

T. Desmond Williams (1921-87)

The death took place on 18 January 1987 of Thomas Desmond Williams, professor of modern history at University College, Dublin, from 1949 to 1983 and joint editor of *Irish Historical Studies* between 1958 and 1973. While he published comparatively little, his role in the development of the historical profession in Ireland in the 1950s and 1960s was considerable and his influence on his students and colleagues incalculably stimulating.

Desmond Williams was born on 26 May 1921, the son of W.J. Williams, professor of education at University College, Dublin, and of Angela Williams (*née* Murnaghan), daughter of George Murnaghan, member of parliament for mid-Tyrone between 1895 and 1910. He received his primary education at a boarding school run by Dominican nuns in Wicklow but after he suffered an accident on the sportsfield, the effects of which were with him throughout his life, his secondary education was at home under his father's tutelage. Poor health or disablement in childhood can sometimes provide the intellectually gifted child with a compensating opportunity to read more widely and precociously than his healthier peers; such was the case with Williams. It was in these years, the 1930s, that he developed his lifelong interest in German politics and history.

Williams's undergraduate career at University College, Dublin, was a virtuoso performance and saw him winning scholarships and prizes each year. It culminated in 1941 in his taking several subject combinations in his finals and achieving first class honours in four subject combinations: history, history and German, legal and political science, and economics. After graduation he prepared a master's thesis on the origins of National Socialism in Germany and he was awarded the travelling studentship of the National University of Ireland in 1942. At the same time he was reading for the bar at King's Inns, again with considerable distinction: first class honours in both the junior and senior Victoria examinations. In 1942 he was awarded the John Brooke memorial scholarship and was subsequently called to the bar, where he practised for a time on the western circuit. By autumn 1944, however, he had turned back, irrevocably as it happened, to the study of history.

It was in 1944 that Williams became a research student at Peterhouse, the start of a lifelong attachment to Cambridge in general and to Peterhouse in particular. His choice of college was entirely appropriate and predictable. Not only had Peterhouse an eminent tradition in diplomatic history, but among its

fellows was Herbert Butterfield, already a dominant influence among a generation of history students within and outside Cambridge. Butterfield's time as external examiner for the National University of Ireland had brought Williams to his attention and it was he, with the encouragement of R. Dudley Edwards, who facilitated Williams's acceptance at Peterhouse to work on 'pan-Germanism in Austria, 1898-1902'. His time in Cambridge was broken by service with the Foreign Office when, along with British, French and American historians, he went to Berlin, bearing a nominal military rank, to edit the papers of the German foreign ministry for the period 1919-45. This gave him an unrivalled opportunity to work on primary material of the utmost importance and of startling immediacy. It made him, at a very early stage in his career, a leading authority on both the sources and content of German foreign policy under Hitler's government but it did not lead, either then or later, to the publication of the substantial work he was so well equipped to write.

Williams made his mark in Cambridge among both historians and the wider academic community. Butterfield described him as 'the most able and promising young historian I have ever had anything to do with' and as 'an extraordinarily stimulating person to have about the place'.¹ An example of this was his role as foundation general editor of the *Cambridge Journal* together with D.W. Brogan, Michael Oakeshott and Basil Willey among others. On his return from Berlin he appeared well placed for a fellowship at Peterhouse. But the fellowship was never offered, apparently because of a practical joke he played on the oversensitive college bursar. However, he never showed any animosity or rancour at his college's failure to make him a fellow. Indeed he retained his link with Peterhouse for the rest of his life, and a long line of history graduates from U.C.D. served their apprenticeship at Peterhouse after Williams's return to Dublin, most if not all of them on his advice and recommendation (and with Edwards's encouragement): F.X. Martin, K.B. Nowlan, Joseph Lee, Ronan Fanning, Patrick Cosgrave, Dermot Fenlon, Eamon O'Flaherty.

Williams's election in 1949 to the chair of modern history at U.C.D., at the age of twenty-eight, was a mixed blessing. The college as a whole and the history department especially benefited from the appointment of this remarkably gifted young professor. The rapid expansion in history staff numbers, the introduction of tutorials and the enlargement of the syllabus are in large part attributable to his foresight and diplomatic skills. It is arguable that this was no more than was happening in provincial universities in Britain at the same time, yet it was not happening to a significant extent in Ireland outside U.C.D. in the 1950s and even in U.C.D. many departments in the rigidly conservative and lecture-oriented faculty of arts were slow to imitate the Williams innovations. In these changes Williams collaborated with and had the support of his professorial colleague and former teacher, R. Dudley Edwards. They operated as a team, as 'the history department', though in statutory terms each presided over separate departments of modern and modern Irish history.

The debit side of William's youthful appointment to the chair was the removal of career pressure to publish. Life in Dublin and at U.C.D., with frequent visits to Cambridge, London and Germany, was sufficiently absorbing, so that

¹Quoted in *Report of the president, University College, Dublin, 1982-83* (Dublin, 1983), p. 153.

the 'great book' on Hitler or German foreign policy was long awaited but never forthcoming. He did write (and typescripts survive) but he was only prepared to publish a small fraction of what he wrote or of what he appeared capable of writing. Among his serious scholarly publications were articles on the Anglo-Polish agreement of 1939 (based on his own archival research),² and the historiography of World War II (remarkable in its range and subtlety of treatment, considering that it was written just a decade after the end of that war).³ *The Great Famine* (1956) which he co-edited with Edwards must also count as a major contribution to historiography. In addition he edited and contributed to a number of Thomas Davis lectures on Radio Éireann, contributions which, in their simple profundity and perceptiveness, well met the aim of T.W. Moody, the series' originator, of bringing the fruits of learning from the universities to a wider audience. Many of these were subsequently published: *The Irish struggle, 1916-1926* (1966), *Ireland in the war years and after* (1969), and *Secret societies in Ireland* (1973).⁴ While he reviewed widely, in disparate journals and newspapers (*Studies*, *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, *Irish Press*, *Guardian*), his major output in the early and mid 1950s was published anonymously in the *Leader*, including articles of primary importance on Irish neutrality during the Second World War.

It is remarkable that Williams's failure to produce a large-scale and sustained work of scholarship in no way diminished his reputation as a historian or as a teacher of history. His interests were predominantly in the history of diplomacy, politics and political thought, and the role of personality, as befitted a good Butterfieldian. He lectured with deceptive ease on a variety of topics but his particular fortes were the balance of power in Europe, Napoleon, Machiavelli and the role of Cardinal Morone in the council of Trent, a role he himself would clearly have enjoyed. He had a special regard for the political and diplomatic skills of great men and in this respect he particularly admired the statecraft of Éamon de Valera in maintaining Irish neutrality during the Second World War. (It might be added here that he never allowed his own pro-treaty family background to influence his judgment as an historian.) His tour de force as a lecturer was a two-hour analysis of the 1922-3 civil war, an experience which left a deep impression on those who heard it for its content and virtuosity.

Williams returned to Dublin in 1949 at a time when the practice of professional history in Ireland was already on a sure if limited footing. Moody and Edwards had laid the crucial foundations in the later 1930s (the Ulster Society for Irish Historical Studies and the Irish Historical Society in 1936, *Irish Historical Studies* in 1938 and the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences in 1939). Williams's contribution in the 1950s was twofold. In the first place his enlargement of the history staff at U.C.D. increased the number of profes-

²'Negotiations leading to the Anglo-Polish agreement of 31 March 1939' in *I.H.S.*, x, no. 37 (Mar. 1956), pp 59-93; *ibid.*, x, no. 38 (Sept. 1956), pp 156-92. The publication of this article in *I.H.S.* was unusual in two respects: it was on a non-Irish topic and it was published in two parts.

³The historiography of World War II' in T. Desmond Williams (ed.), *Historical Studies I* (London, 1958), pp 33-49.

⁴See also his 'De Valera in power' in Francis McManus (ed.), *The years of the great test, 1926-39* (Cork, 1967), pp 30-41.

sional historians in Dublin. Secondly his role as a fruitful source of suggestions and ideas added new dimensions to the practice of history in Ireland. While Moody and Edwards were strongly influenced by their time at the Institute of Historical Research in London, Williams helped to breathe new life into their pioneering work by the range of his contacts in Cambridge and in continental Europe. The early fruits of Williams's influence were seen in the foundation of the biennial Irish conference of historians under the auspices of the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences. This was Williams's achievement and it allowed him to entice to Ireland distinguished British and continental scholars. The two volumes of the conference proceedings which he edited (*Historical Studies* I and VIII) bear tangible evidence of his role.

When Edwards decided to relinquish the joint-editorship of *Irish Historical Studies* Williams appeared an obvious choice as his successor and was duly elected as nominee of the Irish Historical Society in October 1957. Although he jointly edited volumes xi-xviii (1958-73) with T.W. Moody, it must be admitted that his impact on the content and direction of the journal was not considerable. The same sort of articles continued to be published and only among the book reviews can a hint of his influence be detected. When the history of *Irish Historical Studies* comes to be written it may well be that more light will be thrown on his editorship from his own papers and those of Edwards and Moody, but at this stage it seems safe to conclude that Moody was left with a largely free hand to maintain the editorial policies pioneered by Edwards and himself. The rigorously scholarly article, the avoidance of controversy and debate, all crucial elements in the development of professional history writing in Ireland in the 1940s and 1950s, were not Williams's *métier* in the way that a journal of contemporary affairs like the *Leader* clearly was.

By the time Williams resigned as joint editor in 1973 his health was deteriorating noticeably. Nevertheless he continued to take an active, frequently decisive, part in the governance and academic politics of his college and university: dean of the faculty of arts (1969-75) and a member of the governing body (1965-82) at U.C.D., and a member of the senate of the National University (1971-82). Up to his death he continued to be a source of inspiration and stimulation to students, colleagues and statesmen but increasingly so in the confines of his home or his club (though he managed to travel outside Dublin quite extensively). His physical frailty made it increasingly difficult for him to cope with lectures or seminars and many U.C.D. history students of the later 1970s and early 1980s graduated without ever having been taught by him. In 1983 he resigned his chair.

Throughout his life Desmond Williams was the subject of numerous anecdotes, some quite true, others clearly apocryphal. They usually concerned his notorious unpunctuality, his dexterity at avoiding unwelcome confrontations or appointments, or his overriding desire not to be tied down but to keep his options open. These stories were almost invariably told with affection and warmth. Only the most rigorous puritan could have failed to be won over or mollified by his disconcerting charm and studied helplessness, his *joie de vivre* in the face of ill health and physical incapacity.

In conversation he had the remarkable gift of making his companions speak interestingly, even indiscreetly, by his seemingly effortless ability to adapt his views to harmonise with theirs. With the agnostic he could appear comfortably

sceptical; with the believer he could discuss religion with sympathetic discernment. Although *The Times* obituarist referred to him as 'a devout Roman Catholic',⁵ it is clearly impossible to write authoritatively of his religious convictions. What is beyond question is the quality of his intellect and the subtlety of his understanding. The final words of this obituary can be those of his former teacher and colleague, Robin Dudley Edwards: 'Desmond Williams had one of the finest minds in the Irish university world. He rose superior to physical deficiencies which would have killed others long ago.'⁶

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⁵*The Times*, 21 Jan. 1987, p. 18.

⁶Quoted in *Report of the president, University College, Dublin, 1986-87* (Dublin, 1987), p. 198.