

PLATE XVIII



Photograph by Walter Stoneman

THOMAS SOUTHCLIFFE ASHTON

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1889-1968

THE more remote ancestors of T. S. Ashton, through both father and mother, were aristocratic, according to family traditions, which interested but did not impress him. Certainly there is evidence that his mother was descended from the Duke of Monmouth, and so from Charles II; but after Monmouth's abbreviated Chancellorship of Cambridge there was no recorded or rumoured connection with the universities. This remoteness from the seats of learning held equally in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, though the families, thenceforward positively identified, knew some thorough schooling. James Ashton was a hatter at Ashton-under-Lyne and his son, after serving in the Peninsular War, became Governor of the House of Industry at Ashton. T. S. Ashton's paternal grandfather, two generations further down, was an accountant, auditing the books of cotton firms and becoming part-time manager of the Ashton-under-Lyne Trustee Savings Bank. Meanwhile his mother's family, the Sutcliffes, were master cotton spinners, commanding affection as well as respect among humble people. His maternal grandfather's chief interests late in life were the magistrates' court, work for the Congregational Church, and Liberal politics. 'When I grew up and read works about the inhumanity of the cotton-masters of the nineteenth century', Ashton told his own grandchildren, 'I used to wonder whether the writers had ever met any.' A colleague once quoted Blake's line about 'dark satanic mills': Blake, Ashton exploded, could never have been to Lancashire, where large windows were essential to the technical processes of the textile industry.

It was thus against a Lancashire background of the cotton industry, thrift, dissent, and Gladstonian politics that Ashton was born at Ashton-under-Lyne on 11 January 1889. He was the third of six children, and the household also included an invalid aunt. The father, like his father and brother before him, was manager (now full-time) of the Trustee Savings Bank, from which he earned high repute but low salary. The moderate wealth his mother's ancestors once enjoyed had melted away, some of it during the cotton famine of the 'sixties when the mill was kept open for the sake of the workpeople. So, though they lived in a large house, strict economy—on a middle-class

standard—was always the rule. Father and mother were devout Congregationalists: life was grimly Puritanical—dancing, card-playing, and theatre visits were rigidly forbidden—and all centred on the church. Of this, the children grew critical, but there were other sides to it—Burne-Jones windows, an outstanding organist, and stimulating preaching—and Ashton came to regard it as having played ‘a not unimportant part in my education’. But as he grew up he revolted against the forms and teachings of traditional religion, retaining instead from his spiritual heritage a sturdy independence which he expected others to match.

He went first (aged 4) to the Albion Higher Grade Elementary School attached to the Congregational Church. Then, aged 12, when most of his schoolfellows went off to the factories, he with a few others passed on to the Albion Organised Science School. Here he began to enjoy school, better though not highly qualified teachers, a wide range of subjects, and lax discipline. Attached to the school was a closed scholarship—the Hegginbottom and Tetlow—and this became of critical importance to Ashton. His father had decided that the boy should become a parson, and it took some courage, at the age of 15, to insist that he must go a different way. This break having been made, higher education was barred unless the scholarship could be won, to take him to the University of Manchester. In 1905 he competed with two other 16-year-olds; Ashton was second, missing by 5 marks out of over 500. After another year at school, he tried again and just won. The scholarship was a good one for those days: £60 a year for three years, but Ashton in his first year decided that he wanted a Master’s degree and therefore had to make the total £180 last four years instead of three. He walked from the station to the University instead of using the tram, limited himself to 7*d.* or 8*d.* a day for mid-day dinner, and so scraped through the four years. Financial tightness was no novelty, but it was partly responsible for his minimal part in student activities. These did, however, include in his third year a weekly evening at the university settlement in Ancoats. After that, he was in too busy an intellectual ferment to stray far from his studies.

These had taken an unusual course, for an embryo professor. School and university advisers had agreed in telling Ashton to enter for History Honours, but he wanted an all-round education and a chance of finding out where his aptitudes lay. Partly, perhaps, this was because he wished to keep up his chemistry, though when he entered for the Ordinary or Pass degree in Arts he discovered

that all science subjects were excluded. He found Latin a grind, and succeeded only as far as Virgil and Livy; Horace and Cicero tripped him up but good work in Ancient History, Modern European History, Economic History, Geography, English Language and Literature pulled him through. The course was then reduced to three subjects. He chose History and Geography, for these would help him in seeking a post as a school-teacher; and Political Economy because he had come to think of economic improvement, instead of any religious ethic, as the road to a better life. From this point his intellectual interests may be said to have crystallized out, for in Hilda Johnstone's history course he carried off the prize, in competition with her honours students, and in Political Economy, where he found S. J. Chapman 'a brilliantly lucid and attractive teacher', he took a First.

At 21, with four university years behind him, he had to find his first job. Through an agency he obtained a post as master in History and English at the Masonic Boys' School in Dublin, at £80 a year, plus board. Those who remember that short slight figure, and the will and vigour it contained, will not be surprised at the opening episode: 'When I arrived there I found that several of the older boys towered head and shoulders over me, and the first thing I had to do in the classroom was to knock one of them down. After that I had no difficulty with discipline and got on well with my pupils.' The later success of these in examinations pleased his Headmaster, but Ashton was never one for institutional living, and he was especially irked by his bedroom, a mere passage between the Headmaster's house and the School. Home in the summer holidays, he saw a press announcement that the Free Trade Union was to conduct courses of eight lectures on Trade and Tariffs in towns throughout the north-west, and that these would be given by people with training in economics. He inquired, and found that the pay was £1 a night, and that he might be offered £20. He had in Dublin a resident salary of £80, and he had been unofficially engaged to Marion Slater more than a year, but he already knew he could teach, and he knew what he wanted to teach. He went straight to the nearest Post Office and wired his resignation to Ireland; just as quickly as was permissible he was out of schoolmastering and embarked on 'a new and exciting kind of life'. To earn an exiguous and uncertain living by casual lectures in the evenings while trying some unpaid research by day was in those years the only passage for such a man into university teaching, and Ashton's own account of how he began should be recorded:

My first lecture courses were at Leigh, Barnoldswick, and Bacup. The following week I was told they had gone all right, but that a man who had the class at Carlisle had made a mess of things; he was an able graduate in History whom I knew well, and had a part-time post on the *Manchester Guardian*, but was weak on economic policy. When asked a question he said he would think it over and let them have the answer the following week. This wouldn't do for a body which, if its courses professed to be concerned with elementary economics, was at root propagandist. I was asked to take over. There was an audience of about 80, most middle-class Liberals with some single-taxers, very different from the handful of working-men I had at Leigh. I got on well with them and enjoyed my five or six weekly visits. I also had courses at Levenshulme, Skipton, and other places, and ensured enough to live on at home. Early in the session I went to see Chapman at the University to ask if he could suggest a subject for research. He put me on to the measurement of the sizes of businesses in the textile industries, the source for which was textile directories, and out of it came the paper I read with him to the Royal Statistical Society in 1914.

This paper—it may be called a monograph, running to 80 pages—is a classic, and was of great importance in the shaping of Ashton's approach to economic history. Chapman was testing, by a survey international in scope, the reality of Marshall's Representative Firm. Ashton's primary duty was to analyse the sizes of English textile firms, but it seems likely that he also tackled the coal and iron and steel industries, and so introduced himself to a field where some of his main work was to be done. The presentation was characteristic of the period: a statement of the problem in terms of the dominant Marshallian economics, a simple statistical analysis in tabular and graphical form, and a concise interpretation and conclusion. The authors themselves called it 'tentative realistic research in individual morphology'; as such it was unique, but the approach was akin to work then being done by Clapham and Bowley elsewhere. When the paper was read, Edgeworth from the chair commended its economical literary style, a remark that was to have lasting effect on Ashton's use of words.

At an early stage in the work Chapman had recognized the promise of his assistant and was caring for his career, as best he could in those days. He told Ashton that if he wanted to be an economist he must know German, and in the summer of 1912 a £20 bursary enabled him to spend two months in Städe. Ashton later regretted that he had not known Städe's place in the Hansa, for he would have got more out of the visit. From the linguistic point of view the visit was not a great success, but it

gave him a start, and enlarged his horizons. When he came home, Chapman told him of an Assistant Lectureship at Sheffield, and drafted a three-sentences application for him; he was appointed without interview and from October 1912 was with Knoop at Sheffield. 'It was', he wrote, 'a momentous turning point for me.' The salary of £200 was unusually high, but through his second year he took departmental responsibilities while Knoop was away on a travelling fellowship. Then came the war. He did not expect to be much use (his right index finger had been crushed in a mangle when he was four) but he volunteered in 1915 and was rejected. He therefore remained at Sheffield throughout the war, and was badly overworked. His duties included heavy extra-mural work (colliers at Hoyland, railway locomotive men at Sheffield, among others), and stretched over seven days a week. 'And on top of it all was the O.T.C., odd lecturing to create new branches of the W.E.A., the collection of material on labour for one of the government departments, and three months' misery as a wages clerk in the summers.' (This was at Firth's munitions factory.) But it was not as bad as it might have been, for after a very long engagement he had in 1915 married Marion Slater, and their son Anthony was born in 1916. His Armistice Day was singular but in character: inevitably caught in the flu epidemic, when Monday morning came he dragged himself out of bed and ('light-headed I suppose') insisted on going to the University to lecture, though his wife felt she must go with him. They found the building empty: those who were not ill in bed had gone off to celebrate.

His first independent published paper appeared in 1916. Discussion with a trade union official in a W.E.A. class had prompted him to investigate some trade union records, and a paper on 'The Relation between Unemployment and Sickness' (*Economic Journal*, vol. 26) was the result. Apart from this, he had little time or energy for research, but in a small way he began exploring the history of iron in South Yorkshire and the heavy industry of Sheffield. When the war was over he knew he must look elsewhere for advancement. Knoop himself (always a good friend) was only a lecturer with little prospect; besides that, Ashton was looking for wider opportunities to study the history of iron and steel. So in 1919 he moved to Birmingham University, dropping a little to £400. A chief duty was to establish relations with industrial firms and trade unions under a scheme, initiated by Neville Chamberlain and Sir William Ashley, whereby selected workers were allowed two days a week to

attend the University. Ashton himself taught the economics and political science and organized the rest. In addition, he participated in teaching full-time students for the B.Com. degree. The chief attraction was that he would be close to old centres of the iron industry; he supposed, too, that under Ashley he would have a real chance of becoming an economic historian. In the event his contacts with Ashley were devastatingly disappointing, for at this time Ashley was too full of politics and university administration to show any interest in Ashton's research. Ashley's exaggerated insistence on the formalities then usual in academic life grated on the younger man. (At meetings of the Commerce Faculty the lecturers had to appear in cap and gown and stand behind their chairs until Ashley came in.) The confined living conditions the young couple had to accept in post-war Birmingham did not help. In all else, Ashton's two years at Birmingham were a rich investment. He added to his Sheffield foundations a great store of knowledge of the iron industry of the West Midlands (especially Coalbrookdale) ready for his first book. And he made some good friends, both older and younger. Among the latter was Barrett Whale, who remained a warm friend until his death in 1950. They often walked together, in the Lakes and the Cotswolds, and especially in monetary history each learned from and influenced the other.

It was an earlier friend who brought about Ashton's next move, to Manchester. Ashton had been to evening lectures by George Unwin at Manchester in 1912, and in 1916 Unwin stayed with the Ashtons in Sheffield after lecturing to the Sociological Society there. In 1921 a letter from Unwin said that Manchester was looking for a Senior Lecturer in Economics, and inquired whether Ashton was interested. The answer 'Yes' had hardly gone before Ashton (and, to his annoyance, Ashley) read in the *Manchester Guardian* that he had been appointed. On arrival he was told by Daniels (newly Professor of Commerce and Dean of the Faculty) that his job was to teach Public Finance and Currency, and this he did—though neither branch was of special interest to him—for 23 years. His departmental colleagues, besides Daniels, were Henry Clay and Miss Collier, and he was fairly close to Stopford, the Vice-Chancellor. The man who really mattered was Unwin, in the History Department. Ashton worshipped him as no other man in his whole life: 'He came nearer', Ashton told his family, 'to being a saint than any man I have known, except perhaps Tawney.' Saturday mornings would regularly see them in the Library (Ashton's

habit was fostered by the knowledge that Unwin would be there) then walking home together through the quieter back-streets. Ashton had been unlucky with Ashley, but now back in Manchester he found, for the six years till Unwin died, encouragement, inspiration, and wide-ranging illumination.

Unwin's talk would roam far beyond the centuries and the industries Ashton was making his own—indeed far beyond all economic history—but he took great interest in the progress of Ashton's book, and spoke warmly of it when it was published (by Manchester University Press) in 1924. *Iron and Steel in the Industrial Revolution* was almost entirely about the eighteenth century, though his interpretation of the industrial revolution drew on a wide knowledge of earlier industry and trade. Here was the influence, we may guess, of Unwin, but Ashton was already deep in his study of the industry before he saw much of Unwin, and in almost every way the book already showed the characteristics that were to mark Ashton's work through the next forty years. He had an eye for the complex relations between an economic situation and the direction and pace of economic change. He was intensely interested too, in the history of the firms as well as in technical and political aspects. Though he never engaged in wide international sweeps, he was always insistent on getting the international setting right, as in this first book he used a very considerable knowledge of the eighteenth-century Baltic trade. The book was at once accepted as a major contribution to the history of the industrial revolution (I remember it as the only book on the iron and steel industry recommended to undergraduates at Cambridge in 1927). In 1951 it was reprinted, with a new Preface justifying its description as a Second Edition. This Preface noted how the author's scepticism, in 1924, of the claims of Dud Dudley had been justified by subsequent scientific investigations, and—in characteristically generous terms—it recorded the work that had emerged from other writers since the first publication.

Work on a companion volume, on the coal industry, had started almost as a by-product of the iron and steel book. (The size-of-firms article of 1914 had included a little on the coal mines.) But Ashton could not afford to travel to or stay long on the scattered coalfields, and progress was disappointing until a fellow-worker appeared. Joseph Sykes (later Professor at Exeter) came to Manchester to finish his study of the 'Amalgamation Movement in English Banking', under Ashton's supervision, and on completion of this Ashton invited him to collaborate in the

book on the coal industry. Sykes had a car—an oddity among 'Red-brick' juniors in those days—in which they went to Northumberland and Durham, and Sykes alone went to South Wales and Derbyshire. Sykes was responsible particularly for the chapter on overseas and inland trade, and provided much material for other parts. The broad conception, the substance of most chapters and the writing were Ashton's. The book, *The Coal Industry of the 18th Century*, appeared under their joint authorship in 1929. In the *Economic Journal* of March 1930, a review by Tawney was put at the head of the review section. Tawney congratulated the authors 'on having produced a remarkable and instructive book, based on thorough and honest research, and written . . . in a style that makes it a pleasure to read'. At a meeting in Manchester itself Clapham went out of his way to praise the book. From this date onward Ashton's standing as one of the leading economic historians of his generation could not be questioned, though his own University of Manchester hardly seemed to notice it.

Unwin had been Professor of Economic History (the first in this country) but after his death the university's historians appointed Arthur Redford, Ashton's brother-in-law, to a Readership, with some intention of reviving the Chair a little later. For many years thereafter Manchester had two economic historians, Ashton and Redford, with similar interests but in different Faculties. Ashton continued to teach Currency and Public Finance, and elementary economic theory, but he did not feel that Redford's appointment placed any obligation on himself to cease research and writing in economic history. The situation was aggravated by the cleavage, not to say animosity, between the two Faculties and, while Ashton and Redford matured, each Faculty came to regard its own man as deserving the unfilled Chair. Fortunately the two men got on well together, for there was no prospect of money for two Chairs. All that happened was that Ashton's title was changed from Senior Lecturer to Reader, without any change of salary, and the historians saw to it that Ashton had no chance to teach in what he had now clearly made his own subject. As the years went by, bitterness crept in, and he began to apply for Chairs elsewhere. But Chairs were usually in economics, although (as a review of Keynes's *General Theory* had shown) he knew his way about monetary economics, Ashton's reputation was as an economic historian, and he had to stomach four failures. The compensations that kept his self-respect alive were found in his awareness

of recognition among scholars outside Manchester, and in two important connections beyond the university walls. These were with the Manchester Statistical Society and the *Manchester Guardian*. For the first he edited their unusually important centenary history, *Economic and Social Investigations in Manchester, 1833-1933* (Manchester, 1934). At their monthly dinners he was a lively and popular figure, always in the thick of discussion, and he became their President for 1938-40. For the *Manchester Guardian* he wrote obituary notices and reviews, and occasional articles. These were the great days of the *Guardian*, and Ashton's scholarly touch was in keeping. He himself valued the experience highly. It was, he said, 'an educative process. To put things tersely comes not by instinct, but by self-discipline and long practice. One should always write with an editor in mind.' The *Manchester Guardian* thus took him further along the journey started by Edgeworth's commendation back in 1914, and the elegance of Ashton's later style drew life from a true economy in the use of words.

Like the Manchester Statistical Society, the *Manchester Guardian* brought him lifelong friends, especially E. T. Scott, A. P. Wadsworth, and J. L. Hammond. In Wadsworth, editor for many years but also a notable historian of the cotton industry, Ashton found a kindred spirit. Hammond was in Manchester every summer, taking charge of the *Guardian* while the editor was on holiday. The well-known books written by John and Barbara Hammond overlapped with Ashton's in subject and in period, but their interpretation was quite different, and their method of work not one that Ashton would have encouraged in anyone else. Nevertheless, the two men grew to admire each other, and the friendship was one that Ashton treasured to the last. In the later years Ashton found two new friends in the university, when John and Ursula Hicks arrived from Cambridge. He found them economists with whom he could enjoy talking, and they became close friends. The respect and affection Ashton had won in and around Manchester found expression when he left, in a collection from friends for a T. S. Ashton Prize at the university. 'It was the nicest thing that happened to me in my life', was Ashton's comment to one of them (A. H. Allman).

During the 1930s there was a long gap in the otherwise steady stream of Ashton's articles in learned journals, though he wrote a number of interesting short reviews. After the Statistical Society book and an important bibliographical article on the

industrial revolution,¹ he turned to a long-outstanding task with the mass of documents relating to Peter Stubs of Warrington. In 1923 or thereabouts, Unwin, Daniels, and Ashton had looked at and turned over 'a pyramid of letters and ledgers' relating to this file-making business established late in the eighteenth century. They took the pre-1830 material back with them to the university, leaving the rest for later attention. When Ashton returned to them in the middle 1930s, it was only to learn that this remainder had been destroyed. Still, Ashton had enough to get on with: the obvious approach of war would in any case put a large book out of court, and instead Ashton wrote the story down to 1806: *An Eighteenth Century Industrialist: Peter Stubs of Warrington* (Manchester, 1939). Like many books of that date, it missed serious review, though a reprint in 1961 was suitably noticed in the *Economic History Review*.

In the second war it fell to Ashton to take the main burden of keeping the Faculty going, with the help of Miss Collier; he had no choice, for the Vice-Chancellor resisted further depletion of already thin ranks. The total teaching load was of course reduced, and with the transfer of evening classes to Sunday afternoons they thought they were managing tolerably well. But inevitably there were extra duties, and Ashton was responsible for the university building and the refugees it housed during the air-raid of 23 December 1941: at 2.30 a.m. that night, the bombing ended, he climbed the Tower and saw the centre of Manchester a mass of flame.

In 1944 a new vista suddenly opened. Tawney sounded him about the Chair at the London School of Economics, vacant through the death of Eileen Power. His immediate reaction was against, there had been years when half such a chance would have been wonderful, but Ashton was already 55, his personal roots in Manchester were now very strong, and—strange as it may seem—he had not since his early days taught economic history. After telling Tawney 'No', he inquired about his prospects in Manchester. A plan to give him a Chair was already afoot, but in the constricted circumstances of the time the Vice-Chancellor could give him only guarded encouragement, and it had not been possible to follow this up when Ashton received from Tawney a long letter elaborating the claims of the London Chair. It was a marvellous letter, showing that Tawney and

¹ *Economic History Review*, 1934-5, pp. 104-19. It was subsequently re-published in pamphlet form, by A. & C. Black Ltd. for the Economic History Society.

Carr-Saunders really wanted Ashton and attached high importance to the work that was to be done by the holder of that Chair. This turned the scale, and the move was settled, though the ensuing process irked and distressed Ashton. It was a long time before all the distress had evaporated.

He began with a term of misery at Cambridge, the wartime refuge of the London School of Economics. Peterhouse was hospitable, but all the kindness of Master and Fellows could do little to comfort a man who was a stranger to the ritual and folklore of the ancient universities and who at the best of times was allergic to institutional living. Lonely and miserable, he pottered in the Marshall Library, trying to adjust himself to the framework of professorial lecture courses, shrinking from cold shoulders, perhaps from more than there were. Then, incredibly easily, he and Marion settled themselves in London in a flat in Westbourne Terrace, a few hundred yards north of Hyde Park, and a home to become well known to economic historians of many universities and countries. In October 1945 the School was back in London, and Ashton was fairly launched on the most fruitful and most rewarding phase of his career. There was his teaching at the School, from which a stream of younger colleagues and students went out to the proliferation of economic history departments about the country. There were the writings, three fine books in fourteen years, as well as some elegant little piece about once a year. There was the foreign travel, especially among North American and Scandinavian universities, and there was the rising tide of acclaim as one of the real scholars and teachers of his time.

In the early post-war years, lectures were still the mainstay of university teaching, and Ashton had had long and wide experience since his beginning with the Free Trade Union. He was a good, not a great, lecturer; his markedly Lancashire speech reached all but the largest audiences, and his zest for his subject saved him from the dullness that temperate men often cannot escape. But he was too passionately impartial to wish to obtrude his views on students who as yet knew too little to be critical, and he was better—certainly he was more attractive—in his graduate seminar, open to the whole university and hospitable to visitors from other universities. He did not ever, either in the seminar or in discussions among professionals in general, dominate to the point of overbearing, but sheer intellectual curiosity was always pushing him on. Perceiving some new point, or fresh light on an old point, there would be a sudden

glint in his eye, and out would come pen or pencil to make a note of it. To see that glint in his eye was to relish and to share Ashton's own excitement. His colleagues in other subjects were sometimes privileged to see and benefit from these qualities: he was never a man to lead or to dominate Common Room discussion, but in a quiet corner he could be effective and delightful. In committee work he was a fount of wisdom, humanity, and decency. With all his gentleness and humility, he was insistent on the decencies and proprieties of academic life, and there was no doubt where he stood. Openly, too, he was impatient of pretentiousness in any form—pretentiousness of manner, of ideas, of words. This trait was allied to one of the outstanding characteristics of his work in his chosen subject. He thought the grandiose sweep of such words as capitalism, mercantilism, and imperialism a snare, they 'blurred, rather than sharpened, our vision of the past'. (He once boasted in an Oxford common room that no word ending in 'ism' would be found in his book just in proof. 'Not even "baptism"?' asked one of his hosts. Ashton accepted the gentle reproof, and decided against changing the word to 'christenings' as a warning against vain-glory.)

His departmental arrangements at the London School of Economics were strongly influenced by his insistence on quality in preference to quantity. While other departments grew fast, Ashton's extremely high standards in recruitment meant that the economic history department tended to become a smaller part of the School. This was sometimes regretted by professorial colleagues, but Ashton preferred it that way: he was never an empire-builder. In shaping his own part in it, the same characteristics ruled, when he accepted the Chair, he knew he could not do everything in the nine years he would hold it. So he carved out the eighteenth century as his own task, and entrusted the rest to teachers who would match his own standards. This decision to continue to specialize mainly on one century enabled him to write three fine books: *The Industrial Revolution* (Home University Library, Oxford, 1948), *An Economic History of England: The 18th Century* (London, 1955), and *Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800* (Oxford, 1959). They overlapped to some extent, and were written for rather different audiences; between them, they were the distillation of his life's work. From Manchester, Sheffield, Birmingham, and Manchester again, Ashton had been working towards this mid-twentieth-century view of the first century of industrial Britain. Yet when he came to

preface the little book on *The Industrial Revolution*, he did not stress his own years of work. Instead, his Preface opened with the sentence: 'No-one who teaches at the London School of Economics can ever be sure how much of what he writes is his own and how much belongs to his associates and pupils.' Like all his Prefaces, it was restrained, economical, almost austere—but wonderfully generous. The story itself was partly new, partly old, the interpretation unsensationally new, at least in balance. While giving full place to the 'wave of gadgets', Ashton rooted the revolution firmly in earlier industrial and social England. There was new stress on the relevance of accessibility to capital, and of rates of interest; this was an aspect where Ashton was taking to the eighteenth century some of the questions prompted by the monetary controversies of the 1930s. And there were openings to bring writers on 'isms' up with a jerk: 'In the eighteenth century the characteristic instrument of social purpose was not the individual or the State, but the club.' A congenial thought, probably, to a man whose winter evenings had often been spent talking with trade unionists and others in tutorial classes in industrial Lancashire.

The second book was written as a contribution to a five-volume *Economic History of England*, four of his colleagues at the School having undertaken the remaining volumes. Their object was 'to find answers (partial and provisional though these must be) to the questions economists ask, or should ask, of the past'. The volumes were to 'be thought of as representing the way in which the subject has been taught, in recent years, at the London School of Economics and Political Science'. The series is still far from complete, and it is not possible to judge how far as a whole it will fulfil Ashton's intentions; but through the rest of his life he worked hard, if intermittently, as an editor helping and prodding his fellow-authors. Ashton feared that people might find his own volume disappointing, partly, I think, because it eschewed any pretence at comprehensiveness. The event proved differently: once again the *Economic Journal* (September 1956) gave pride of place to an Ashton book. The reviewer (D. M. Joslin) noted 'the discrimination and integrity in the handling of evidence, the taut but readable economy of words, and the apt illustrations and distilled reflections that only a life-time of study can command'. The book would, Joslin concluded, 'act as a landmark in the development of the subject and provide ample guidance for further exploration'. This assessment has been justified by the event, for Ashton's view

of eighteenth-century change, developed in this and the other two books, made economic historians think harder than ever before about the effects of industrial change on the standard of living. New kinds of evidence have been sought out, and old evidence has been re-assessed. Ashton's 'optimistic' conclusions are still hotly debated, but the professional standard of debate was lastingly raised by his contribution.

In 1953 Ashton gave the Ford Lectures at Oxford using again the material on which he had been drawing for the eighteenth-century volume. Although the tenure of his Chair ended in the following summer (he continued his seminar two further years), Ashton's preparation of the Ford Lectures for publication was delayed first by extensive travel and then by a severe coronary thrombosis in September 1955. It was not until after his retirement in 1956 to Blockley, in the Cotswolds, that he was really himself again and was able to settle to the task of polishing and re-polishing the book. One of his main concerns was to show traces of the trade cycle, a phenomenon that had interested him in his early studies in the iron and steel industry. It was also a great debating ground of economists when Ashton was teaching economics, and his exploration of the phenomenon in history was another example of the fertilization of his work in history by his contemplation of contemporary economics. He was sceptical enough to avoid the term 'Trade Cycle' in the title, and settled on *Economic Fluctuations in England, 1700-1800* (published by Oxford, 1959). He himself thought the title forbidding, but he comforted himself with the book's opening gambit—the weather, which 'has given rise to no ideologies and no class wars. There is general agreement that it is rarely any better than it should be.' (Ashton was, it may be noted, unduly sensitive to the weather: in the best of all Ashton stories he would recount the horrors of a wintry night spent in an Oxford college at the height of the post-war fuel crisis.) There was humour as well as elegance in his chronological survey of English weather through the century—he wryly noted that the first rain gauge was set up in Lancashire—but the core of the book was statistical. As became the historian of the Manchester Statistical Society, every possible figure was brought into use, but only after it had survived a scholar's scepticism. 'His persistent quest of the quantitative' (I quote Herbert Heaton) 'was matched by a constant cautious questioning of the quality of the quantities, whether they were statistical series of raw data or had been put through the statistician's mill and emerged "far from their

pristine condition”.¹ The searching out, handling, and application of eighteenth-century statistics must be reckoned one of Ashton's major contributions to economic history. He was adding more than material, he was using a new box of tools. He showed, too, how his tools could be used to provide historians, for the first time, with a coherent picture of the English economy in the eighteenth century. He undoubtedly enjoyed writing about the weather, but he did much more, he demonstrated just how important it was in the economic life of town and country.

Besides these books, Ashton found time during these years to write occasional short papers, all of them exemplifying and some of them explicitly discussing his approach to his subject. Some were directly related to his work on the industrial revolution: 'The Industrial Past' (Institute of Bankers, 1948) was a neat and elegant summary, and 'Changes in the Standard of Comfort in Eighteenth-Century England' was his subject for the Raleigh Lecture at the British Academy (1954). His long years of teaching on currency problems were not wasted, in 1945 he contributed to the *Economic History Review* an article on means of payment in Lancashire, 1790–1830, which was reprinted when he joined with R. S. Sayers in editing *Papers in English Monetary History* (Oxford, 1953). His view of economic history was given in his inaugural lecture (*Economica*, 1946), in 'Recent Trends in the Writing of Economic History' (*Journal of Economic History*, 1949), and less directly in 'The Treatment of Capitalism by Historians' (in Hayek, *Capitalism and Historians*, 1951). Of his book reviewing, the review article on Rostow, Gayer, and Schwartz (*Economic History Review*, 1954–5) was much the most interesting.

As the histories of individual firms formed an integral part of his industrial histories, it was natural enough that he should have taken great interest in the writing of 'business history' as such, and a great pity that he was not able to make the Peter Stubs book the major history of a firm, as he originally intended. He took a lasting interest, however, in the Business Archives Council, with which he had been in close touch from its foundation in 1934. He became its second chairman in 1946, and remained ten years in office, thereafter being a vice-president. As on every side, he was fearful of the growth of a great machine and thought

¹ The words 'far from their pristine condition' were taken by Heaton from Ashton's review article on the Gayer–Rostow–Schwartz book, *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol. vii (1954–5), pp. 377–81. The article consists mainly of a highly characteristic critique of the statistics used in that book.

the Council should confine itself to acting as honest broker between scholars and business firms, and between business firms and libraries or other depositories for records. Nevertheless in 1950 he stretched a point, by contributing a brief Introduction to *Letters of a West African Trader, 1767-70*, the first publication of the Council. He was able to explain that a 'Scrivello' was 'an elephant's tusk weighing less than 20 lb', though the *O.E.D.* does not mention it.

Two wars and lean years through the 1920s and 1930s meant that Ashton travelled very little until he reached his sixties. In 1949 he visited the eastern United States, lecturing to the American Economic History Association at Rutgers, visiting New York, Washington, Mount Vernon, Montecello, Williamsburg, Charlottesville and Philadelphia, Harvard and Princeton, then up to Canada to lecture at Toronto. It was a hurried tour, but he found the intellectual atmosphere highly stimulating, and was surprised by the beauty of the eastern States. Two years later, he lectured to the Mont Pelerin Society (he was, strangely enough, a member) at Beauvallon on the Riviera, and this led to an invitation to Johns Hopkins University. Both he and his wife had learned to appreciate North American hospitality, on the 1949 visit, and he felt able to take two terms away from the London School. They spent five months at Johns Hopkins, and found Baltimore full of lively and stimulating people; the teaching obligations were light enough to give him a real chance to get on with the book on *The Eighteenth Century*. He was much in demand in the American universities, and gave single lectures at Yale, Harvard, and Maryland, before going to New York to teach for ten hours a week at Columbia through a gruelling July and August. While there, the Ashtons spent a weekend in Connecticut with Mrs. Schumpeter. She had worked for years on the statistics of English overseas trade, and allowed Ashton valuable use of her data for his own book; he was able later to arrange English publication for her work (Oxford, 1960). In 1954 the Ashtons (his wife accompanied him on all these tours) visited Scandinavia, the tour being financed jointly by the Swedish ironmasters and the Scandinavian universities. It was an unusual itinerary, taking them through textile, timber, and iron districts of Sweden as well as the university cities; then to lecture at Helsinki, Gothenburg, Oslo, Copenhagen, and Århus. At Oslo especially he was helped by his northern accent, making his English easy for Norwegians to follow. Everywhere there was warm hospitality and an enthusiastic audience. There was no

doubt about his international standing. This was obvious, too, when he went to Rome for the International Historical Conference in 1955. But Rome, though magnificent and exciting, was hot and exhausting, and a fortnight later a coronary thrombosis threatened his life and put an end to his foreign travels, except for a brief visit in 1964 to Sweden to receive an honorary doctorate in the University of Stockholm.

Ashton was then 65, and honours were coming thick and fast, to assuage the memory of difficulties in his earlier university career. First—a step that gave him tremendous satisfaction—in 1951 he was elected to the British Academy. In 1961 the Royal Historical Society, on whose Council his term had been 1946–9, made him an honorary vice-president. He was on the Council of the Royal Economic Society from 1946 until 1957, and in 1964 the Society elected him an honorary vice-president. Nottingham gave him his first honorary degree (Litt.D., 1963) and Manchester—a peculiar pleasure, this—made him D.Litt. a year later, just before he went to Stockholm to receive the third. Public recognition in England would have gone further but Ashton, like Unwin and Tawney before him, would have none but academic title. What he did accept with intense pleasure was, on the occasion of his 70th birthday (1959), a volume of essays. Of the contributors, seven had been his own students, and all had learned from him. Many others would have liked thus to honour him as friend, as counsellor, and as scholar. The book, *Studies in the Industrial Revolution*, edited by L. S. Pressnell, was published a year later (Athlone Press, London, 1960). It included a six-page ‘Bibliography of Academic Writings of T. S. Ashton’. After that date (and therefore not in the bibliography) Ashton wrote two important reviews, of books by Phelps Brown (*Economica*, 1960) and Beveridge (*Econ. Jnl.* 1966). Also—a labour of love—he contributed to the 1962 *Proceedings of the British Academy* a memoir of R. H. Tawney.

Most of all in his last years he was honoured and loved as the doyen of the Economic History Society. He had been a member since the foundation of the Society in 1926, and was on its Council from 1938 onward. In the later 1950s Tawney remained the greatly-loved President of the Society, but Ashton was, at the wish of everyone, a pillar of support to Tawney especially in coping with the annual conference. In 1960 he succeeded Tawney, though characteristically he insisted on limiting his own Presidency to three years. He made an excellent chairman, both for the Council and for the Conference: a man of humility but

firmness, with a shrewd but gentle humour that would put both speaker and audience at their ease and in rapport with each other. The Conference almost always hit on the bleakest week-end of the Easter vacation, and there was always a struggle to keep Ashton warm enough—as there had been with Tawney too.

For a countryman Ashton was unusually bothered by the cold. And he was a countryman, although his working life had been spent in great cities. He was always a walker, and knew the moors that were beyond the last of the houses, whether in Sheffield or in Lancashire. He returned to them, and especially to the Lake District, over and over again, and when he sweltered through that New York summer in 1952, his hunger for a glimpse of the moors became almost an obsession. In his later years—largely through Barrett Whale, Val Judges, and John and Ursula Hicks—he came to know the Cotswolds well, and there at Blockley the Ashtons lived the last eleven years of his life. Driving himself—a much earlier accomplishment, of which he had been proud—he enjoyed excursions to the lovely Cotswold towns and villages, and he took—with his visitors often—his little walks to relish ever again the daily changes in field and woodland. He took some part in local life, notably enjoying his governorship of Campden Grammar School, to which he bequeathed £500.

He wrote no more books, but spent much of his time helping young authors by reading their drafts—sometimes of books he himself had said they ought to write. He was not a great letter-writer in the old style, but it was always a pocket experience to receive in that small regular handwriting his comments on one's latest draft. It was extraordinary how quickly the letter of comment would come, when one knew that Ashton was doing this for many many others. He took pleasure in the work, partly because he continued to feel the urge of scholarship, but also because, lightly as he wore the honours that came to him, he was proud of his old students and colleagues. Many of these had already reached Chairs—Ashworth at Bristol, Ralph Davis at Leicester, Barker at Canterbury, Arthur John at L.S.E., Minchinton at Exeter, Pollard at Sheffield. To these and many others Blockley became almost a place of pilgrimage.

All this contributed yet more to the hold he had upon historians from far and wide. It was a hold of affection as well as respect, for Ashton's qualities as a man reinforced his claims as a scholar. Keeping to the family tradition of Gladstonian Liberalism (he avowed it publicly in a neat article on the

historical Manchester School), he yet had a curious capacity for friendship, warm and intellectual, with men of very different persuasion. A just man, and humane, he put people before institutions and ideologies. Another asset was his faith in the value of his subject. In that persuasive letter in 1944, Tawney had written: 'Economic and social history sensibly taught—not merely as one more specialism, but with due regard to the place of economic interests in the life of society—can do more than most academic subjects to help the young to keep a steady hand and a stout heart', and this Ashton continued to believe. More than anyone else, more even than Clapham, he made economic history the economist's history. He had an eye for the picturesque incident, and could use it effectively when lecturing or discussing, but he knew that, whenever it could be so, argument must be based on numbers. The numbers, though, had to stand up to a scholar's most critical scrutiny. His long distraction into the teaching of economics and other subjects prevented his applying his craft to more than a century or so, but perhaps those years of teaching were not entirely in vain. He made himself—he was forced to make himself—enough of an economist to understand, better than anyone before him, what are 'the questions economists ask, or should ask, of the past'. In answering them, and in his way of answering them, he himself made his direct contribution to his subject and showed a whole generation of economic historians how to make theirs.

Four months short of his 80th birthday he had a major operation. He survived, and seemed set for recovery but suddenly died on 22 September 1968. One of his last actions was to give £500, without restrictions, to the Economic History Society. This sum has been applied to the endowment of an annual T. S. Ashton Prize for an essay by a scholar under 35, on any subject within the general field of economic and social history. This and his books will keep younger people mindful of a scholar who made a lasting impact on economic history; those old enough to have known Cliffe Ashton will treasure also their memory of the man.

R. S. SAYERS

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