

Williams, (Thomas) Desmond

by Michael Laffan

Williams, (Thomas) Desmond (1921–87), historian, was born 26 May 1921 in Dublin, the only child of William John Williams, later professor of education in UCD, and his wife Angela (née Murnaghan), member of a prominent legal and political family in Co. Tyrone. Ill health forced Williams to stay at home for several years as a boy, and he joked afterwards that he had thereby escaped the benefits of a formal secondary education. Encouraged by his parents, he read widely and deeply. Between 1938 and 1943 he was a prodigiously successful student in UCD, gaining four first-class degrees simultaneously in different combinations of subjects. He was called to the bar in 1942 but he rarely practised; instead he devoted himself to the study of history.

His MA dissertation on the genesis of National Socialism was awarded an NUI travelling studentship, and he used it to spend several years in what he found to be the congenial environment of Peterhouse, Cambridge. There he established enduring friendships with a group who would later be prominent in British journalistic and academic life. In particular he formed a close intellectual and personal alliance with Herbert Butterfield, who afterwards became master of the college and regius professor of modern history in the university. He researched on Pan-Germanism in Austria, and in 1947–8 he was the first general editor of the monthly *Cambridge Journal*. He was elected a by-fellow of Peterhouse in 1948, but a practical joke which he played on the college bursar prevented his election as a full fellow. During the following year he attended some of the Nuremberg trials and he worked in Berlin as an honorary member of the British occupying forces, examining captured German diplomatic documents. He married (1949) Ursula Schwatke; they later divorced. In later years he formed a close relationship with Patricia Murphy, whose novel *Playing the harlot* was published posthumously in 1996 under her maiden name of Patricia Avis. She had earlier been married to the poet Richard Murphy, and she died in 1978.

In 1949, at the age of 28, Williams fought for and won the chair of modern history in UCD. He and his father narrowly failed to overlap as professors. He held the post for thirty-four years, and his first two decades in UCD were characterised by initiative, imagination, and energy. He was a man of cosmopolitan mind and interests, and he helped to internationalise what had been an insular university. He formed an intermittently fraught but generally creative partnership with his counterpart in modern Irish history, Robert Dudley Edwards (qv); together they shaped the 'history department' which was influential both inside and beyond UCD. He introduced the practice of tutorials, appointed generations of younger colleagues, and (although often undisciplined, and increasingly elusive) was an inspirational teacher. His range was formidable, and throughout the 1950s and

1960s he enlightened generations of students through his courses on subjects such as 'The council of Trent', 'Historiography', and 'The balance of power'.

Williams was a 'public intellectual' as well as a university figure. He lectured widely, he broadcast frequently on radio and television, and he reviewed regularly. He wrote for the *Irish Press* till the end of his life, and he also contributed to British publications such as the *Spectator*, the *Guardian*, and the *Observer*. For years he acted as both the 'political' and 'diplomatic' correspondent of the *Irish Press*, writing on Irish and international affairs – at a time when relatively few people in Ireland were concerned about developments in Europe. Between 1951 and 1955 he edited the fortnightly *Leader* with his friend Patrick Lynch (qv), persuading friends and colleagues to contribute without receiving fees. Here too he wrote frequently about international (and particularly German) affairs. His study of Irish wartime neutrality ran for seven issues in 1953, and it revealed a deep appreciation of the policies of Éamon de Valera (qv). It also provoked a successful libel action.

In various ways Williams worked to professionalise Irish historians and Irish academics in general. He served (1951–69) as secretary of the Irish Committee of Historical Sciences and also as a (relatively inactive) joint editor (1958–73) of *Irish Historical Studies*. A central figure in founding the biennial Irish Conference of Historians, he was its secretary from 1956 to 1969. He was prominent in the Academic Staff Association and acted as its chairman. He also cherished a formidable number of friends and contacts in Britain and Germany; one body where he was active for nearly twenty years after 1959 was the British Committee for the Theory of International Politics.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s Williams was constantly busy. In particular he researched on European political and diplomatic history in the 1930s, and took issue with established authorities such as Lewis Namier – who, he felt, 'hovers over almost every field of European diplomacy, and never for once abandons his self-imposed duty of passing judgement on all the actors surveyed by him' (Williams, 'Historiography', 54). Williams was not judgemental. Although for many years he worked on a biography of Hitler, and although large sections of it were written and typed, the book was never completed. A similar fate befell his history of the Irish civil war, as well as other ambitious projects – such as his planned study of various fascist movements, and a collection of documents on the origins of the second world war. In 1956 he and Robin Dudley Edwards edited *The great famine*, a collaborative work of seven other scholars. He also edited three collections of Thomas Davis lectures, *The Irish struggle* (1966), *Secret societies in Ireland* (1973), and (jointly with Kevin B. Nowlan) *Ireland in the war years and after* (1969). He published articles on topics ranging from 'The German nunciature of Giovanni Morone, 1536–42', through 'The risorgimento in retrospect' and 'Adolf Hitler and the historians', to a seventy-two-page study of 'The negotiations leading to the Anglo–Polish treaty of 31 March 1939' (*IHS*, x (1956), 59–93, 156–92). But nothing that he wrote matched his plans or his potential. Some observers ascribed this failure to perfectionism or

procrastination, but other explanations included distractions and failing health. Over the decades the number and the impact of his ailments increased and they sapped his energy – though they never broke his spirit.

Like many others, Williams was deflected from scholarship by academic politics. He was a member of the governing body of UCD (1965–82), and served on the NUI senate (1971–82). For three years after 1967 he was a principal leader of the successful opposition to the government's plans for merging UCD and TCD. He remarked characteristically that only their shared hostility to such an imposed union could have created such an effective alliance between the two rival universities. This success propelled him to the deanship of the faculty of arts (1969–75). In his early years as dean he presided over reforms such as widening faculty membership to include junior lecturers; for a man of deeply conservative instincts he could be surprisingly liberal. He retired as professor in 1983, and he died 18 January 1987 at the age of 65.

In terms of publications, or of founding a school of historians, Williams's career was disappointing. But he left a memory of a learned and brilliant man, charming, insightful, and intuitive, who influenced not only his students in UCD but many others as well. He opened, widened, and sharpened people's minds. He was a legendary figure in Dublin, Cambridge, and certain London circles. Shuffling on his stick, chain-smoking, talking, chuckling and conspiring, double-booking and breaking appointments, he became a figure of legend. Among a list of his own habits he included 'mischief-making . . . always innocent in intention though not always in effect' (*RTV Guide*, 15 Mar. 1963); however, at times he gave the impression of plotting for its own sake. Appropriately for a man surrounded by stories and rumours, some of his exploits and mannerisms were fictionalised – in the characters of Patrick South in John Vaizey's *Barometer man* and of Myles Keating in Jack White's (qv) *The devil you know*.

In his prime, in the 1950s and 1960s, Williams made a significant contribution to Irish educational and intellectual life.

---

T. Desmond Williams, 'The historiography of world war II', Esmonde M. Robertson (ed.), *The origins of the second world war* (1971); J. J. Lee, *Ireland, 1912–1985: politics and society* (1989); Donal McCartney, *UCD: a national idea* (1999); James McGuire, 'T. Desmond Williams', *IHS*, xxxvi (1988–9), 3–7; Eda Sagarra, 'T. Desmond Williams (1921–87): Ireland's greatest German expert', Gisela Holfter and Hans-Walter Schmidt (ed.), *German–Irish encounters / Deutsche–Irische Begegnungen (Irish German Studies, ii)* (2007); personal knowledge

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Mon Nov 30 05:33:26 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.