Evening Standard*, 11 April 2000. Watt’s argument here is that he, Watt, ‘knew the Holocaust happened. I grew up among those who were fortunate to escape it. But what happens when the witnesses are all dead, if the reality had not been thrashed out? The truth needs an Irving’s challenges to keep it alive.’ See also <http://aaargh.vho.org/fran/polpen/dirving/esdw000411.html> (accessed 7 February 2019).

<sup>54</sup> R. J. van Pelt, *The Case for Auschwitz: Evidence from the Irving Trial* (Bloomington, IN, 2002), p. 437. Van Pelt was a Dutch architectural historian who had testified that Auschwitz did indeed have gas chambers.

<sup>55</sup> Watt, ‘History needs David Irving’s’.

<sup>56</sup> Fry, *Power, Personalities and Policies*, Foreword.

<sup>57</sup> The writer of the obituary in *The Times*, 4 February 2015, remembers peacocks and fish.

<sup>58</sup> Holden Reid, ‘Watt’.

Watt's 'soporific chairing of seminars was legendary: sometimes snoring, his body would plunge forward but never quite tumble onto the floor; he always awoke as the speaker finished, however, and always asked a challenging question'.<sup>59</sup> I myself was a victim of this habit. Fellow postgraduate research students had warned me of it, and one offered to drop her briefcase on the floor to wake him up. He fell asleep about five minutes into my paper, snored but not too loudly, woke up just after I finished, and asked a question, although I cannot remember whether it was brilliant or banal. (One of his former research students thinks that Watt suffered from narcolepsy, since he would drift off during supervisions and then realise and ask a question, and that he remained aware during the session.<sup>60</sup>) In my case, after the seminar was finished he apologised to me, with the explanation that he was taking tablets for a medical condition.

Another real problem for seminar or lecture convenors was Watt's propensity to drone on seemingly forever. One such occasion took place at the German Historical Institute in London when it was headed by the German historian Wolfgang Mommsen. After about fifteen minutes of Watt's comments, very little of which could be heard by some of us, Mommsen finally said, 'Donald, you have spoken quite long enough. Now be silent.' Another occasion took place in Oslo, during the International Congress of the Historical Sciences in 2000. There was a session held to celebrate Watt, and he was invited to speak about his work. Two and a half hours later, by which time he had shown no sign of finishing, I crept out the back.

Tales of his treatment of his students abounded. One found himself in a curious situation during his PhD viva. The organiser of the viva tried to shuffle Watt over to a comfortable chair in a corner in the hope that he would fall asleep, but instead, Watt insisted that he sit next to his student. From this vantage point, he answered virtually all the questions put to the student by the Examiners, until the latter gave up.<sup>61</sup> The story of another PhD viva was more menacing. He had a bullying side, and students were sometimes the victims. Some years ago at a seminar at the Institute of Historical Research in London, a foreign student gave a paper on British intelligence in the 1920s. At that point, there were few papers in the relevant archive. The student said that he could produce a breakdown of the structure of the Secret Intelligence Service; Watt said that that was impossible, because the information did not exist. The student insisted that it did: in an impressive piece of lateral thinking, he had found such a breakdown in the Treasury papers. Watt was not pleased. When the occasion of the viva came, Watt was one of the Examiners and he gave the student a brutal time. He

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Professor Joseph Maiolo, discussion with the author, 21 December 2018.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

told the External Examiner that he wanted to fail the thesis, and the External replied that if they did so, they would have to fail every other thesis ever written. The thesis was later published as a book, and the student later became a professor.<sup>62</sup>

Yet it is also the case that he wanted his students, both then and later as academics, to follow their own routes and to challenge him as they wished; as are many academics, he was proud when his students showed such independence of mind, as long as their research was thorough and the evidence intelligently analysed.<sup>63</sup> He did, however, set a bad example in that his desk, and indeed his room, in the LSE resembled a particularly messy archeological site, with layers of papers, files and books sitting on every surface, including much of the floor. It was memorable watching him frantically trying to locate the telephone as it rang and then finally ceased ringing. He was an owl rather than a lark, often working until 4 am, which might partially account for his tendency to nod off during the day.

He followed his own historical interests wherever they led him, and this was in many different directions, a fox rather than a hedgehog. This can influence the reputation of such an historian, since the theoretical mastery of one field of history is often more celebrated than the ability to walk confidently in more than one. Furthermore, his work in editing and publishing German and British documents, which was vitally important in enabling other historians to plunge into a field, arguably commanded less attention and approbation than ought to have been the case. The conundrum was well expressed in the entry on Watt written for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*: he was ‘a remarkably gifted and wide-ranging historian with an encyclopedic knowledge of twentieth-century history. He not only displayed breadth and depth but an astonishing exactness on detailed points. But he over-committed himself. He was a dominating authority and a fine historian who might have been a great one if he had directed his energies in one direction rather than scattered them over a broad front.’<sup>64</sup> It is likely, however, that the sheer quality of *How War Came* will ensure that the memory of him as a great historian will not be wholly lost.

<sup>62</sup> Professor David French to the author, 30 December 2018. Professor French was not the student; another professor, who was there, insisted on the veracity of the story.

<sup>63</sup> Professor Brian McKercher to the author, 3 January 2019, and others in conversations.

<sup>64</sup> His publications include six books, six pamphlets, nine edited books, twenty-three documentary publications, some comprising multiple volumes, and dozens of articles, essays, conference proceedings and reviews on a vast range of subjects: see Fry, *Power, Personalities and Policies*, pp. 299–320 for a detailed list.

*Acknowledgements*

I am very grateful for help from Professors Richard Aldrich, David French, Brian Holden Reid, Joseph Maiolo and Brian McKercher. Richard Aldrich and Joseph Maiolo went beyond discussions and read the draft for me.

*Note on the author:* Kathleen Burk is Professor Emerita of Modern and Contemporary History, University College London.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.