

[SECOND DRAFT]

**George Unwin: A Manchester Economic Historian Extraordinary**

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I

George Unwin held the prestigious chair of economic history at Manchester from 1910 until he died in 1925. During that decade and a half, he built up the reputation of economic history in Britain by a unique combination of two distinct qualities. He is credited as having had one of the most penetrating and philosophical minds ever to be attracted to this discipline.<sup>1</sup> He also brought to his research an intellectual rigour, involving a scientific approach through intensive study of original sources. His influence over the development of economic and social history was thus a far-reaching one.

Even so, Unwin has been to some extent overlooked. He failed to be included among the worthies in the *Dictionary of National Biography's* supplement for 1922-30 (1937): an omission to be rectified in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004).<sup>2</sup> However, he was given a two-page entry in the *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* in 1968<sup>3</sup>, and all his four books were reprinted during that decade. A more extended treatment of his career, as the 'Founder of the Manchester school of economic history', by D.A. Farnie, was published in 2001.<sup>4</sup> The present, somewhat broader, account of his life and professional achievements therefore seeks to demonstrate that Unwin is well worth recalling in a new century.

Although Unwin became by adoption a loyal citizen of Manchester, he had spent his formative years in Stockport, a town only six miles from the city but with a proud heritage of standing apart from its giant neighbour. Born in 1870, Unwin passed his youth ‘within a stone’s throw of poverty’, as his biographer, Richard Tawney, put it.<sup>5</sup> His father, formerly a railway clerk, at the time of George’s birth kept an old-fashioned pub in the town, the Daw Bank Vaults. A very early memory was of a blind fiddler who ‘brought from his cellar hard by [the pub] a roughly constituted fiddle of his own making, and scraped out “the death of Nelson”, while the old Chartist collier sat caressing his pot and told how he had escaped at Peterloo [the massacre of 1819 at St Peter’s fields, Manchester] from under the hoofs of the Cheshire yeomanry’<sup>6</sup>. For all its comradely atmosphere, the pub clearly spun little money, and after attempts to make a success of a grocer’s shop, his parents moved to another, no doubt poorer, part of the town.

As the eldest of six children, George could expect little out of life. However, his mother, Priscilla, was a spirited character who had, before her marriage, raised nine small brothers and sisters. She imbued him with a sense of purpose, which in her case took the form of a Calvinist iron will and in him an energy which manifested itself in an increasingly over-exerted frame and brought about his premature death at the age of fifty-four.

Priscilla Unwin provided him with the best elementary education she could, at the Edgeley Wesleyan Day School, and sent him to the Baptist Sunday School; a subsequent gesture of independence was his defection to the Unitarians. From an early age, he listened to Dickens being read at home, and gained an appetite for reading. Yet a keenly observant child lacking spare money for entertainment must

have spent a good deal of time tramping the town's streets until he knew them backwards.

A number of authors have commented on how the locality they had grown up in became part of their make-up, in a way which localities they subsequently came to know never did. A child 'lived very near the ground' and – so to speak – 'explored it on all fours', whereas an adult 'strides or gallops over later landscapes'.<sup>7</sup> Stockport was then a medium-sized and grimy cotton town surrounded by moors; yet Unwin grasped its special characteristics.

Despite its proximity to Manchester, Stockport was still largely self-contained and hence dependent on its own resources. The all too obvious inequalities of income and wealth did not appear to breed the same class distinctions as in the south, so that the economic classes were more used to intermingling. Thus the poor had a greater chance of help both from more affluent individuals and through charitable, religious and other voluntary agencies, which seem to have been plentiful. The town's name dated back to the twelfth century; it currently made its livelihood mainly from cotton, but earlier from logwood and silk mills, and earlier still from manorial corn mills. To Unwin, the town so much represented a microcosm of the wider world that as an academic he could instinctively transfer its lineaments to any city or town, in Europe as well as Britain, he happened to be visiting, and deduce the historical stages of its growth.

At the age of thirteen, he had to leave school, and became an office-boy in Samuel R. Carrington & Sons' hat manufactory, where his mother had formerly worked. He later recalled how he had helped the cashier with making up the wages of the 200 employees, which took them the greater part of two days a week. As a bookish

youngster – his scholarly handwriting in correspondence and formal documents contrasts with the execrable script described as ‘like the convulsions of a spider dipped in ink’<sup>8</sup> used for his lecture notes and private jottings – he was soon promoted to a clerkship. Once old enough to join the Mechanics’ Institute, he helped his employer, probably William E. Carrington, a JP, to write letters to the papers and even to prepare talks.

Here was no young Charles Dickens detesting every moment in a blacking factory; he did not lurk in the office but ate his packed lunch with the workpeople, who no doubt supplemented the meagre ration his mother could provide, in the process giving him what he later regarded as ‘the best part of my education’. He was convinced that education was good, in sowing a spiritual seed, but that to prolong schooling excessively all too often merely stifled originality. By his twentieth year, he knew what he wanted to do in life: to teach either literature, philosophy or religion, but in a practical and not purely theoretical way. By encouraging pupils or students to think, he could go far towards improving the quality of their lives.

While still a Carrington’s clerk, Unwin studied at night school, doubtless in classes run by the Mechanics’ Institute, and at twenty he won a scholarship, worth £20 a year, at Cardiff University College. His uncle, a Cardiff schoolmaster, offered him accommodation there. Living on about a shilling [5p] a day proved to be a struggle. He hoped unavailingly to earn some money by learning shorthand, and he became a vegetarian so as to economize. Yet to him college life proved to be a revelation, with books galore at his disposal, formal debates, the college magazine to edit, and college

plays to act in. It took only a year at Cardiff to enkindle in him an aspiration to study philosophy at Oxford, and he won a classical scholarship there, at Lincoln College.

His first three undergraduate years were spent in a garret in college, and the fourth in rooms over a grocer's shop in Walton Street, then a remote locality unexplored by the vast majority of undergraduates. In lodgings he had his main meal at lunchtime and a late tea, with watercress in season. Essential to him was a regular supply of books; he joined the Oxford Union Society so as to borrow his week-end reading from its capacious library. Remarkable then as a 'small eager figure in a dark suit and dark cap (everyone wore a cap then)', he actively supported the college's literary society and took part in many undergraduate rituals, attentively observing the 'social tyranny of etiquette and conventionalism' that then governed the conduct of mainly middle-class students in the mass.<sup>9</sup> He attended meetings at Mansfield College, the recently-established Congregational foundation, and a philosophical and theological colloquium open both to dons and to undergraduates.

Unwin's hero among philosophers was T.H. Green, now deceased, who appealed to him for the links he had established between philosophy and religion. Green's law of love explored the triangular relationship between individuals, human society and the divine. As their personalities could only be developed fully within society, people had social obligations they were required to fulfil; religious duties thus comprised the highest form of citizenship. Unwin later claimed to have extracted these basic principles out of the New Testament epistles even before he discovered them in Green. Significantly, in his words, 'it was out of this exercise of creative power that I gained confidence to make an attempt on the academic world'.<sup>10</sup> Yet it was the practical rule of life rather than the metaphysics which gripped his imagination.

Unwin was likewise impressed with Green's successor in the philosophy chair, William Wallace. Wallace had abandoned the Oxford practice of comparing and contrasting the respective philosophical schools, and lectured extempore on the borderline between philosophy and religion; his manner of instruction, basically serious but enlivened by humour, was designed to encourage thought. No wonder that Unwin depicted the lectures as 'a conversation with the audience of the most unconventional kind, [offering] deep truths in the homeliest dress, great and noble ideals set forth with a piquancy almost cynical'.<sup>11</sup>

While his brain was experiencing this stimulation, Unwin did not neglect his health, taking long walks and joining the volunteers; he claimed to have become a first-class shot. He paid less attention than he should to ancient history, preferring to read deeply in modern history, especially recent international affairs. He came under the spell of Sir John Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883),<sup>12</sup> which narrated at length how, in the era between 1688 and 1815, Britain had achieved its position of power and influence in the world through military and imperial endeavour. Unwin rapidly saw through Seeley and came to challenge his assertion that 'History is past politics; politics is present history'. Seeley thereafter grew into a kind of bogymen, to be regularly buffeted in Unwin's writings.

At Schools (as Oxford finals are known) in the summer of 1897, the most celebrated of the five examiners in Greats was Hastings Rashdall, already acclaimed for his work on *The Universities of Europe in the Middle Ages* (1895) but also a philosopher of note, whose writings on ethics were a trifle too speculative for Unwin. His scripts must have been found to be up to scratch, as much to his surprise, Unwin was awarded a First.<sup>13</sup> That result he later attributed to his 'writing a small essay or two

on points which I had thought upon intensively for years'.<sup>14</sup> But he had run through his scholarship money, ending up a little in debt, so that he needed to think urgently about his future career.

His inclination was to share his knowledge with ordinary people in the University Extension Movement, giving extra-mural lectures around the countryside. However, he was dismayed to encounter the organizers' conviction – which he knew to be unfounded – that working-class folk had no interest in studying academic subjects. It devastated him when the trial lecture he gave in Oxford did not win him a post as extension lecturer. His delivery was judged to be good; yet the content proved to be too factual and way above the heads of his audience. It was Oriel College which threw him a lifeline, by offering him a scholarship to study economics in Germany.

### III

Unwin spent the first half of 1898 in Berlin as an economics student. To start off with, he did not much enjoy abroad: long-distance travel disagreed with him, and heavy German food upset his delicate stomach. Yet this exposure to entirely novel academic challenges proved to be what Tawney called 'a turning point in his intellectual development',<sup>15</sup> allowing him to broaden his philosophical ideas to encompass economic and social history.

Germany was then a generation ahead of Britain in building up economic history as an academic subject, one in any case still treated at home in an insular way. Unwin's professor was the distinguished economist, Gustav von Schmoller, who taught him how to chart the progress of societies with scholarly rigour, by extracting the

maximum possible information out of the research documents. Unwin later judged that Schmoller had perhaps 'done more than any other scholar to give the study of economic history an independent and constructive basis'.<sup>16</sup> However, in his disillusion with Seeley, Unwin reacted against Schmoller's pronouncements about the state being the main promoter of economic progress and about the benefits to society of enlightened paternalism.

Having no quarrel with Schmoller's methodology, Unwin came to see his own specific field of enquiry as examining the organization of economies in a historical perspective. Yet as an immediately accessible case study Berlin turned out to be no Stockport. Unlike his native town, it had no social cohesion, and he found it too brash and *nouveau riche* to appeal much to a budding economic historian. Instead, he benefited mightily from visiting factories, trade union branches and socialist meetings.

Enthused by this heady experience, Unwin returned to Britain in the summer of 1898, in two minds about what to do next. He felt a strong pull towards Stockport, as the ideal subject of a social enquiry, along the lines of Charles Booth's *Life and Labour of the People of London*. However, projects of that kind were heavily statistical, an exercise in which he had no particular skill. He therefore sensibly looked elsewhere.

At first Unwin lived in Mansfield House, a 'settlement' in East London where university graduates carried out social and educational work among the surrounding community. He gave talks on social history and political science, and taught Shakespeare to teen-age boys, organizing performances of certain plays, coaching and stage-managing and even making the scenery. But he was in dire need of an income,



and after one or two expedients, he was introduced by Sidney and Beatrice Webb to Leonard (later Lord ) Courtney, whose wife happened to be one of Beatrice Webb's eight sisters.

Courtney, then in his mid-sixties, was a Liberal MP who had on conscientious grounds resigned from junior ministerial office when on the brink of a cabinet post; as a back-bencher, he was recognized as perhaps the most able politician since Richard Cobden never to have headed a government department. Unwin became his private secretary in July 1899, moving close to the Courtney residence in Cheyne Walk.<sup>17</sup>

His secretarial duties were as congenial to Unwin as any outside job could possibly have been. Courtney by then was virtually blind; in the mornings Unwin read *The Times*, journal articles and official papers to him and helped with correspondence. When his chief went off to Westminster (he was made Lord Courtney in 1906) or to other meetings, Unwin had the remainder of the day to himself. After lunch he often walked the four miles from Chelsea to the British Museum or the Public Record Office; sometimes after supper he did further reading in the Chelsea Library.

Unwin was at last able to throw himself into documentary research, free of anxiety over money. He sought to test Schmoller's conclusions on how contemporary economic structures had evolved, by investigating voluntary organizations which had earlier underpinned society. Having an inside knowledge of the felt-hat industry from his years at Carrington of Stockport, he chose to study the records of the Feltmakers' Company of London, supplemented by those of two other prominent London livery companies, the Haberdashers and the Clothmakers. He soon found himself developing a hypothesis which was to preoccupy him for a number of years:

that these livery companies and the earlier craftsmen's guilds were the direct ancestors of the country's trade unions.

A possible historical link between those guilds and unions had been a topic of scholarly debate since Luigi Brentano had published his work on the subject (without conclusively accepting that link) in 1870. Unwin was the first to attempt a serious solution by working systematically through guild records. William Ashley, in his *Introduction to English Economic History and Theory* (1894)<sup>18</sup> had given a rather patchy account of guilds up to the fifteenth century, while the Webbs, in *The History of Trade Unionism* (1894)<sup>19</sup> had begun their detailed discussion of the forerunners of unions in the eighteenth century. Unwin's book of 1904 on *Industrial Organization in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* thus sought to bridge the intervening gap.<sup>20</sup>

In 230 pages of text, closely packed with information from the unpublished records, Acts of Parliament, calendars of state papers and similar sources, he traced a 'real, significant and vital' line of development between guilds and trade unions, but one with complex intermediate links. In a diagram, he offered an outline genealogy of trade unions. The 'modern wage earner' was shown to be the issue jointly of the journeyman and small master, themselves descended from the 'yeomanry organization' of journeymen, and hence from the 'Craftsmen (Early Guild)' who headed the diagram. The immediate antecedents of the trade union he found in the diminished status of the seventeenth-century small master, carrying out domestic manufacture, subservient to the large master or trader, and gradually declining into mere wage-slaves. Hence the following century's labour troubles compelled the 'reduced' small masters, together with the journeymen, to organize themselves in combinations of workpeople.

Here was a pioneering work of great authority. As Unwin included relevant examples taken from European countries, mainly France and Germany, in Tawney's words he 'broke away from the insular tradition which, till recently, had been the misfortune of English economic history, [and] set the growth of industrial organization in England against the background of continental movements'.<sup>21</sup>

However, he did rather overload the text with facts. The American economic historian, N.S.B. Gras, who highly valued Unwin's work and was prevented only by the latter's death from a personal meeting, used to test his advanced students by making them study the book; if they really understood it in two or three readings, they showed 'promise'.<sup>22</sup>

Scholarly reactions to the book were mixed. In the later edition of their history of trade unionism, published in 1920, the Webbs continued to maintain that they saw no evidence of unions being descended from medieval craft guilds, a judgment echoed in the 1950s by G.D.H. Cole, who argued that guilds were 'essentially associations of masters, with journeymen and apprentices holding an entirely subordinate position under their control'.<sup>23</sup> Academic historians, reviewing his book in learned journals, concentrated on the gaps in Unwin's supposedly unbroken descent of trade unions from guilds: they maintained that only the felt-makers and hatters could be assumed to have had a continuous existence, and even that was not capable of being conclusively proved.<sup>24</sup> Yet despite these informed reservations about his findings, the thoroughness and sheer quality of his research was widely acknowledged, and in 1906 he was elected a fellow of the Royal Historical Society. He wrote the first of several articles for the *Victoria County History* on Suffolk industries, collecting material on

the spot by bicycle rides round the county. His reputation as an economic historian of formidable gifts was by then established.

#### IV

Unwin remained as Courtney's secretary for a total of eight years. He valued the politician as 'not only the greatest man I have known, but also the most lovable'.<sup>25</sup> Courtney's idiosyncratic and outspoken views were all too well known in ruling circles. He was a zealous individualist, whose lifetime involvement in politics had convinced him that the activities of the state on the whole brought more harm than good to society. Having then little sympathy with socialist principles, he believed that countries and their citizens deserved to have the widest opportunities to work out their own destinies.

In their basic philosophies, therefore, the two men were very close, except that Unwin rated human relationships, especially in voluntary groups, above the individual who surely had duties as well as rights. What influenced his thought most powerfully during that period was his involvement at a high political level in the vexed question of imperialism.

He took up his post just when Courtney, an acknowledged expert in South African affairs, was striving first of all to prevent war with the Boers, and when war came late in 1899, as president of the South African Conciliation Committee to work towards some kind of negotiated peace. Neither man found it easy to withstand the degree of war fever then gripping the British people. Unwin for one attributed such fever to decades of distorted propaganda about the supposed benefits to the home economy

from overseas wars and aggressive ventures. To him, imperialism could only disrupt the forces which had created a civilized society, for example the Stockport of his youth: tolerance, mutual confidence, neighbourliness and social co-operation. Those qualities had taken centuries to reach maturity, but once placed in jeopardy they could be destroyed almost overnight. To maintain civilization of that kind, genuine religious principles were needed. In short, 'a Christian democracy wielding empire over subject races is impossible. Democracy does *not* rule India'.<sup>26</sup>

In 1902 Unwin married Frances Mabelle Pearse, third of the four daughters of the Revd Mark Guy Pearse, prominent in the Wesleyan world. They had met while working on different projects at Mansfield House. A talented artist, 'Mab' (as she was called by those close to her) in 1930 collaborated with the Revd John Telford, another Wesleyan, on a biography of her father.<sup>27</sup> The marriage took place in a Quaker meeting house, no doubt to demonstrate their common abhorrence of conflict in the aftermath of the recently concluded war with South Africa, both Courtney and her father being present. As a minister's daughter then in her thirties, she knew well how to be self-effacing and devote herself to a spouse who was absent-minded to a fault, off here there and everywhere, and heedless of every consideration except his work. Despite having a gifted and sensible wife, Unwin was against women receiving the vote, as he feared that, until they had some experience of politics, they would be taken in by reactionaries. One is reminded of another's marriage to a distinguished academic: that of Mary Paley to the economist, Alfred Marshall.

During forty-seven years of married life his dependence upon her devotion was complete. Her life was given to him and to his work with a degree of unselfishness and understanding that makes it difficult for friends and old

pupils to think of them separately or to withhold from her shining gifts of character a big share in what his intellect accomplished.<sup>28</sup>

Sadly, the Unwins had less than half that time together. There were to be no children.

In 1904 Courtney allowed Unwin to work half-time on his becoming a regular lecturer at the London School of Economics. Then a year later Unwin was appointed to the Creighton lectureship to give, as the leading authority on the history of London, a course of thirty lectures on the capital's guilds and livery companies. Out of these lectures came his second work, for Methuen's Antiquary's Books series, *The Guilds and Companies of London* (1908). Its scope was broader than that of the previous work, relating the topic to England's, as well as London's, economic and political history; it also covered the entire period from the twelfth to the nineteenth centuries. In the first chapter, on 'The place of the gild in the history of Western Europe', he stated that in the west, the gild's principal importance was in having been an organ of progress. He then expounded his fundamental law:

The progress of Society, like the progress of the individual, is a moral fact which cannot be ultimately derived from any cause outside of itself; but it rests on psychological conditions.

Under the Roman empire (he continued), society had tended to become the creature of the state. Then during the dark ages, and even more in the middle ages, society became fragmented, as church and state tended to separate, local and central government drew apart. Hence

The political liberty of Western Europe has been secured by the building up of a system of voluntary organizations, strong enough to control the State, and

yet flexible enough to be constantly remoulded by the free forces of change....

It was in the gild that voluntary associations first came into a permanent relation with political power.<sup>29</sup>

Unwin reckoned this book to have been his best piece of work; yet for all its qualities, it was not as well received by the public as it deserved. His conviction was that reviewers were deceived into thinking that there was no new material because he had been sparing with footnotes.

At Christmas 1907 Unwin left Courtney's employ; they remained the closest of friends for the rest of their lives. In 1908 he obtained his first permanent academic job, as lecturer in economic history at the University of Edinburgh. A lecture he gave there that October authoritatively sums up the Unwinian credo, showing what he could achieve at the peak of his powers. Entitled 'The aims of economic history', it argued that that discipline owed more to history than to political economy, being concerned not so much with individuals as with groups, which in more distant periods were far from predominantly economic in functions or aims.

Tawney characterized Unwin's historical work as combining 'minute investigation with daring speculation in a manner which is not very usual'. In a breath-taking generalization during that lecture Unwin declared, 'The tribe is an organ of real or nominal kinship, the feudal manor is an incipient organ of local government, the gild is partly a religious fellowship, partly a political club, and partly an organ of municipal administration'. He perceived a 'transformation of social forces into political forces which is an essential feature of what we call progress. We see class after class constituting itself a social force by the act of self-organization'. Against these 'forces from below, the forces of spontaneity, of germination' were those from

above, authoritarian ones which could only retard economic progress.<sup>30</sup> That antithesis between society and the state is brought out clearly in the outline of his ideas, discussed in the next section.

Unwin's work-load at Edinburgh was not a heavy one, averaging three lectures a week in term-time. He did a fair amount of book reviewing, especially for the *English Historical Review*, and no doubt planned any number of books, as he continued to do in the latter part of his life. The Unwins made many friends, and there was the added bonus that his widowed mother and sister were close by, looking after his youngest brother who lectured in physics at Heriot-Watt College. The family met almost every day for talk, reading aloud and practising glees or madrigals or 'bits of oratorios'; sometimes they went in a party to concerts, plays or the opera. Unwin had inherited a love of music from his mother, his favourite composers being Bach and Mozart. He regularly attended performances of the *St Matthew Passion* and the *Magic Flute*, the mystical symbolism of which intrigued him, even though he was clearly not a freemason. There was plenty to explore on foot in the city of Edinburgh, and through long bicycling trips he came to know the countryside round about.

However, he suffered cruelly from the harsh Edinburgh climate, and he had a severe attack of influenza late in his first autumn there; the cold also worsened his increasing deafness. He was rescued from almost inevitable physical collapse by Thomas F. Tout, since 1890 professor of history at Manchester University. Tout took the initiative in establishing the university's – and the British empire's – first chair in economic history, and in January 1910 Unwin was invited down to Manchester, where he dined with the vice-chancellor, Sir Alfred Hopkinson (a graduate of Unwin's old Oxford college) and was offered the chair at a salary of £350 a year.<sup>31</sup>



F.M. Powicke, a colleague there as professor of medieval history, explained that ‘Tout and Unwin were in many ways as unlike each other as two men can be, but they were alike in their belief in history and in their capacity to inspire’.<sup>32</sup> Tout had discovered that Manchester’s science departments possessed a vigour and an enthusiasm to extend their fields of knowledge to an extent rarely found in the arts faculties, and therefore sought to introduce the scientific method into historical studies, which had all too often comprised merely ‘antiquated pedantry and literary elegance’. To this end, Tout was building up a cadre of advanced students, whom he attracted to the university with graduate scholarships. With his established reputation in archive work, Unwin could be relied on to supplement Tout’s programme on the economic history side. He appreciated being brought to Manchester; ‘the fact that the University made the Chair for me is the most gratifying honour I ever can receive’. At forty he had arrived at his spiritual home.

## V

By July 1910, the Unwins had moved to Withington, on the Stockport side of Manchester; they were to remain there for the rest of his life. Their home was within walking distance of Withington and West Didsbury station, on the Great Central line, which took him into the city centre. From the outset, he found the university highly congenial. It turned out to be what he called ‘much “aliver”’ and more of a real seat of learning than Edinburgh, with academics at all levels mixing more freely, especially in the smoking room (he himself did not smoke), and generating a more democratic spirit.

For the first time in his teaching life, Unwin was to a large extent his own master. He could almost certainly have avoided much undergraduate tuition, so as to concentrate on advanced students who specialized in history. That would have left him time to write many of the books which were constantly buzzing through his brain. Yet he recognized himself as a man with a mission. He felt impelled to disseminate to the widest possible audience his vision of social development, not merely as the truest essence of historical studies but also as a route to achieving a fuller life.

He was not particularly happy with his regular undergraduates. As he wrote to Courtney, 'It's a terrible business to explain the British Empire to babes and sucklings (N.B. the men are mostly Liberal, the girls Jingoists)', or bellicose patriots.<sup>33</sup> He therefore made a point of lecturing also to the many young students who had taken up economic history as an optional subject in their commerce or general arts degrees. Others he reached through extra-mural work, in tutorial classes or at summer or other residential schools.

That ready-made audience, most with little prior background in his subject, would have been greatly assisted had he published a shilling primer which gave the gist of his basic ideas and emphasized the respects in which he differed from the version of history, for example of the Seeley kind, in which they might have been indoctrinated elsewhere. Lacking this aid, most of his listeners found his lectures hard to follow, being as a rule well over their heads. He put in too many facts, referred to books (such as calendars of state papers) they had never heard of, and did not present them with a logical framework. At least in his books, the puzzled reader had the opportunity to go back and attempt to pick up the drift of the argument.

Yet the difficulties in his lecturing were not due to inadequate preparation. Never giving the same lecture twice, he pasted each page of his notes on to the earlier sheets, until the result approached the thickness of cardboard. What the students' examination scripts were like could be anyone's guess, but he is known to have marked them with the utmost understanding, and searched hard for any redeeming features.

As Tout had anticipated, it was the small number of bright students, taking economic history as a special subject, writing an undergraduate thesis for honours, or reading for a Ph. D., who fully benefited from his teaching. Unwin enthusiastically helped Tout to plan the development of a School of History, grounded on exact documentary-based scholarship. As a member of the University Joint Advisory Committee on Tutorial Classes, he regularly spoke at the annual extra-mural summer school at Bangor. He continued to be an enthusiastic journal reviewer, mainly in the *English Historical Review*, never being tempted to catch out authors who knew less than he did.

For the Christmas of 1910, his family came down from Edinburgh. However, he suffered from his 'annual Xmas indisposition'; while the others enjoyed turkey and trimmings, 'I dined this Xmas on stewed tripe and bread, with cornflour pudding to follow'.<sup>34</sup> He was thus being carefully nurtured by his wife. A photograph of 1913, the frontispiece of the volume of his collected papers edited by Tawney, shows him as still a youngish and energetic man with expressive eyes and a puckish smile, always ready to surprise colleagues with an audacious hypothesis. His first four years in Manchester were therefore full of satisfying endeavour.

Having read widely in economics and in many branches of history, Unwin can be expected to have had views on the tenets of the Manchester School. His published writings yield no direct evidence on this topic, but a colleague and close friend in the political economy department, George W. Daniels, has stated,

If, in his thought on economic and political questions, he is to be identified with a 'School', the Manchester School would have stronger claims upon him than any other, and he never considered it an reproach to be told so.

Daniels did detect a similarity between Unwin's and the Manchester School's 'attitude to the State in its relation to international economic and political problems', and also to those problems at home.<sup>35</sup> Unwin repeatedly criticized tariff protection because it hampered industrial growth. Many adherents also fought for the final repeal of the navigation acts which required British cargoes to be carried in British ships, thus parting from the radicals of the day, who set national power and sovereignty above wealth. Unwin condemned the navigation acts for being repressive and working against the country's economic interests, unhappy that Adam Smith should have supported the acts.

Some members of the Manchester School campaigned for Britain to modify relations with its colonies, so as to relieve taxpayers of administrative and defence costs and of fiscal preference to certain colonial products. Unwin, while doggedly attacking eighteenth- and nineteenth-century imperialism, expressed bafflement as to what the empire in fact comprised. With his knack of cutting through the propaganda to arrive at reality, he found the British empire of his day to be no more than a loose federation of states, styled an empire for rhetorical purposes, but with such a relatively weak 'imperial claim' that the mother country 'has been able to retain the honorary

presidency of the federation and to count on the spontaneous aid of the other states in times of war'. He thus kept his distance from those Manchester merchants who looked on the empire as the source of cheap raw materials and the outlet for their manufactured goods.

Unwin did have some ideas in common with the acknowledged leader of the Manchester School, Richard Cobden. Both men espoused pacifist principles, Cobden on the grounds of self-interest and Unwin because conflicts harmed the delicate fabric of social development. Moreover, Cobden had his doubts about 'that unreasoning kind of philosophy at the expense of the great bulk of the community', while striving to 'inculcate in the minds of the labouring classes the love of independence, the privilege of self-respect, the disdain of being patronized and petted, the desire to accumulate, and the ambition to rise'; in short, promoting self-reliance. Unwin likewise felt that too many philanthropists were 'sentimentalists who want to find an easy way to heaven', showing 'vanity, insincerity, self-deception' and unconscious impertinence to the poor.

As to the factory acts, most adherents of the Manchester School favoured outlawing or restricting the employment of young people; yet they could see little reason to interfere with adult labour. Unwin, on the other hand, cordially endorsed factory legislation as 'perhaps the most striking modern instance in which the values of the market were made in some degree subordinate to those life-values which are ultimate', or paramount. He was thus not an out-and-out supporter of *laissez-faire*, despite his well documented hostility to such official action. He once claimed to support three-quarters of the socialists' programmes, which would necessarily entail state intervention. Yet to him legislation sometimes appeared to usurp the functions

of his cherished voluntary bodies, as the Trades Board Act of 1909 – providing for minimum wages in so-called sweated industries – took steps which he felt would be better carried out by trade unions.

Unwin's thinking about *laissez-faire* as a policy for his day was thus far from dogmatic. If he was not a 'Manchester School' man, what then were his beliefs? Modifying the out-and-out individualism which Courtney so vigorously espoused, he was convinced that the relations between the individual and society were so interlinked that any obstacle to the development of one must inevitably hinder the development of the other.

Social development involved a broadening and deepening of human relationships. To proceed smoothly, there should be no restrictions on the forming of such relationships, and no barriers to their cultivation. These coalesced into voluntary groups, which by working together harnessed the creative powers of their various societies. The original and fundamental group was the family, while others were based on kinship, fellowship, collaboration in work, religious worship, and cultural activities in their widest sense. Typical groups were churches, trade unions, the co-operative movement and societies promoting art and science. Their ethos was that of fraternity, with social development fostering the horizontal extension and vertical deepening of fraternal sentiments. According to his own researches, the most representative and robust examples of voluntary associations had been the medieval guilds.

As the growth of such associations was organic and long drawn-out, it could neither be forced nor imposed from outside. Any external coercive power, whether by central or local government, could only be counter-productive. Over time, a country's

economic and financial system was bound to become more complex; as a result, some associations would decay, but then be replaced by others better attuned to the new conditions.

To buttress his thesis, Unwin put much effort into nailing once for all the widespread notion that the state had promoted the commercial greatness of England. Thus he could find no evidence that Queen Elizabeth I and her two successors had pursued a strategy towards industry that was both well thought out or consistently applied with due vigour. Rather, their actions in that regard had been opportunistic and tending to pursue sectional rather than national interests. James I, at loggerheads with his parliaments, introduced protection for the cloth-making and other industries, only to provoke retaliation from formerly lucrative markets; in consequence, he merely set back the progress of these industries for decades.

The freebooting exploits of Sir Francis Drake, hero to generations of patriotic schoolboys, represented nothing more than ‘international highway robbery’, the more reprehensible because Gloriana, his sovereign, both condoned and profited handsomely from them. Indeed, by interfering in the global circulation of money, these depredations held back the expansion of an international economic order. Likewise, Britain’s successive wars in the eighteenth century, largely commercial in origin, were both iniquitous and futile, doing little to raise the country’s prestige in the world. By contrast, the industrial revolution sprang from below in an economy which was beginning to slough off its past excessive government-imposed restrictions. For all that revolution’s harmful consequences to some extent, it did encourage the mobility of people and capital and hence allowed new social groupings to emerge in

the new industrial centres. Britain and the wider world benefited from becoming part of a larger, if more complex, economic system.

Unwin's turning of history on its head, by down-grading political history to a subordinate subject, partly based on fictitious notions, provoked the wrath of more traditional scholars who found his whole approach obnoxious. H.W.C. Davis, a professor of modern history at Manchester since 1921, in his inaugural lecture after translation to Oxford in 1925, vehemently attacked 'those self-styled "social historians" who think that they find the quintessence of our common humanity in the life of the common man'. Hence, Davis continued, 'historians of the commonplace', recording only what poorer and more illiterate people thought and said,

have in their minds a confused doctrine of the wisdom of the humble, which has been eloquently expounded by imaginative writers, and has overflowed from their works into certain schools of historical research. I can find no justification in history for the belief... that religions, philosophies, political ideas rise like exhalations from the cottage, the workshop, or the market place.... Our common humanity is best studied in the most eminent examples that it has produced of every type of human excellence.<sup>36</sup>

Unwin, with his inimitable technique of put-downs to questionable ideas without giving offence, would have countered this trickling-down theory with a gentle reminder to Davis that their common Christian faith had come from the manger. But by then Unwin had gone to his final resting place.



Unwin's life changed for good with the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. He was to drive himself to the edge in attempts to persuade everyone that his was the sovereign remedy against social breakdown. During the South African war he and Courtney had striven hard to combat the mood of jingoistic imperialism that had for too long beset the nation. Now as a philosopher he expressed his aversion to war, fomented by imperialistic sentiments, as follows:

That the forces which made civilization – tolerance, mutual confidence, the habit of co-operation – are a slow and delicate growth, which resolute measures and trenchant solutions [involving force] may destroy, but not create.

He had been looking forward to a leisurely trip to Cologne and towns along the Rhine. Instead, on the brink of Armageddon, on 3 August 1914, attending the summer school at Bangor, he was seen to depart hastily, clutching his Gladstone bag, and declaring that he was off 'to Manchester, to stop the war'.<sup>37</sup>

His letters to Courtney chart the movements in his thought as the conflict wore on. In August J.L. Hammond persuaded him to sign a manifesto by a group of authors, supporting the allies' war aims and condemning the German government for having provoked the conflict by the invasion of Belgium. Unwin cannily felt it 'desirable to give a clear and public approval of the war in order to have a stronger position in working with others to influence the [eventual peace] settlement'. He corresponded with a number of influential figures who were offering a Christian perspective on the war, including the future archbishop, William Temple, then president of the Workers Educational Association, and the radical campaigner, Edward D. Morel. With Courtney's blessing, Morel had founded the Union of Democratic Control, which

attributed the war to secret and class-driven diplomacy and worked for a negotiated peace; Unwin became a member.

By the early months of 1915, he was informing Courtney that ‘none of the wounded want to go back’ to the trenches; ‘the next generation will know the cost of war and will have no illusion about its gains’. That March, the Unwins went to hear Dr W.E. Orchard, a progressive Congregationalist and minister of King’s Weigh House in London, explaining the objects of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, a nonconformist-sponsored body which sought to have disputes settled by non-belligerent methods. To the first issue of the fellowship’s journal, *The Venturer*, published later that year, he contributed an article, ‘The God of History’. There he laid into Seeley for having given the imperialist movement an intellectual basis. Because Seeley read history backwards and had a poor idea of historiography, his books suffered from ‘unconscious disingenuousness’ and ‘the want of philosophical seriousness’. Unwin expressed his intention to expand in further articles his denunciation of Seeley for having dragged the Almighty into the writing of history, but he may have felt it impolitic to do so, as in 1917 the Fellowship’s London office was raided by the police and in 1918 the journal was fined £100 for sedition.<sup>38</sup>

In a long letter of July 1915 to the *New Statesman* about the conditions of a future peace, Unwin pointed out that history showed how insecure peace settlements had turned out to be. Rather, there would be considerable financial, social and psychological costs, which were currently being concealed behind emotional phrases such as ‘decisive victory’ and ‘the hegemony of Europe’. A year later, in the preface to a Quaker colleague’s book on *National Power and Prosperity*, he powerfully attacked war fever. Harking back to his own time in Berlin, he claimed that British

imperialist triumphalism had had a baleful influence on German historiography.

Schmoller, he asserted, while conceding that mercantilist practice had been consistently crude, wasteful and barbarous and that Adam Smith was the prophet of a freer era in national and international economic relations, had fallen victim to a championing of land-seizure by major nations. Schmoller had besides urged the German government not to neglect sea power, used so ruthlessly in the eighteenth century and capable of being deployed again two centuries later.<sup>39</sup>

Having been beastly to the Germans, Unwin went on to assist with organizing anti-war rallies, addressed by the arch-pacifist Bertrand Russell, wrote to the *Manchester Guardian* opposing conscription, and actively supported the rights of conscientious objectors, even to the point of offering resignation of his chair – not accepted—when the university authorities sought to penalize one of them. He was secretary of the Manchester University Committee for the reception of Belgian teachers and students, as well of other refugees from that country. He expressed irritation with those who uttered lofty sentiments about the nation being cleansed by passing through an ordeal of fire. When members of the Oxford history faculty published tracts on ‘Why we are at war’, he was repelled by their ‘self-righteous pronouncements’, much as he had found distasteful the way in which some philanthropists turned their acts of mercy into ego-trips.

There was nothing egotistical about Unwin’s war work. He readily took on the teaching and administrative loads of colleagues called away to national service, so that he was often lecturing no fewer than fourteen times a week. In 1917, although an Arts man, he became dean of the Faculty of Commerce. Meanwhile, he significantly extended his involvement in outside lectures and tutorial classes, convinced that these

would help his audiences to think clearly about the manifold issues thrown up by the war as it painfully dragged on.

Now that he had a clearer agenda to offer the world, Unwin as a lecturer became more skilful in putting over his message. His war-weary listeners were enthusiastic, writing him many letters that discussed points raised in the talks. When the government began to look ahead to Reconstruction in 1917, he deployed his ideas from a very broad historical perspective. As he informed the Women's International League that year, in the medieval era of Christendom the economic aspects of life had been subordinated to social and spiritual ends. Since the Reformation, a narrow nationalism had taken root in most of Europe. Yet the forces of spiritual unity -- roughly summed up as 'civilization' -- had manifested themselves in movements of religion, science, art, education, philanthropy, co-operation and fellowship which leapt over frontiers; with appropriate goodwill, these mutually enriching influences could in a benign period of peace form the nucleus of a world-wide community of mankind.

On top of these commitments, in 1918 Unwin published *Finance and Trade under Edward III*, which he edited, writing over a third himself. Having previously refuted claims about the actions of sovereigns, from Elizabeth I onwards, and eighteenth-century governments having helped the economy of England to flourish, he now spiritedly challenged the assertion by Archdeacon William Cunningham, in his *Growth of English Industry and Commerce*, that Edward III was the father of English commerce, through his having established the cloth industry. Unwin showed that, in reality, the king 'found it [the industry] expanding and taxed it' for his costly and destructive foreign wars. So far from taking offence, Cunningham accepted with

grace Unwin's interpretation, both in a personal letter and in his last work, a pamphlet giving *Hints on the Study of English Economic History* (1919). That book on Edward III was noteworthy also because Unwin contributed to it what Tawney later called 'the best account of the economic life of mediaeval London yet written', characteristically inspired by Goethe's reconstruction of Frankfurt in the middle ages.<sup>40</sup>

## VII

When war ended in 1918, Unwin was seen to have markedly aged. As physically active as ever, he learnt to live with deafness, insomnia and dyspepsia. Possibly he may already have begun to suffer from inflammation of the heart valves which brought on periods of exhaustion.

He felt his mission in life to be as pressing as ever in the troubled post-war world, and to that end he resolutely stripped out all trivialities from his life, reading *The Times* only on Thursdays. Yet he could be roused to action over a patent act of vandalism. Shortly after the peace, the city fathers proposed to remove the Prince Consort's statue from the centre of Manchester. To him, the royal presence in Albert Square was an integral part of civic history, and he joined with the Conservatives to have the statue kept there. He maintained his programme of extension lecturing, concentrating on schoolteachers who would be able to pass on his ideas to the new generation.

He readily accepted that the social fabric, after the disruptions caused by the late conflict, would take time to return to something like its pre-war pattern. It was little comfort to him that the state had assumed a far more pervasive role in the country's life after a total war which had subjected the people to degrees of compulsion never

envisaged before. At the same time, he was already pursuing a new avenue of research, which opened up important academic possibilities for the future.

Unwin's earliest archive-based research had been into guilds and livery companies. Then in 1913 Unwin and G.W. Daniels, a colleague in the economics department, were informed that the cotton manufacturer, McConnel & Kennedy, held a considerable quantity of documents covering the period 1795 to 1835. Daniels used these for his book *The Early English Cotton Industry* (1920), to which Unwin wrote the introduction.

Also in 1920, a zealous boy-scout was found to be distributing eighteenth-century weavers' pay tickets in the Stockport streets. These were traced back to the loft of a derelict cotton mill at Mellor, six miles away and just across the Derbyshire border, where a cache of company records had lain neglected, and partly spoiled by damp, for over a century. It took a year for a Manchester team to clean up, transport to the university, catalogue and then interpret them. After giving a preliminary account in two articles of 1922 in *The English Historical Review*, with the aid of two students he completed a book in the autumn of the following year, entitled *Samuel Oldknow and the Arkwrights: The Industrial Revolution at Stockport and Marple* (1924), Marple being a village close to Mellor.<sup>41</sup>

Unwin's first foray into business history proper thus resulted from what he called 'a piece of almost inconceivable good fortune'. The firm's founder had been Samuel Oldknow (1756-1828), by the late 1780s the foremost muslin manufacturer in the country. In 1790 he built in Stockport its first steam-powered mill, but over-extended himself once muslin ceased to be the high earner it had been. When he attempted to diversify into fine-cotton spinning, the required technical standard was found to be

wanting, and he had to be rescued by the mill-owner Sir Richard Arkwright; he remained indebted to the Arkwright family until he died.

The Stockport connection inspired Unwin to write a chapter on the industrial revolution in the town, with a sketch-map contributed by his artist wife. That chapter made full use of his youthful memories and information gained specially from local firms and other sources. The narrative of Oldknow's business dealings drew on both the correspondence and the financial documents found in the loft. What fascinated Unwin as much as the business side was the model village which Oldknow set up at Mellor in the late 1780s. To provide employment for the hands, Oldknow erected a water-powered mill to make coarse yarn and promoted farming, lime burning and road and canal construction work. Unwin and his co-authors thus had the scope to write at length about community building, on which Oldknow had expended so much money and effort.

This Oldknow volume can be claimed as the first British business history to be based on a comprehensive use of corporate archives. It thus differed from histories that were 'glossies' or public relations hand-outs, or the superficial and laudatory accounts from the pens of retired company secretaries or family members. To be sure, because it dealt with a long-vanished firm in the remote past, his book could be entirely candid about Oldknow's shortcomings and reverses; as Unwin put it, 'from the purely economic point of view the record of failure may have as much scientific interest as one of success'. More than three decades would pass before the first scholarly and commissioned business history appeared in Britain: that of Unilever by Charles Wilson, published in 1968. However, Unwin had been the pioneer, in

showing how a combination of well scrutinized records and analysis could bring the history of an enterprise to life.

The Harvard business historian, Henrietta M. Larson, paid tribute to Unwin for having come closer than any economic historian of that era to an understanding of the importance of research in the history of business:

A scholar by training, and indeed, one might say, by instinct, Unwin had lived and worked in an industrial community so that he knew business as a living thing. He had a rare sense of the dynamic in business, which may in part explain both his feeling for function and his acute perception of economic change.... In his *Samuel Oldknow and the Arkwrights*, Unwin came to the very threshold of business history if he did not, indeed, really enter the structure.<sup>42</sup>

As Tawney pointed out in his review of the book, it threw light not only on the evolution of the factory system in England, but also on the kinds of practical problems faced by entrepreneurs of the day: shortages of financial (especially working) capital and of skilled managers, and relations of producers with markets, in Oldknow's case with his main outlet, in distant London.<sup>43</sup> These were precisely the kinds of problems analysed by later generations of business historians in their archive-based projects.

Soon after finishing this book Unwin heard, through Daniels, of yet another regional hoard of business records, those of Peter Stubs Ltd, file makers of Warrington in Lancashire. He threw himself into the task of searching through them while they were still in their dusty loft, and travelled on his free afternoons, armed with a hearth-brush and a housemaid's apron. He then asked T.S. Ashton, teaching



in the economics department, to produce a companion volume to that about Oldknow, published in 1939. Unwin and Daniels were keen to write their own book of more general studies on the industrial revolution in Lancashire, but that fell by the wayside, and Unwin returned to more general questions. In April 1924 he addressed a teachers' conference on 'Some economic factors in general history'. Although Tawney rated it as a striking piece of scholarship, it added little to what Unwin had said many times before, mingling his personal message with vigorous and controversial outbursts.

Unwin expressed dismay that history should still be regarded as primarily political by many general readers, history schoolteachers and 'those who, through the medium of Matriculation Boards and of scholarship examinations, or through the all-pervasive propaganda of Wembleyism, mould the plastic thoughts of youth and marshal them [in] the way they should go'. The public prints were at that time full of the Wembley British Empire Exhibition, featuring the Empire Pageant (of life as supposedly led in its various territories) and a military tattoo reconstructing the battle of Balaclava and igniting real fires during mock air raids.

In fact, he argued, political history concerned itself with the persistent and suicidal examples of abuses of influence and wealth. It thus had a pathological character in chronicling 'a continual series of divergences and backslidings from the sound and healthy line of human progress'. To this end, he rounded up the usual power-hungry suspects, from Edward III to the freebooters of Elizabeth I's reign, Cromwell and Chatham, throwing in for good measure their apologist Seeley. To conclude, he looked forward – not with any great optimism – to a two-fold revival of community

spirit: extensively, to encompass the whole of mankind, and intensively, through restoring 'the older and more vital connections of knowledge, of work and worship'.<sup>44</sup>

He reverted to the subject in a lecture, published in October 1924, on 'The teaching of economic history in university tutorial classes'. Once again, he characterized political history as 'concerned largely with illusions'. However, he did make a point of distinguishing economic from social history. The former involved 'the study of communities of life and kinship, of work and vocation, of property and enterprise' solely from the economic viewpoint. That limitation of its subject matter left to its fellow-discipline, social history, a concern with people's higher preoccupations and their interactions with one another in communities.<sup>45</sup>

That summer Unwin visited Bruges and Ghent for the first time, and he astonished his companions by taking them through the two cities as if he were a long-time resident. He then went on to Italy, where the weather was so atrocious that he returned home in a seriously battered condition. Yet bouts of physical debility did not affect his mental powers. Tawney noted that, after earlier struggles with himself, he had achieved a harmony of mind and will that gave him spiritual solace. That autumn, disregarding friends' remonstrances over further risks to his health, he insisted on offering an additional evening course of fifty lectures – over and above an equivalent day-student course -- for teachers, business men and civil servants, who he felt sorely needed exposure to his social ideas.

This intrepid man could still find energy to stand up for his beliefs. He had earlier written a strong letter to the *New Statesman*, opposing a plan to introduce family allowances for dependent children. To him, it cut across the functions and responsibilities of the family. That proposal came to the fore again in 1924 when the

social reformer, Eleanor Rathbone, wrote a campaigning book, *The Disinherited Family*. Early in January 1925, the Conference of Teachers in Economics, at its meeting in Cambridge, devoted one session to forecasting the economic implications of such a scheme. Unwin was resolved to take part, although he told a friend that it would be death for him to speak.

The post-Christmas weather was turbulent but fairly mild. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> January, Unwin found himself in combat with some of the sharpest economic brains in the country, namely Sir William (later Lord) Beveridge, Mrs (later Baroness) Stocks, (Sir) Arthur Bowley, (Sir) Henry Clay, and Gerald Shove, of King's College, Cambridge. The session was so lively that it had to be resumed after dinner that evening. The following day, Unwin collaborated with Beveridge in presenting, at very short notice, 'Some contributions to the history of prices'. Beveridge later published his *Prices and Wages in England*, and Unwin may have spoken about the price rises, attributable to the influx of precious metals from America, between the Reformation and the Restoration, and their social consequences. In between meetings, according to Tawney, 'He darted up and down the town, intent on verifying his pet doctrine that the stages in the growth of cities could be determined by the dedication of churches'.<sup>46</sup>

Whether or not a relapse in health immediately followed his Cambridge visit, Unwin returned to Manchester for the new term and a heavy lecturing programme, of extension as well as university teaching. He also had to complete the kind of article which he clearly relished, but which – to our loss – he undertook only when commissioned or, in the case of prefaces, when requested by other academics. Earlier examples from English history had been pre-1914 articles on industries and social

history for the *Victoria County History*, and an extended chapter, on commerce and coinage, for Sir Sidney Lee's *Shakespeare's England* (1916).

A Manchester colleague had lately discovered an unpublished tract of 1691 by the Revd Richard Baxter, the much-persecuted Presbyterian minister. Entitled 'The poor husbandman's advocate to rich racking landlords', Baxter's pamphlet showed up the depressed economic condition of husbandmen, or small tenant farmers, which he blamed on the exorbitant rents they were charged, making them worse off even than their more provident servants. To help clarify that argument, Unwin turned to Gregory King's celebrated table of the social structure of England in 1688, readily accepting that the King estimates were 'little more than shrewd guesswork' but at least a springboard for further investigation.

He spotted one gap in King's classification: the absence of a manufacturing category of either employers or employed, who would then have been mainly engaged in the woollen industry. Yet -- he continued -- that category, together with the clothiers and dealers who both organized such manufacture and marketed their output, comprised a new economic order which King had overlooked. Unwin believed that the sons of these poor husbandmen did not enjoy the same access to the skilled trades and professions as did the freeholders and copyholders who, although they occupied a diminishing proportion of the country's cultivable land, possessed the advantage of long leases at stable rents. The husbandmen's sons could well have been compelled to join the 'new proletariat' of textile workers who in the following century were to be found in the London suburbs, the clothing districts of the west and in south-east Lancashire.<sup>47</sup>

Unwin's hypotheses were apparently unknown to the scholars who have since carried out work on King's table, and it thus remains an example of ideas thrown up by his nimble brain. As he completed his introduction only a few days before his death, that brain was still working overtime. When he had taken to his bed, perhaps on the following afternoon, Ashton visited him; yet his spirits were so high that no one had any suspicion of the danger he was in. That morning, Unwin said, he and his wife had sung their way through Handel's *Messiah*. Mabelle Unwin took the opportunity of Ashton's presence to have a few hours' break visiting a friend. Unwin chatted at length to Ashton about his family history which he had been able to trace after some effort. His descent was from a modest East Anglian farmer in the eighteenth century, whose progeny had migrated to the northern counties, but at the cost of losing income and status. He himself was the only one of that extended family who had gone up in the world; that train of thought led him to concede that the state *could* sometimes help to bring poor people a better life. Yet, with a final show of defiance – as Ashton remembered it --, 'he was worried lest well-intentioned legislators should mix up relief with wages and quench individual and non-political group effort'.<sup>48</sup>

Ashton must have looked forward to further visits, but a day or two later, on 30<sup>th</sup> January, Unwin's heart gave out. He was not yet fifty-five. A week later, the Council and Senate of Manchester University passed a resolution which paid him a handsome tribute for his distinction as a 'pioneer worker in a new field', who had built up the first academic school of economic history in the country, and gathered round him a group of students who, inspired by his stimulating influence, had joined with him in producing a fine record of published original work. Manchester's appreciation was

transmitted to the whole country, and beyond, by its being published in full in *The Times*.<sup>49</sup>

### VIII

My books are dumb to-day.  
 The Dominie is dead.  
 Put them awhile away,  
 For his last words are said  
 Who made them doubly dear  
 And all their questions clear.

Much was written about George Unwin after his death, including the above encomium in verse.<sup>50</sup> These and other sources allow a profile of him to be built up. A small man, 'he had a great domed brow descending to a little pointed chin'. Sherlock Holmes once remarked that a large head must contain an intellect to match; 'it is a question of cubic capacity: a man with so large a brain must have something in it', he averred. If modern scientists might challenge that reasoning as superficial, they would have been in no doubt of its correctness in Unwin's case.<sup>51</sup> He had excellent observational powers, thanks to his lively and quick-moving eyes.

His many-sided character was extensively discussed in the obituaries. To some, he was not so much a historian as a sentimental philosopher who happened to be concerned with the past. In his personal relations, he could be whimsical and direct, given to provocative statements, resembling an elfin, but bird-like as he swooped on books in the university library while suggesting sources during discussions with graduate students. In his tireless concern for colleagues' and others' welfare, he was generous to a fault with his time, visiting them and readily taking over tuition when they were unwell. His steadfast Christian faith, springing eclectically from the nonconformity of his native region, governed every aspect of his life. From the outset he had studied philosophy for practical ends; likewise, his conception of good works was very wide-ranging. At the political level, he had courted unpopularity when

working for peace in two wars. He could be summed up as a saintly man, but one with his feet on the ground, who lacked the less engaging attributes of many saints.

His most prominent characteristic was a complete absence of self-consciousness. It never troubled him, as it did one or two of his status-preoccupied contemporaries, that his origins had been humble or that he had once come close to penury. When he sat down to write or plan a lecture, he assumed that everyone would share his enthusiasm over the latest facts or insights he had unearthed. Nor did he ask himself what his audience, or the reader, were looking for in tapping into his extensive knowledge. Young newly arrived members of staff at Manchester must have been bemused to be taken for a perambulation round the environs of the university, having their attention drawn to houses, streets and any landmark which illustrated the city's phases of growth.

Yet it was his extraordinary conversational gifts by which a privileged few best remembered and revered him. When secretary to Courtney, he and his chief would forever swap quotations from English poets with each other. From his personal observation, Tawney gave an unforgettable account of Unwin in congenial company:

He was an eager and vivacious talker, listening, hand behind ear, with a rather alarming intentness, the result partly of deafness, partly of excitement, and then, after winding himself up with a succession of little coughs, darting in to take command.

Tawney remembered also his 'aphoristic darts into conversation, half humorous, half passionate,...plunging into the discussion of the matters nearest to his heart with a seriousness terrifying to those whose opinions were less decided.... Unwin's charm sprang partly from his intellectual audacity; conversation with him meant glissading among precipices, and one never knew where next the spirit would carry him'. Daniels, too, recalled how Unwin's friends '—and everyone was a friend to Unwin — used to revel in his knowledge, in the flashes which came from his original mind, in his humorous conversation — largely interspersed with quotations from the Bible, Dr Johnson, Dickens, and numerous other sources, not forgetting his quaint Lancashire stories told in the dialect'. An acquaintance from his youth, Sir Ernest Barker, was 'amazed by the power and the passion of his thought...; he was a natural thinker,

absorbed and almost consumed (indeed he *was* eventually consumed) by the fire of his thought.... He pointed his arguments with a lively finger, and he was one of the most animated thinkers I ever knew'. Barker observed 'the way he had of pursing his lips together to face a doubt or a difficulty: the way he clutched your arm to press a point: the sudden stoppages [when walking in the street] and the waving of his stick to elucidate an argument'.<sup>52</sup>

Unwin's overriding strength, but also a source of weakness, was his photographic memory, or at least an ability to remember where to look things up. That facility of recall or recapture, and his almost child-like excitement over new discoveries, perhaps denied him the power to discriminate between the really important and what could be discarded, however reluctantly, in the interests of clarity. Yet in his later years the content of his lectures and articles became easier for people to understand. He was the very model of the absent-minded professor, mislaying hat, umbrella, spectacles and lecture notes among other objects.

The indirect legacy which Unwin left to economic history, through the publications of others, was the more impressive for a man who died prematurely. R.H. Tawney, while not a pupil, lived in Manchester until 1914 and regarded him as a highly valued mentor. Tawney produced, with Eileen Power, *Tudor Economic Documents* (1924) and *Religion and the Rise of Capitalism* (1926). T.S. Ashton, having an earlier Manchester degree, became a friend in 1912, and on Unwin's prompting returned to a post in the economics department in 1921. His archivally-based works included *Iron and Steel in the Industrial Revolution* (1924) and *The Coal Industry in the Eighteenth Century*, with Joseph Sykes (1929). A.P. Wadsworth, not an academic but from 1917 onwards on the staff of the *Manchester Guardian*, wrote *The Cotton Trade and Industrial Lancashire* with Julia Mann (1931) and *The Strutts and the Arkwrights*, with R.S. Fitton (1958). G.W. Daniels, who as a cherished colleague wrote a moving and informative memorial lecture about Unwin, had, as stated above, published *The Early English Cotton Industry* in 1920. Those works published during his lifetime were dedicated to him, or else they acknowledged in their prefaces his help and encouragement.

Douglas Farnie has shown how these scholars, and others including Unwin's successor, Arthur Redford, kept alive his tradition of rigorous and archive-driven



economic history for decades after his death, although some of that tradition was diffused to other universities. Ironically, for a man of cosmopolitan outlook such as Unwin, his disciples concentrated on the topic of Britain's industrial revolution. At Manchester, much enduring work was done on the history of the region and of the cotton industry, as explained by Farnie. A survey of 1971 by Max Hartwell, in *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth* offered the 'interesting fact' that

The modern reaction against 'the evil factory thesis' [of J. L. and Barbara Hammond and others about appalling conditions in factories] came from the north of England, from J.H. Clapham in Leeds and a galaxy of Manchester historians, beginning with G. Unwin, who relied for their history of the industrial revolution not only on the parliamentary papers but also on the archives of industry.<sup>53</sup>

Coming on to recent times, Unwin would scarcely have approved of economic historians relying on statistics collected by the state for its own administrative purposes. However, computers have allowed extensive private archives, such as medieval manorial court rolls and demesne accounts, to be processed so as to obtain useful findings from huge quantities of data.

For its part, social history has tended to follow G.M. Trevelyan's practice, in his *English Social History* (1944), of portraying impressionistically 'our ancestors as they really were, going about their daily business and daily pleasure'.<sup>54</sup> The analytical framework, which Unwin had so painstakingly constructed, of voluntary organizations unobtrusively promoting the growth of communities, and the counter-productive activities of the state in times past, remains to be tested. If found still to be academically valid, it could help to re-establish Unwin as the great economic history scholar in Britain of the twentieth century.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I would like to thank Professor D.A. Farnie for providing many documents and for a great deal of helpful advice, and Professor D.J. Jeremy and Dr A.J.H. Latham for very constructive comments on an earlier draft. I am also grateful to the Archives Division

of the British Library of Political and Economic Science for allowing me to quote from the Courtney Papers.

## NOTES

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- <sup>1</sup> *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 December 1927.
- <sup>2</sup> Corley, T.A.B., 'George Unwin (1870-1925)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, forthcoming, 2004).
- <sup>3</sup> Ashton, T.S., 'George Unwin', in Sills, David L. (ed), *International Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences* (New York, 1968), Vol. 16, pp. 199-200.
- <sup>4</sup> Farnie, D.A., 'George Unwin (1870-1925): Founder of the Manchester School of Economic History', in Hudson, Pat (ed), *Living Economic and Social History* (Glasgow, 2001), pp. 75-80.
- <sup>5</sup> Unwin, G., *Studies in Economic History* (edited with an introductory memoir by Tawney, R.H., London, 1927), p. lxx. Tawney's memoir is admirably supplemented by Daniels, G.W., *George Unwin. A Memorial Lecture* (Manchester, 1926).
- <sup>6</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, p. xii.
- <sup>7</sup> Buchan, John, *Memory Hold-the-Door* (London, 1940) p. 76.
- <sup>8</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, p. xlvi.
- <sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.
- <sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxv.
- <sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xvii.
- <sup>12</sup> Seeley, J., *The Expansion of England* (London, 1883).
- <sup>13</sup> *Oxford University Calendar* (Oxford, 1898), pp. 115-6.
- <sup>14</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, p. xxv.m
- <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxi.
- <sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 343.
- <sup>17</sup> Unwin's reminiscences of this period are given in Gooch, G.P., *Life of Lord Courtney* (London, 1920), pp. 473-9.
- <sup>18</sup> Ashley, W., *Introduction to English Economic History and Theory* (London, 1894).
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- <sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 196-227.
- <sup>21</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, p. xxxix.
- <sup>22</sup> Gras, N.S.B., *Economic History Review*, 1928, p. 164.
- <sup>23</sup> Webb, *History of Trade Unionism*, 1920 ed.; Cole, G.D.H., 'Trade Union', *Chambers Encyclopaedia* 13 (1959), p. 726.
- <sup>24</sup> McArthur, E.A., *English Historical Review*, 1926, pp. 796-9.
- <sup>25</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, pp. xxix-xxx.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.
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- <sup>28</sup> Keynes, J.M., *Essays in Biography* (London, 1961), p. 145.
- <sup>29</sup> Unwin, G., *The Guilds and Companies of London* (London, 1908), pp. 13-14.
- <sup>30</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, pp. lviii, 33, 45.
- <sup>31</sup> Charlton, H.B., *Portrait of a University 1851-1951* (Manchester, 1951), pp. 90-1.
- <sup>32</sup> Powicke, F.M., *Modern Historians and the Study of History* (London, 1955), p. 32.
- <sup>33</sup> British Library of Political and Economic Science, Archives Division: *Courtney Papers*, 10, G. Unwin to Lord Courtney, 8 May, 23 December 1910.
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, Unwin to Courtney, 26 December 1910.
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- <sup>38</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, pp. 407-28; *Parliamentary Debates: House of Commons* 99, col.860, P.Q., 19 November 1917; *Times*, 13 July 1918.
- <sup>39</sup> *New Statesman* 118, 10 July 1915, pp. 384-5; Unwin, *Studies*, pp. 336-44.
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- <sup>41</sup> Unwin, G., *Samuel Oldknow and the Arkwrights* (Manchester, 1924).
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- <sup>43</sup> Tawney, *English Historical Review*, 1925, pp. 135-7.
- <sup>44</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, pp. 3-17.
- <sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 37-40.
- <sup>46</sup> 'Second Annual Conference of Teachers of Economics', *Economic Journal*, 1925, pp. 153-5; Unwin, *Studies*, p. lv.
- <sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 345-51.
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- <sup>49</sup> *Times*, 7 February 1925; cf. Obituary, 2 February.
- <sup>50</sup> Porteus, T.G., 'For a Dear Teacher', January 1925, Manchester University Archives UA/3/76.
- <sup>51</sup> Barker, E.H., *Age and Youth* (Oxford, 1953), p. 294; Conan Doyle, A., *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Short Stories* (London, 1928), p. 194.
- <sup>52</sup> Unwin, *Studies*, pp. xlix, lxxvii, lxxii; Daniels, *Memorial Lecture*, p. 38; Barker, *Age and Youth*, p. 294.
- <sup>53</sup> Farnie, *George Unwin*, p. 79; Hartwell, M., *The Industrial Revolution and Economic Growth* (1971), p. 398.
- <sup>54</sup> Trevelyan, G.M., *English Social History* (London, 1944), p. viii.