
THE HISTORIANS

*Charles Wilson, 1914-1991: retrospect for an Historian*¹

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[The text was delivered as the Memorial Lecture to Charles Wilson at the European University Institute, Florence, on Tuesday 18 February 1992].

Be warned that this can scarcely be regarded as an unbiased account. I was an undergraduate at Jesus College in the years 1948-51 and was supervised by Charles Wilson for the Historical Tripos in English economic history and modern European history; I then became a graduate student and a Research Fellow of Jesus, with Charles Wilson as the University supervisor of my postgraduate work (on the English brewing industry in the eighteenth century). Until I left the History Faculty in Cambridge for Oxford in 1968, I was a University colleague (but a Fellow of Queens' College after 1955) as well as a friend, and that friendship lasted until his death. As always, the advantages of personal knowledge have to be bought at the price of objectivity.

Charles Henry Wilson, one of Britain's most distinguished economic historians and the *doyen* of business historians in Britain, died in Sydney, Australia on 1 August 1991, at the age of 77. It is singularly appropriate that this memorial lecture should have been initiated by the European University Institute in Florence, where he was Professor of History and Civilisation between 1975 and 1980, followed by several sabbatical visits in 1980-81.

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 had failed to be elected

¹ I have received much help in preparing this text; in particular from Mr Maurice Cowling's Address at the Memorial Service for Charles Wilson in Jesus College Chapel, Cambridge on 2 November 1991; Professor S. Salisbury (for information about Charles Wilson's last years in Australia); Ms Angela Schenk, his Secretary at the European University Institute; *Who's Who*, and the obituaries published in *The Times* (8 August 1991); *The Daily Telegraph* (5 August 1991, written by M. Cowling) and *The Independent* (3 August 1991, written by Ian Harris).

Master of his College; and in the aftermath of divorce 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 and which he grew to love. You will know what Charles Wilson did for the Institute: but the Institute at this time also did much for Charles Wilson.²

His commitment 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 1980-1991 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 *Settimane di Studi*.

Charles Wilson reached Jesus College, Cambridge as an undergraduate in 1933 by a hard route, taking an "exhibition" (a less well-remunerated scholarship) from a small grammar school (De Aston Grammar School) in the local country town of Market Rasen, in rural Lincolnshire. His family were modest in means: his father was a tailor in the town and his mother, the youngest of eleven children of a farming family near Peterborough, had spent twelve years at an orphanage in London, having lost both her parents at the age of five. However, they were extremely supportive for their children. 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 invitations 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, for which he fought a losing battle for funding from the Arts Council.³ 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.

On the basis of a research fellowship at his own college in 1938, Charles undertook his first major research project, in Holland; hastily completed before the outbreak of war and published in 1941 by C.U.P. as *Anglo-Dutch Commerce*

² The *Who's Who* entry gives «1976-79, Vis.Prof.1980-81», but the records of the Institute document his appointment as: 11 September 1975—30 August 1976 (part-time; this was before the Institute opened for courses in October 1976 and was taken up in various preparatory activities); 17 September 1976—31 August 1980 (full-time); 31 October 1980—5 December 1980; 4 months in the Spring of 1981 (both part-time appointments).

³ He does not cite this commitment in *Who's Who*.

