

## **William Montgomery Watt: the man and the scholar**

### **Introduction**

I have the honour this evening to speak to you about Professor William Montgomery Watt, a remarkable figure in the field of Islamic Studies who spent almost all his long career in the University of Edinburgh. Fifty years ago, on 21 October 1965, he gave his inaugural lecture, entitled *Islamic Studies in Scotland. Retrospect and Prospect*. In his long lifetime, Professor Watt was probably the foremost Western non-Muslim interpreter of Islam and he was a much-revered name for many Muslims all over the world. He died, aged ninety-seven, on 24 October 2006. Those of us who have worked or continue to work as scholars of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies here, across, the University of Edinburgh – and we are an increasing number - have not forgotten his considerable achievements.

My talk today will be in two parts: firstly I will try to give you some insights into Professor Watt as a person and as a friend, and then I will discuss his scholarly career. In preparing this talk I have drawn on his published writings and my recollections of him for over a period spanning more than thirty years. I have also been privileged to have access to an unpublished book of his, partly a kind of 'autobiography', called *Towards the Religion of the Future. The Testament of a Search*; he gave me a copy of this in the late 1990s.

### **Life**

William Montgomery Watt was born in 1909 in a small village in Fife called Ceres. His father, who was the Church of Scotland minister there, died when William was only fourteen months old, leaving his mother, aged thirty-nine, a widow and him an only child.

They moved to Edinburgh where there were other family members. In 1919 William went to George Watson's College. There his headmaster persuaded him to study classics on the grounds that when he applied for a university place there would be more available scholarships in this subject for impecunious applicants. William reluctantly agreed; he writes in his unpublished autobiography: *'I thus became reconciled to the plan of studying Latin and Greek for the next five or six years, though I had no intention of devoting the rest of my life to this field. Already I was trying to work out ways of switching from classics to philosophy.'*

So he studied for a four-year classics degree at Edinburgh University, finishing it in 1929 in only **three** years. He then found enough financial support to go to Balliol College, Oxford where he eagerly embarked on another undergraduate degree, specialising in philosophy and ancient history, followed by a B. Litt. on Emmanuel Kant. By then Professor Watt had had enough of Oxford. Writing with a rare and disarming frankness in his autobiography, he says that through the church he had made some good English friends: *'But I must be honest and state that on the whole I dislike the English'*. So he came back to Edinburgh in 1933 and began a Ph. D on what he describes vaguely as a topic in religion and science. A year later he started doing some undergraduate teaching to help out the Professor of Moral Philosophy.

The year 1937 proved to be a major turning point for Professor Watt in a number of deeply significant ways. His mother died and shortly thereafter he left the Church of Scotland and joined the Episcopalian Church, which, as he wrote later, gave him the 'spiritual nurture' he needed to deal with his problems. His bereavement was

followed by two other pivotal events: as he puts it quite frankly, '*my Ph. D was rejected without a chance of revising it*' and he also published his first book, a vigorous critique of pacifism, called *Can Christians be Pacifists?*

Also in this year which proved so momentous for Professor Watt, he met and befriended K. A. Mannan, a veterinary student from what later became Pakistan; MW describes him as a 'keen and argumentative Muslim of the Ahmadiyya sect'. He took this young man in as a lodger and had lengthy conversations with him about Islam.

In 1938 Professor Watt went south again; he studied at Cuddesdon Theological College outside Oxford and was ordained in the Episcopalian Church a year later. Back in Edinburgh he then served as curate of Old St Pauls Church for two years, and began a serious study of Arabic with Richard Bell, an original but still undervalued Qur'anic scholar, who was teaching Islamic studies at Edinburgh. Professor Watt then started a Ph.D on a subject well suited to his interests and abilities, *Predestination and Free Will in Islam*. In 1943 he married Jean Donaldson and finished his Ph. D.

An important new stage of his life then began. In January 1944 he went to Jerusalem as chaplain to the Anglican bishop. He was still there when Jewish terrorists blew up the King David Hotel in 1946. But he was afraid to stay there after that. In his autobiography, he writes that he had found Jerusalem disappointing because he had not had proper contact and discussion with Arab Muslim scholars. But he never forgot his sojourn in the Holy Land.

Soon after he returned to Scotland, on the retirement of his mentor Richard Bell, he was appointed Lecturer in Arabic at the University of

Edinburgh. That was in 1947 and here he was to spend nearly all his long and fruitful career. He was awarded a Personal Chair in 1964 and he retired from his post at the University in 1979. But he did not stop there. Indeed, for the majority of the remaining twenty-seven years of his life he kept doing what he liked doing most – writing books and articles.

Professor Watt was given a number of academic honours; he lectured briefly –at the University of Toronto, the Collège de France, and Georgetown University. He was awarded an honorary doctorate by the University of Aberdeen, he received the prestigious American Giorgio Levi Della Vida medal and he was an early recipient of the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies award for services to the field.

### **Watt's personal life and his family**

Professor Watt kept his family matters private but it was always clear that Jean was an ideal wife for him; she was warm, friendly and sociable and the mainstay of family stability for him and their five children; one son and four daughters, all of whom are here tonight. He makes a rare reference to his family in the preface to one of his early books, *The Truth in the Religions*, published in 1963. There he writes:

*As for my wife and family, I can only speak with the highest praise of the good humour and resilience with which they endured my vagaries and eccentricities during the six months when the book was actually being written'.*

Later, in the first draft of his unpublished 'autobiography' completed around 1974, he says that the secure base in his home has been an important factor in all that he has achieved. He had a cosy house in

Dalkeith, appropriately called the Neuk, and every summer the Watt family used to decamp to their second house, beautifully situated by the sea in Fife.

Outside the family Professor Watt was a shy, withdrawn person, not easy to chat with. Indeed, he had no small talk at all. A conversation with him soon moved to weighty religious matters and it stayed there. He was lofty and remote, even Olympian, in manner. There was always a sense of distance. His expression, however, was always kindly and unthreatening and I never found him to be malicious about anyone. One reference in his unpublished 'autobiography' is revealing in this respect: there he writes: *'I sometimes shrink from meeting other people in a friendly open way because I am afraid of some sort of rejection'*.

Being the only child of a lonely young widow and spending most of his childhood with adults must have contributed to his introspective and inhibited social manner.

In his unpublished autobiography he is disarmingly frank about his first years at the University of Edinburgh as a lecturer in Arabic and Islamic studies. He writes that he had to produce a four-year honours course in Arabic, without ever having been through such a course himself as a student. He remarks that fortunately, in his first year of teaching here, there were no students in the third and fourth years of the course so, and let me quote his own words:

*'I was broken in gradually (and) my Arabic improved somewhat'*

By the 1970s while I was doing my Ph. D here, Professor Watt was well launched into building up Islamic studies at Edinburgh, not through increasing the undergraduate intake, which was small, but by agreeing to supervise large numbers of doctoral students from the

Arab world and Pakistan. These students were drawn to Edinburgh because of his stellar publishing reputation. Although he had a famously light touch, perhaps seeing them **once** a term, they were very happy to say that they were working under **his** supervision. In 1979 on his retirement he handed over to me the responsibility for fourteen of these students who were in the middle of their doctorates- they came from Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Turkey and Pakistan.

Professor Watt's reputation lingered on long after his retirement. Indeed, it was because of him that the University of Baghdad chose the University of Edinburgh as the best place in the UK in which to endow a new Iraq Chair of Arabic and Islamic Studies, an event which we are celebrating during this weekend.

When I travelled to the Middle East, Pakistan and Malaysia in the 1980s and 90s, to attend conferences or give lectures, it would be true to say that I found the reputation of Professor Watt to be nothing short of legendary in these countries. I was frequently asked 'Do you know Professor Watt?' After I had said yes, many doors were opened for me and I was bathed as it were in his aura. All the Muslim academics I met praised him to the skies for what he had done for Islamic studies.

What happened after his official retirement? Quite simply, as I have already said, he went on writing for around another twenty years; and it was in this period of his life that I got to know him. I had seen him in passing when I was a postgraduate here. But I never actually worked with him, because I joined the academic staff of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies as a junior lecturer in 1979 just after he had retired. But for the next twenty years or more I would, at his request,

visit him regularly for coffee in his home several times a term. We would then talk for an hour or two. During my many visits there he would talk about his publications, his future projects and, most of all, his ideas on many aspects of religion. He did not gossip or reminisce.

He rarely came in to the University of Edinburgh; indeed I met him only once in the department when he attended an afternoon seminar. He appeared to be fast asleep throughout the event but when the speaker's talk ended he was the first to ask him a question, and a very penetrating question it was. However, in his study at home in the mornings when I visited him he was always very alert right through his seventies and eighties.

Let me share with you a few memorable moments I spent with him. One such occasion was a visit of the eminent German scholar of Islamic studies, Annemarie Schimmel, who held chairs simultaneously at Harvard and Bonn. That was the only time that Professor Watt visited **our** house in Edinburgh. We watched incredulously as he and Schimmel had a really great time; her full-blown eccentric personality broke down his usually shy manner. They were both very relaxed, ever more so as most of a bottle of malt whisky was gradually consumed by the two of them without any outside help during the evening.

In any case, on the subject of whisky Professor Watt was a true Scotsman. My husband Robert and I gave him a bottle of malt whisky for his ninetieth birthday present and we attended his party. He wrote us a charming letter of thanks which I have kept. Speaking of the whisky he said in the letter:

*'Though my sense of taste is now somewhat impaired I get a good flavour from it and am thoroughly enjoying it'.*

So life for MW was not always grim tussles with metaphysical issues. Thank God.

One day in the late 1990s he suddenly said to me:

*'I have been thinking that I would like to give my personal library to Edinburgh University. Would you please be my executor and organise this for me?'*

This was a marvellous surprise. And indeed over nine hundred volumes of his were donated to Edinburgh University Library soon afterwards and they are housed here as The Watt Collection.

### **Watt the scholar**

Over the last forty years and indeed until the present turmoil began, most scholars specialising in Arabic and Islam have been eager to visit Muslim-majority countries and to live there for extended periods. Not so with MW and many of his European contemporaries. Such men were, to use the German term, *Stubengelehrten*, armchair scholars. Apart from a few visits to occasional conferences, they kept at a safe distance from the Middle East, South Asia and beyond. That led to an overriding emphasis on texts rather than on other roads to knowledge, such as personal experience, residence in Islamic countries, fieldwork and discussions with Muslims on the spot. Inevitably, therefore, this resulted in a somewhat rarefied, intellectualized approach.

In the field of Islamic studies his output was colossal, ranging from popular introductory books to scholarly monographs. He published a phenomenal **twenty-nine** books and literally **hundreds** of articles and book reviews. Of the books twenty-one are about aspects of Islam and the Muslim world, one is a translation from Arabic of parts



of a treatise called *The Book of Demonstration* (written by Eutychius, a tenth-century bishop of Alexandria) and his other books are about Christianity and religion more generally. He was very pleased that a good number of his books had been translated into other languages.

In 1948, he published his first book on Islam; it was his Ph.D thesis, entitled *Free will and predestination in Early Islam*. This heralded the beginning of one of his abiding academic preoccupations – the study of Islamic theology.

Early in his career he focussed especially on the career of the Prophet Muhammad. For these writings he made a close analysis of the original Arabic sources; as a result two books were published, *Muhammad at Mecca* (in 1953) and *Muhammad at Medina* (in 1956). The second of these is a particularly impressive work on Muhammad, as the founder of the first Muslim community, the *umma*, and as a lawmaker. In 1961, MW wrote a third, shorter book, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*. It is these three books on Muhammad that have made him so famous in Muslim-majority countries. He was always aware of what Muslims might think and how they would feel when non-Muslims write about Islam and their Prophet. Of course, since Professor Watt's first publications on Muhammad, much new research has been published by later scholars who were not as scrupulously concerned as Professor Watt was about whether Muslims approved or disapproved of what they wrote. These later scholars have excavated the historical origins of Islam, also using non-Islamic sources, rather than accepting the salvation history of the new faith that developed in Muslim lands after the death of Muhammad.

Professor Watt saw part of his brief as setting out to correct the deep-rooted negative images of Islam and Muhammad that had prevailed in Europe since the Crusading period. In his 1961 book, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*, he emphasises the Abrahamic foundation of Islam and its links with Judaism and Christianity: he writes:

*'Islam is 'a form of the religion of Abraham – a form, too, well suited to the outlook of men whose way of life was closer to Abraham than that of the bulk of Jews and Christians'.*

Later, in his autobiography, he sums up his lifelong approach to Muhammad as follows:

*'From an early date I held that Muhammad must have been sincere. It is unthinkable that a great world religion should have been based on imposture or falsehood'.*

However, he was not always afraid to experiment with new schools of thought and methodology. Quite early in his academic career, in 1961, he published a book, called *Islam and the Integration of Society*. In this work Professor Watt, influenced by Max Weber, uses sociology and economic history to interpret the beginnings of Islam. But the book had little impact; as the great German scholar of Islam, Josef van Ess, said:

*'The book remained a call in the wilderness; there was not much discussion of it and almost no attempt to carry it forward'*

And in any case Professor Watt did not follow up this approach.

A useful book of his is *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*, published in 1973. This outlines with admirable lucidity the major developments in Islamic theology from the death of Muhammad until around the year 950. MW also translated the spiritual

'autobiography' of the great medieval Muslim scholar, al-Ghazali, and followed that with an excellent study of al-Ghazali entitled *Muslim intellectual*.

At the time of Professor Watt's death in 2006, Timothy Wright, the Chief Executive of Edinburgh University Press, wrote the following words to Jean Watt:

*'It goes without saying that Professor Watt was an enormously important figure in the history of the Press, establishing as he did in 1962 the Islamic Surveys series and spending twenty years as its editor. The series is still one of the most successful that the Press has and it laid the foundation for what is now widely regarded as one of the leading Islamic lists in the country.'*

Professor Watt's achievements with the highly successful EUP Islamic Surveys series were two-fold. Firstly, serving as commissioning editor, from 1962 until 1980, he masterminded the setting up and continuing regular output of handbooks intended for students and the general reader. He judged this - rightly in my view - as an important aspect of an academic's work. And secondly, he practised what he preached. He showed the way by writing seven books of his own in this series, which proved to be very popular and useful in the classroom. He had a way of writing which simplified and clarified complex topics. Inevitably, in all these seven books, he was not equally sure-footed. He was less at ease with historical subjects, such as *A History of Islamic Spain*, or *The Influence of Islam on Medieval Europe*, where he mostly summarised the work of other scholars. On the other hand, he was on his home territory when writing the other four books in this series, which were fine short overviews of Islamic thought - with titles such as *Islamic Philosophy*

*and Theology, Islamic Political Thought, and Islamic creeds.* Professor Watt's EUP books have sold phenomenally well. The present Islamic editor at EUP, Nicola Ramsey, tells me that it is fair to say that, from the 1960s until now, at least 25,000 -30,000 copies of Professor Watt's books have been sold - a truly wonderful achievement. And those figures take no account of the somewhat left-handed compliment which publishers in South Asia have paid him over many decades, pirating his books and selling them at a fraction of their original cost. And that area is home to some half a billion Muslims.

In similarly popular vein but with other publishing houses Professor Watt wrote short histories of Islam, and a book entitled *The Majesty that was Islam*, a cultural and social overview of the period 661-1100. He also wrote books on non-Islamic subjects. From the very beginning of his career as an author he published short books about his own faith, Christianity. Two such works appeared in quick succession: *The Reality of God* (1957) and *The Cure for human troubles: a statement of the Christian message in modern times* (1959). These are evangelical tracts. In his autobiography he mentions rather ruefully that he had published books outside the field of Islamic studies '*though they have received much less attention than my books on strictly Islamic subjects*'. This frank admission proves true especially for his writings on Christianity which earned him very little praise and indeed were on occasion turned down later in his retirement by publishers, such as the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge (SPCK) who had published some of his books in the past.

I should also mention one late work, entitled *Islamic Fundamentalism and Modernity*, published in 1989 when he was eighty; this concerned current issues to do with Islam in the modern

world; it made little impact. Then, in 1991 he brought out the book *Muslim-Christian Encounters: Perceptions and Misperceptions*: in it he covers the first contacts between Eastern Christians and Muslims in the seventh century and he brings his account right up until the Salman Rushdie affair. In his review of this book, the American Muslim scholar Mahmoud Ayoub, whilst saying that Professor Watt's discussion adds nothing new, describes it as engaging, lucid and fair throughout. Right to the end, therefore, Professor Watt manages to clarify material that is little known to the reading public in the West. And as a final publication at the age of eighty-four he returns full circle to his early passion for philosophy in a book entitled *Religious Truth for Our Time*. Here he examines grandiose topics such as the limitations of human thought and language, the nature of truth and the impact of the new global order.

Despite the wide range of topics covered in his vastly prolific writings, certain deeply entrenched views remained constant. Long before the recent wave of Islamophobia in the West, he advocated the necessity of dialogue with Muslims, not demonisation of them. He doubted the appropriateness of conversion and felt that those of all faiths should collaborate in friendship to stem the tide of materialism and secularisation. In my last few conversations with him he expressed opinions almost exclusively the same as those which he had held when I first met him; but now in his extreme old age they had become even more urgent for him. In particular, he said to me how much he wished that Christians could accept the prophethood of Muhammad: already in 1988 he had written the following:

*'I consider that Muhammad was truly a prophet and I think that we Christians should admit this'.*

He deeply regretted the fact that whilst Christians could share without difficulty the monotheism of the first line of the Muslim *shahada* (the profession of faith): “*I testify that there is no god but God*”, they were unable to accept the second half of the *shahada*: “*I testify that Muhammad is the Messenger of God*”.

He also often mentioned that the Islamic emphasis on the uncompromising oneness of God had caused him to reconsider the Christian doctrine of the Trinity, a doctrine which is vigorously attacked in the Qur’an as undermining true monotheism. Influenced by Islam, with its ninety-nine names of God, each expressing a special attribute of God, MW returned to the Latin word ‘*persona*’ - which meant a face or mask, and not ‘individual’, as it now means in English - and he formulated the view that a truer interpretation of the Christian Trinity would not signify that God comprises three entities. For him, the Trinity represents three different ‘faces’ of the one and the same God.

After his retirement in 1979, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when increasing pressure was beginning to be placed on non-publishing academics, forcing them to produce at least a modest body of research to justify their status as scholars, Professor Watt was busy writing at home in retirement far away from such pressures. He was never afraid of hard work, and he worked as hard in retirement as he had while in post. The truth is that he was sold out to research and publication and he made that his priority for the entire time that he worked as a scholar of Islam in Edinburgh, both when he was in post and also in his long retirement. Students, whether undergraduates or graduates, were of secondary interest in comparison. But the sheer number of Muslim postgraduates who

came to Edinburgh to study with him year on year changed the very face of the department.

Let me say a few more words about Professor Watt's unpublished 'autobiography'. As I have already mentioned, in the late 1990s he gave me a copy of this work and he asked me to try to find a publisher for it. He had apparently tried and failed to do so. I too had no success in this. The fact of the matter appeared to be that he was a highly successful and prolific world-famous scholar of Islam but he also **wanted** to be recognised in matters Christian. And this recognition was simply never accorded to him. So this personal memoir of his, which is not exactly a traditional autobiography but is more an account of his long spiritual and intellectual journey in search of religious truth, has remained unpublished. Much of its contents, such as chapters on religion and science and his encounter with sociology and psychology, are very outdated now. But the document contains a number of very interesting insights into his personal development and his thinking about Islam and Muslim-Christian relations. The work is in two parts. The first part was completed around 1974 and contains valuable autobiographical remarks. The second part, written at a later stage, is philosophical in tone and is almost entirely about his views on Christianity; indeed, he wishes this part to be **exemplary** rather than personal:

*'I have deliberately kept the autobiographical element to a minimum, since I felt that much of what I was saying was not just **my own** ideas, but had a measure of objective truth.'*

In a sense I have always felt that in this work he wanted to chart the stages in his own spiritual development in a way similar to that adopted by al-Ghazali or perhaps even St Augustine.

In his advanced old age, he still cared about the Israel-Palestine issue and he said that he had become increasingly convinced that there can be no lasting solution to the Palestine problem which does not bring in all three religions for which Jerusalem is sacred. And to the last he had not forgotten his two-year stay in Jerusalem. So it was thoroughly appropriate that the church collection at his funeral was given to Medical Aid for Palestinians.

Above all, he wanted a rapprochement between Christians and Muslims; at his funeral service, as well as two readings from the Bible, part of Chapter 6 of the Qur'an was read out in English translation.

Professor Watt believed in dialogue, in which he himself had long played the role of facilitator, a two-fold dialogue held on the one hand between him and his own **non**-Muslim society in order to promote understanding of Islam and Muslims, and on the other hand an inter-faith dialogue between Christians and Muslims.

In his discussions he was not polemical. Van Ess describes him as *'intellectually detached from both religions, while continuing to practise one.'* Professor Watt himself writes:

*'While adhering to scholarly standards I have been as sympathetic as possible to Islam.'* This approach is apparent above all in his writings about Muhammad.

In his autobiography he speaks of a reality underlying religious experience. Whilst there is no exact way of translating a Christian doctrine into Islamic terms and vice versa, he writes:

*'I am convinced that the same reality underlies the experience of both religions.'* Time alone will tell whether this insight proves prophetic. But for now, it is clear from the size of the audience gathered here



that he '*is accepted in his own country*' and that his memory is celebrated there. In the present climate of Islamophobia his example, and above all, his inspiring writings, have much to teach us.