

Obituary of Christopher Seton-Watson

John Pollard¹

Christopher Seton-Watson, born in London and educated at Winchester, went up to New College, Oxford, in 1937 to read philosophy, politics and economics. In 1939, like many other undergraduates, he did not return to university, but was called up because of the outbreak of the second world war. He served in the Royal Artillery from 1939 to 1945, initially in Belgium and France: he was evacuated from Dunkirk. In late 1940 he was posted to Egypt and served in the disastrous Greek campaign, during which he was awarded the Military Cross. He returned to north Africa in the summer of 1941 and took part in all the campaigns against Rommel, including El Alamein and the battle of Tunis, and was wounded. In March 1944 he was sent to Italy and from then until the liberation fought his way up the peninsula. He ended his military career as a major.

Christopher's wartime diaries and letters, published by Buckland Press in 1993 as *Dunkirk–Alamein–Bologna: Letters and diaries of an artilleryman 1939–1945*, are extraordinarily vivid and gripping. He captures place and situation brilliantly, and makes many shrewd judgments about the people he met: like other British officers, he was shocked by what he perceived as a complete lack of a sense of noblesse oblige on the part of the upper-class Italians he encountered in Rome. As Sir Michael Howard writes in the book's foreword, Christopher had a 'good war' militarily, morally and 'in the human sense; his positive experiences and achievements far outweighed the negative aspects inseparable from military activity'.

When he returned to Oxford after demobilisation he was given a 'war degree' (an MA) and was elected to a fellowship and lectureship in politics at Oriel College, where he taught from 1946 until 1983. Powerfully inspired by his Italian experiences, he began his studies of liberal Italy (1870–1922), with a particular interest in its foreign policy. His work culminated in the groundbreaking and authoritative *Italy from liberalism to fascism, 1870–1925*. Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in 1967, it quickly became a classic. It is still essential reading for students of Italian history and the translation is still on sale in Italian bookshops. In 1981 he published jointly with his brother Hugh *The making of the new Europe: RW Seton-Watson and the last years of Austria-Hungary, 1906–1920*.

He supervised generations of PhD students who would become historians and political scientists of Italy, and inspired and encouraged others. He was highly regarded in Italian academic circles and in 1983 was made a commendatore of the Order of Merit of the Italian Republic. Italian studies in Britain owe an enormous debt to him.

In 1982 he founded the Association for the Study of Modern Italy (ASMI) to bring together geographers, historians, political and social scientists and others teaching and researching on Italy, because, as he said: 'We only seem to meet in the bookshops of

Rome', and he served as its first chair, from 1982 until 1987. In 1994 he was delighted when ASMI published the first edition of its own scholarly journal, *Modern Italy*.

Note

1. This is an edited extract from John Pollard's obituary for Christopher Seton-Watson, a longer version of which was published in the *Guardian*, December 7, 2007.