

Wilson, Thomas

by Linde Lunney

Wilson, Thomas (1916–2001), economist, was born on 23 June 1916 on the family farm at Ballylagan, Ballynure, Co. Antrim, the only child of John Bright Wilson (d. 1948), and his wife Margaret (née Ellison). His father, while keeping the farm, established a grocery and animal feed business in North Street, Belfast, and the family lived in the city, experiencing civil unrest in the 1920s.

As a six-year-old, Thomas (often called Tom) had to spend twelve months in bed and another year on crutches to treat suspected tuberculosis in his hip bone. His education was delayed, but seems not to have suffered, as his father read to him. An outstanding student at Methodist College, Belfast, he went to QUB to study history and economics. During his time in Queen's, he was involved with the left-leaning journal the *New Northman*, represented QUB in a debate in Glasgow against Conor Cruise O'Brien (qv), and in 1938 was Northern Ireland delegate to a world youth peace conference in New York. His socialist idealism suffered as a result of his realisation at the conference that the communists, who controlled the agenda, left no opportunity for the discussion of any other views. He achieved a good second-class degree from Queen's, but was ineligible for a postgraduate studentship. His father initially supported him while he studied for a Ph.D. at the London School of Economics (LSE) from October 1938. In two years he completed a thesis on trade-cycle theories which was so impressive that in 1942, despite wartime restrictions, the LSE supported its publication as *Fluctuations in income and employment*. It was widely and favourably reviewed as a succinct and thorough critique of macroeconomic theories, judged on their ability to explain historical trade patterns. Wilson's effort to reconcile the allure of Keynesian theory with his understanding of the realism of monetarist policy was to characterise much of the rest of his career, often causing him, to his amusement, to be described as a 'capitalist lackey on one side and a crypto-communist on the other' (*Independent*, 6 August 2001).

In 1940 he volunteered for work in the Ministry of Economic Warfare in London, and served as a fire warden during German bombing raids. He moved to the Ministry of Aircraft Production, and in 1942 joined the prime minister's statistical branch, helping formulate advice for Winston Churchill on the quantitative aspects and planning of the war effort. He also researched and reported on employment policy and social insurance. Not content with contributing to policy, he sought a more active role, and in June 1944 served with two colleagues as a deckhand on a barge that towed sections of the Mulberry harbour across the Channel to Normandy just three days after D-Day. Their superior told Wilson and his colleagues that if captured they must kill themselves to prevent their specialised knowledge falling into German hands.

As the war came to an end, Wilson was one of the backroom team supporting Churchill in the negotiations at Potsdam with Stalin and Truman, and in 1945 was awarded the OBE. The following year he was elected to a fellowship in University College, Oxford (and in 1955 was elected an unpaid fellow in Nuffield College, Oxford). He had a heavy teaching load, was domestic bursar and then estates bursar of his college, and from 1948 was editor of the increasingly important journal *Oxford Economic Papers*.

Wilson continued to participate in the economic controversies of the day, as the UK's fiscal policies fluctuated with government changes and swings in economic thought. He published important articles challenging some socialist views on public ownership of industry and on state planning to control the economy, and a book, *Modern capitalism and economic progress* (1950). These views were not particularly popular at the time, and attracted criticism from left-wing scholars. Throughout his career, Wilson stressed the merits of a pragmatic approach to the economy, and always sought to strike a balance between the market and the welfare state, and between the encouragement of competition and control of monopolies.

In 1958 Wilson left Oxford for the Adam Smith chair of political economy in the University of Glasgow. He was happy to spend the remainder of his career in Scotland, refusing many approaches from elsewhere, until becoming professor emeritus in 1982. He reformed aspects of the economics course, and expanded the department with a number of appointments; both students and colleagues appreciated his willingness to help and include them in his huge network of contacts and friends worldwide. He published a large number of articles and several books during this time, including *Inflation* (1960), *Planning and growth* (1964), and *Pensions, inflation and growth* (1972). Wilson was joint editor in 1976 and 1982 of other works on inflation and the role of the market in the modern state, topics of much interest during the premiership of Margaret Thatcher.

He was also joint editor of a volume of essays by distinguished scholars on the economic thought of Adam Smith, commissioned to accompany a multi-volume edition of Smith's writings and correspondence, which appeared in 1975 in advance of the two-hundredth anniversary of the publication of the *Wealth of nations* (1776). This was the focus of a large international conference in April 1976 at the University of Glasgow, which encouraged a major revival of interest in Smith's legacy. Wilson edited and published the conference proceedings as *The market and the state* (1976), after his recovery from a serious heart attack on the eve of the commemorations.

As vice-chairman of a committee of inquiry into the Scottish economy (1961) and as economic consultant to the secretary of state for Scotland (1964–5 and 1970–83), Wilson was close to governmental decision-making as Scotland's traditional industries faltered; he also served on the shipbuilding committee in 1965, and

was director (1966–87) and chairman (1978–81) of the Scottish Mutual Assurance Society.

Wilson maintained an interest throughout his life in Northern Ireland, and inherited both the Ballynure farm and the business in Belfast. In 1955 he published *Ulster under home rule*. He had the opportunity to influence affairs as well as write about them when in 1963 Terence O'Neill (qv), the reforming prime minister of Northern Ireland, asked Wilson to become an economic consultant to the Stormont administration (1964–5 and 1968–70). His 1965 report on the province's economic development, known as 'the Wilson plan', proposed ambitious schemes to improve agricultural efficiency, boost scientific input into industry and training with a second university, build housing and invest in transport. A follow-up plan was published in 1970. Wilson's proposals, those of a moderate unionist, could possibly have helped greater community integration, but were overtaken by events as civil disorder diverted attention away from policy planning. Years later, in his retirement, Wilson published a distillation of his views and research in *Ulster: conflict and consent* (1989), which Conor Cruise O'Brien in a review in the *New York Times* (19 July 1990) warmly recommended as 'an extremely perceptive and instructive assessment; the best book on the situation that exists, in my opinion'; other commentators concurred.

Wilson's work in Ulster, Scotland and the Atlantic provinces of Canada in the 1960s and 1970s led to more publications and reports studying local, regional and federal policy concerning fiscal issues and economic planning. In 1984–5, he was asked to be one of four distinguished assessors to report on the UK Department of the Environment's scheme to change local-government finance. Wilson was unhappy at how the scheme was initially presented, with civil servants altering the terms of the commission, then trying (apparently) to steamroll decisions, and holding back adverse opinions; Wilson, sidelined, considered resignation. At a meeting in August 1985 his lone opposition to the introduction of the poll tax was ignored. The measure eventually went ahead in 1989–90, provoking widespread and sometimes violent public protests.

For Wilson, monetarism became a less attractive theory in the 1970s, just as much of the political and academic establishment became fixated on controlling inflation by controlling the money supply. He particularly criticised the willingness of monetarists to regard high unemployment as a necessary evil. He remained at heart a Keynesian, and in 1976 gave the Keynes lecture on 'The political economy of inflation' in the British Academy. He published a number of articles on aspects of Keynesian economics, which appeared in his *Inflation, unemployment and the market* (1984).

In 1943 he married Dorothy Joan Parry, who had a first-class degree in sociology from the LSE; they had one daughter and two sons. In 1966 Dorothy became a full-time lecturer in social administration in Glasgow university, and published on aspects

of the welfare state. She collaborated with Thomas on several publications, including *The political economy of the welfare state* (1982). After organising an important conference in Oxford, they jointly edited the proceedings as *The state and social welfare* (1991). By that date, her health had greatly deteriorated. She had been diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1952, and from 1966 needed a wheelchair and increasing care, mostly provided by her husband and family. In 1984, after Wilson's retirement from Glasgow, they moved to a flat in Bristol, near their daughter, but also had a much-loved cottage in Callander, Perthshire, close to the Scottish highlands. Dorothy Wilson died in 1998.

In retirement Thomas Wilson continued to research and publish. A book of reminiscences about his wartime work and his boss Lord Cherwell, *Churchill and the Prof* (1995), provided historians with valuable first-hand (and even-handed) assessments of contentious wartime events, such as the carpet-bombing of German cities. A planned work containing his assessment of the current status of economic theory remained unfinished at his death, in Callander, on 27 July 2001.

Wilson was Nuffield Foundation visiting professor in Ibadan, Nigeria (1962), a visiting fellow in All Souls College, Oxford (1974–5), external examiner in a number of universities, and also worked in Kenya, Canada, the United States and Australia. He received many honours, including fellowships of the British Academy (1976), the Royal Economic Society (1980) and the Royal Society of Arts (1992).

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*Larne Times*, 16 Aug. 1943; C. F. Carter, 'Review of *Economic development in Northern Ireland (including the report of the economic consultant, Professor Thomas Wilson)*', *Economic Journal*, lxxvi, no. 303 (Sept. 1966), 646–8; Conor Cruise O'Brien, 'A tale of two nations', *NY Times*, 19 July 1990; *Daily Telegraph*, 30 July 2001; *Independent* (London), 6 Aug. 2001; *WWW*, xi; M. F. G. Scott, 'Thomas Wilson 1916–2001', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, cxx (2003), 493–511 (a detailed study, based largely on an unpublished autobiographical memoir)