Martin Wight: A Biographical Overview of his Life and Work

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Robert James Martin Wight was born on 26 November 1913, the second of the three sons of Dr Edward and Margaretta Wight, née Scott.[1] He was educated at Prestonville House School and Bradfield College in Berkshire, winning an Open Scholarship to read Modern History at Hertford College, Oxford. He took a First Class degree in 1935.

Wight's subsequent career may be divided into three distinct phases. Between 1935 and 1949, by which time he was thirty-six years old, he engaged in a variety of occupations, from bookseller to schoolteacher, researcher to journalist.



From 1949 until 1961, he held the post of Reader in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics. In 1961, Wight became Professor of History at the new University of Sussex, where he remained until his untimely death, on 15 July 1972.

Throughout his life Wight was torn between the study of history and international relations, and between scholarship and activism. In both cases, the former eventually trumped the latter. His interest in international relations dated from his Oxford days, perhaps stimulated by one of his tutors, C. R. M. F. Cruttwell, the historian of the First World War, or by the dramatic course of contemporary events. While an undergraduate, he was a 'passionate supporter' of the League of Nations.[2] It appears, however, that the blow dealt to that institution by the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-36 prompted a change of heart. Wight turned against the League and became an outright pacifist, falling under the influence of the Reverend Dick Sheppard of the Peace Pledge Union (PPU).[3] Around the same time, after some postgraduate work at Oxford, he submitted an application for the lectureship[4] in the Department of International Politics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth.[5] He was unsuccessful, instead moving to London to manage the PPU's bookshop on Ludgate Hill.[6] Wight's first publication dates from this period: a characteristically elegant, powerful and unorthodox article advocating Christian pacifism that appeared in *Theology* in 1936.[7]

In early 1937, Wight took up a position as a researcher at the Royal Institute of International Affairs, where he contributed to a number of Chatham House research programmes, including those on South Africa, British imperial policy, the political and strategic interests of the United Kingdom, and 'Ocean routes: bases and ports'.[8] He worked under the direction of Arnold J. Toynbee, who quickly became something of a mentor, as Dick Sheppard, who died later that year, had once been. Before joining Chatham House, Wight had read volumes one to three of Toynbee's monumental *A Study of History* (1934). The book had a considerable and lasting effect on his thought. As he later wrote to its author: '[a]t once all my previous reading and experience fell into perspective and pattern, and I saw clearly, instead of in a glass darkly, what historical study was about and the heights that it might scale'.[9]

Wight left Chatham House in 1938. It seems to have been the case that he again sought an academic post,[10] but, finding no suitable opportunities, he turned instead to schoolteaching, becoming History Master at Haileybury. He lasted two years in this role, until he received call-up papers for military service and decided to make an application to be registered as a conscientious objector.[11] The application was refused, at first, and then accepted, provided that he left the teaching profession.[12] Finding himself again without paid employment, Wight went back to Oxford, joining the staff of Margery Perham's project on colonial constitutions from 1941 until the spring of 1946.[13] This work led to the publication of three books: *The Development of the Legislative Council 1606-1945* (1946), *The Gold Coast Legislative Council* (1947), and *British Colonial Constitutions* (1952).[14]

In 1946 Wight returned to London, and to Chatham House.[15] Under its auspices, during the first half of that year, he wrote his pamphlet on *Power Politics*, often described as a 'realist' classic, though - arguably - its central argument is consistent with his later more 'Grotian' work.[16] *Power Politics* brought him to the attention of the editor of *The Observer* newspaper and Liberal grandee David Astor, who commissioned Wight to travel to the United States as special correspondent at the first session of the United Nations in the winter of 1946-47.[17] In early 1947, having been succeeded at the UN by Susan Strange,[18] Wight rejoined Chatham House, where he was being touted as a future Director of Studies. Over the next two years, Wight worked closely with Toynbee and others on the production of the Survey of International Affairs for the war years, contributing five lengthy and now much-neglected essays, as well as footnotes and appendices to volume VII of Toynbee's *A Study of History*, published in 1954.[19]



During the late 1940s and early 1950s, Wight toyed too with a number of causes. He was active in the Christian ecumenical movement, addressing the World Council of Churches Round Table Meeting of Christian Politicians in Geneva in June 1948.[20] The address was later published in the first issue of the *Ecumenical Review* as 'The Church, Russia and the West' (1949).[21] In the early 1950s, Wight worked on the World Council of Churches project to promote European unity.[22] He continued, moreover, to show concern for colonial issues, working with Arthur Lewis, Michael Scott and Colin Legum on a Penguin special book, *Attitude to Africa* (1951),[23] which Richard Cockett has called 'the manifesto of the liberal Africanist in England in general but also for the Observer in particular'.[24]

In 1949, the second phase of Wight's career opened. At the second attempt, Charles Manning, Montague Burton Professor at LSE (1930-62), had succeeded in creating a Readership in International Relations and - together with Herbert Butterfield - persuaded him to take the post. Wight was quickly recognised as an exceptional teacher. It is clear, however, from his surviving early lectures and essays that Wight was none too familiar with the literature of the field (notwithstanding his earlier work for *Power Politics*), but that he committed himself with great dedication to establishing its parameters.[25] Nor, once he was more familiar with it, was he completely convinced as to the academic merits of IR, at least as a subject for undergraduates.[26]

During the 1950s Wight taught with great commitment, reviewed extensively in the field for a variety of outlets (including *The Observer, The Economist*, and *International Affairs*), and remained closely involved, as a member of Council, with Chatham House. He toyed, at the LSE, with a number of major projects, but being something of a perfectionist, proved unable even to complete the long promised, extended version of *Power Politics*. He did, however, help revise Harold Laski's *An Introduction to Politics* for a posthumous edition and succeeded in publishing a number of essays, including an incisive review of Herbert Butterfield and Reinhold Niebuhr (1950), two radio lectures for the BBC, 'War and International Politics' and 'What Makes a Good Historian?' (both 1955), 'The Power Struggle within the United Nations' (1956), and two of his finest pieces, 'Why is there no International Theory?' and 'Brutus in Foreign Policy' (both 1960).[27]

In 1956-57 Wight took a sabbatical year from the LSE, serving as a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago and standing in for the absent Hans Morgenthau. Wight took this opportunity to develop and to present the drafts of the work on international theory for which he is perhaps today best known: his lectures on the 'three traditions' of realism, rationalism and revolutionism.[28] He gave them for three further years upon his return to the LSE - but it is ironic, indeed, that these lectures, so central to the so-called 'English school of international relations' were first delivered in America.

It is clear that around this time Wight had begun to contemplate leaving Manning's Department. In 1955, he turned down the chance, probably slight, of succeeding Toynbee in the Stevenson Chair of International History at University College, London.[29] During much of 1956 he was involved in lengthy - and, as it proved, rather fraught - negotiations for a Chair and the Headship of the Research School of Pacific Studies at the Australian National University in Canberra, urged on by the historian of the British Empire Keith Hancock.[30] In 1957 Wight was offered a professorship at Chicago, but eventually turned it down.[31]

Other opportunities, however, were welcomed. In 1958 the Cambridge historian Herbert Butterfield asked Wight to participate in the meetings of his new British Committee on the Theory of International Politics - an honour, such as it was, not accorded to Manning or indeed to colleagues of Butterfield like F. H. Hinsley. The group, initially funded by the Rockefeller Foundation, at the behest of Kenneth Thompson, met fairly regularly during the first half of the 1960s. Wight delivered nine papers in all, of which three remain unpublished, three appeared in *Diplomatic Investigations* (1966),[32] edited with Butterfield, and three in the posthumous *Systems of States* (1977).

By 1960 Wight had resolved to leave the LSE, partly, as he put it in a private note, to 'avoid' the 'Manning succession crisis' and to '[g]et out of a subject I don't believe in into [a] subject I do believe in'.[33] The following year he took up a Chair of History at the University of Sussex, then a new institution being built on the outskirts of Brighton. This post was combined with the Deanship of the School of European Studies, with a mandate to create its curriculum.[34] Together with Asa Briggs and others, Wight designed an innovative (and now sadly defunct) range of inter-disciplinary courses for the School, combining history, philosophy, economics, politics, sociology, geography and international relations, as well as modern languages. Wight's object was to demonstrate the 'unity of European history' and to 'combine historical and contemporary interest'.[35]

Only in the late 1960s, a few years before his death, did Wight return to the study of international relations. When he did, his work showed a marked shift in approach, one evidenced in the contrast between the taxonomical, even Procrustean approach of the international theory lectures, and the more nuanced exploration of 'longitudinal themes' of his essays on 'International Legitimacy' (1972) and 'The Balance of Power and International Order' (1973).[36] These changes have, in part, been obscured by the otherwise very welcome posthumous publication of a number of Wight's works. In 1977 his former colleague Hedley Bull assembled some of his later British Committee essays in Systems of States. In 1978 he collaborated with Carsten Holbraad in the production of a revised *Power Politics*.[37] Two further essays appeared in 1978 and 1987.[38]



Since the early 1990s, however, these works have been overshadowed by Wight's earlier writings, especially by his Chicago/LSE lectures on international theory. Indeed, one of the most significant moments in the recent history of the field came with the publication, in 1991, of *International Theory: The Three Traditions*.[39] The book might easily have been dismissed as a historical curiosity if not for the sympathy of Wight's former students and the enthusiasm of a new generation of theorists eager to distance themselves from American thought. Instead, it reinvigorated the 'English school' and remains, for better or worse, a touchstone for those working within that tradition. In 2005, a later series of lectures, *Four Seminal Thinkers*, were published, the eponymous thinkers being Machiavelli, Grotius, Kant and Mazzini. The impact of this elegant volume is yet to be determined.[40]

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- Footnotes -

[1] Pitt, 'Wight, (Robert James) Martin (1913-1972)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition.

[2] Hedley Bull, 'Introduction: Martin Wight and the study of international relations', in
Wight, *Systems of States* ed. Hedley Bull (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p.
3.

[3] Bull, 'Martin Wight and the study of international relations', p. 3.

[4] During the inter-war period, a single lecturer was employed by the College to assist the Woodrow Wilson Professor with his teaching duties.

[5] Brian Porter, 'E. H. Carr – The Aberystwyth Years, 1936-47', in Michael Cox (ed.), E. H. Carr: *A Critical Appraisal* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004), p. 53. The successful applicant, favoured by Carr, was Hugh Seton-Watson.

[6] Bull, 'Martin Wight and the study of international relations', p. 3.

[7] Wight, 'Christian Pacifism', Theology 33:193 (July 1936), pp. 12-21.

[8] Bull (op. cit.) dates Wight's employment at Chatham House from 1936 to 1938. However, Wight to Toynbee, 13 October, 1954, *Toynbee MSS* 86, Bodleian Library, Oxford, states that Wight joined Chatham House in the spring of 1937. See *The Republic of South Africa* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937), *The Political and Strategic Interests of the United Kingdom* (London: Oxford University Press, 1938) and H. V. Hodson (ed.), *The British Empire: A Report on its Structure and Problems* (London: Oxford University Press, 1937). Hedley Bull, in 'Martin Wight and the study of international relations', argues that Wight also worked on the *Surveys*, and contributed to Toynbee's *Study*. It is more plausible that this work was done after rather than before the Second World War (1946-49).

[9] Wight to Toynbee, 13 October 1954, *Toynbee MSS* 86. On the broader intellectual relationship between the two, see Ian Hall, 'Challenge and Response: The Lasting Engagement of Arnold J. Toynbee and Martin Wight', *International Relations* 17:3 (2003), pp. 389-404.

[10] Laski to Wight, 26 December 1938, Wight MSS 233 3/9, British Library of Political and Economic Sciences, London.

[11] It should be noted that Wight probably need not have taken this stand: he was in a

'reserved occupation' and suffered from chronic asthma. See Pitt to Bull, 2 April 1974, *Wight MSS* 250. Parts of Wight's application are reproduced in Bull, 'Martin Wight and the study of international relations', p. 4, and Dunne, *Inventing International Society*, p. 65, note 23.

[12] Pitt, 'Wight, (Robert James) Martin (1913-1972)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online version.

[13] For some of the details of this position, see Bull to Butterfield, 19 March, 1976, *Butterfield MSS* 531(i)/ B191, Cambridge University Library.

[14] Wight, The Development of the Legislative Council 1606-1945 vol. I (London: Faber & Faber, 1946); The Gold Coast Legislative Council (London: Faber & Faber, 1947); British Colonial Constitutions (London: Clarendon, 1952).

[15] At this time it seems that Charles Manning made an unsuccessful bid to bring Wight to the LSE, but he was unable to create a new Readership in his Department. See Manning to Bull, 11 April 1974, *Wight MSS* 250.

[16] Power Politics Looking Forward Pamphlet no. 8 (London: RIIA, 1946).

[17] Richard Cockett, *David Astor and the Observer* (London: André Deutsch, 1991), p. 148.

[18] Susan Strange (1923-1998) later became one of the most influential British scholars on international political economy and Montague Burton Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics from 1978 to 1988.

[19] Wight, 'Spain and Portugal', 'Switzerland, The Low Countries, and Scandinavia', 'Eastern Europe', 'Germany' & 'The Balance of Power' in A. J. Toynbee & F. T. Ashton-Gwatkin (eds.) *Survey of International Affairs 1939-1946: The World in March 1939* (London: Oxford University Press, 1952), pp.138-150, pp. 151-165, pp. 206-292, pp. 293-365 & pp. 508-532. Toynbee, *Study of History*, VII, p. 396, note 3, p. 415, note 5, p. 428, note 2, pp. 456-457, note 3, p. 460, notes 1 & 4, p. 464, note 1, p. 488, note 2, p. 489, note 3, p. 505, note 2, p. 543, note 1, pp. 711-715. See also Wight's 'The Crux for an Historian brought up in the Christian Tradition', pp. 737-748.

^[20] 'Our Christian Position in the Face of the Conflict between Russia and the West', Wight MSS 10.

[21] Wight, 'The Church, Russia and the West', *A Ecumenical Review: A Quarterly*, 1:1 (Autumn 1948), pp. 25-45.

[22] See *Wight MSS* 232. Wight attended the second meeting of the 'Ecumenical Commission on European Co-operation', 19-20 May 1950, at Bièvres in France.

[23] W. Arthur Lewis, Michael Scott, Colin Legum & Martin Wight, *Attitude to Africa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1951).

[24] Cockett, David Astor and the Observer, p. 187.

[25] See'What is International Relations?' (1950), Wight MSS 112.

[26] See Ian Hall, *The International Thought of Martin Wight* (New York: Palgrave, 2006), pp. 88-97.

[27] Harold J. Laski, *An Introduction to Politics*, new ed. prepared by Martin Wight (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1951). The bulk of the revisions were to chapter four,

'The State and the International Community', pp. 88-105; 'History and Judgment: Butterfield, Niebuhr and the Technical Historian', *The Frontier* 1:8 (1950), pp. 301-314; 'What Makes a Good Historian?', *The Listener*, 53:1355 (17 February 1955), pp. 283-284; 'War and International Politics', *The Listener* 54:1389 (13 October 1955) pp. 584-585; 'The Power Struggle within the United Nations', *Proceedings of the Institute of World Affairs* 33rd session (Los Angeles: USC, 1956), pp. 247-259; 'Why is there no International Theory?', *International Relations* 2 (1960), pp. 35-48; 'Brutus in Foreign Policy: The Memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden', *International Affairs* 36:3 (1960), pp. 299-309.

[28] Wight to Morgenthau, undated draft (January 1956), Wight MSS 103. The lectures were later reconstructed and published as Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* ed. Gabriele Wight & Brian Porter (Leicester & London: RIIA & Leicester University Press, 1991).

[29] Bullock to Wight, 9 July 1955 & Wight to Bullock, 17 July 1955, both in *Wight MSS* 233 1/9.

[30] See Wight MSS 32.

[31] Wight to Grodzins, 27 May 1957, Wight MSS 103.

[32] Wight, 'Why is there no International Theory?', 'Western Values in International Relations' & 'The Balance of Power' in Butterfield & Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations*, pp. 17-34, pp. 89-131 & pp. 149-175.

[33] Wight, 'University of Sussex', 1960, Wight MSS 233 7/9.

[34] Asa Briggs, 'Drawing a New Map of Learning', in David Daiches (ed.), *The Idea of a New University: The Experiment in Sussex* (London: André Deutsch, 1964), p. 61.

[35] Wight, 'European Studies', in Daiches, Idea of a New University, p. 110.

[36] Wight 'International Legitimacy', reprinted in *Systems of States*, pp. 153-173; 'The Balance of Power and International Order', in Alan James (ed.), *The Bases of International Order: Essays in honour of C. A. W. Manning* (London: OUP, 1973), pp. 85-115. For an examination of this shift, see Hall, *International Thought of Martin Wight*, pp. 151-156.

[37] Wight, *Power Politics* ed. Hedley Bull & Carsten Holbraad (Leicester and London: RIIA & Leicester University Press, 1995 [1978]).

[38] 'Is the Commonwealth a Non-Hobbesian Institution?', *Journal of Commonwealth and Comparative Politics* 26: 2 (1978), pp. 119-135; 'An Anatomy of International Thought', *Review of International Studies* 13 (1987), pp. 221-227. See also Wight's 'On the Abolition of War: Observations on a Memorandum by Walter Mills', in Harry Bauer & Elizabeth Brighi (eds.), *International Relations at the LSE: A History of 75 Years* (London: Millennium Publishing Group, 2003), pp. 51-60.

[39] Wight, *International Theory: The Three Traditions* ed. Gabriele Wight & Brian Porter (London: Leicester University Press, 1991).

[40] Wight, *Four Seminal Thinkers in International Theory: Machiavelli, Grotius, Kant, and Mazzini* ed. Gabriele Wight & Brian Porter (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Martin Wight: A Bibliography

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Wight's publications divide themselves into a number of categories: books, book chapters, articles and correspondence, as well as the very many short book reviews, which are listed separately at the end.

There are some publications yet to be identified, including the many articles Wight wrote during his time in the United States – under his own name and under that of 'a special correspondent' – for *The Observer*, in 1945-46. Most of these articles seem to have been preserved in the Wight MSS held in the British Library of Political and Economic Sciences (BLPES) in London. He probably also, given the extant evidence in this papers, contributed a number of articles and reviews to *The Economist*, but these were, of course, published anonymously.

Books, Chapters, Articles and Correspondence

'Christian Pacifism', Theology, 33:193 (July 1936), pp. 12-21.

Letter on 'Christian Pacifism', Theology 33:198 (December 1936), pp. 367-368.

'The Tanaka Memorial', History 27 (March 1943), pp. 61-68.

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'Sarawak', New Statesman and Nation 31, 8 June 1946, pp. 413-414.

The Gold Coast Legislative Council (London: Faber & Faber, 1947).

'The World's Churches', The Observer, 22 August 1948, p. 4.

'The Church, Russia and the West', *A Ecumenical Review: a Quarterly*, 1:1 (Autumn 1948), pp. 25-45.

'History and Judgment: Butterfield, Niebuhr and the Technical Historian', *The Frontier: A Christian Commentary on the Common Life*, 1:8 (August 1950), pp. 301-314.

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Note on A (III) (a) Annex I 'Spiritual Achievement and Material Achievement', 'The Crux for an Historian brought up in the Christian Tradition' & numerous notes in Arnold J. Toynbee, *A Study of History*, vol. VII (London: OUP & RIIA, 1954), pp. 711-715 & pp. 737-748.

Letters in *Counsels of Hope: The Toynbee-Jerrold Controversy* (London: Times Publishing Company, 1954), pp. 18-21 & pp. 30-32.

'What Makes a Good Historian?', The Listener 53:1355, 17 February 1955, pp. 283-4.

'War and International Politics', The Listener, 54:1389, 13 October 1955, pp. 584-585.

'The Power Struggle within the United Nations', *Proceedings of the Institute of World Affairs*, 33th session (Los Angeles: USC, 1956), pp. 247-259.

'Brutus in Foreign Policy: The Memoirs of Sir Anthony Eden', *International Affairs* vol. 36, no. 3 (July 1960), pp. 299-309.

'New History in Old Forms', review of J. Bronowski & Bruce Mazlish, *The Western Intellectual Tradition, The Economist* (3 December 1960), p. 1021.

'Are they Classical', *Times Literary Supplement* 3171, 7 December 1962, p. 955 & 3176, 11 January 1963, p. 25.

'The Place of Classics in a New University', *Didaskalos: The Journal of the Joint Association of Classical Teachers*, 1:1 (1963), pp. 27-36.

'Does Peace Take Care of Itself', Views 2 (1963), pp. 93-95.

'European Studies' in D. Daiches (ed.), *The Idea of a New University: An Experiment in Sussex* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1964), pp. 100-119.

'Why is there no International Theory?', 'Western Values in International Relations' & 'The Balance of Power' in Herbert Butterfield & Martin Wight (eds.), *Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1966), pp. 17-34, pp. 89-131 & pp. 149-175.

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'Arnold Toynbee: An Appreciation', International Affairs 52:1(January 1976), pp.11-13.

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W. N. Medlicott, British Foreign Policy since Versailles, International Affairs Review Supplement 19:11 (1943), p. 591.

'The Realist's Utopia', on E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Year's Crisis, The Observer*, 21 July 1946, p. 3.

John Middleton Murry, Truth or Perish, IA 22:4 (October 1946), p. 542.

Henrique de Pinheiro, *The World State or the New Order of Common Sense*, *IA* 22:4 (October 1946), p. 542.

Ely Culbertson, Must we Fight Russia?, IA, 22:4 (October 1946), p. 543.

Leland M. Goodrich, *Charter of the United Nations, IA* 23:1 (1947), p. 80.

C. E. M. Joad, Conditions of Survival, IA, 23:1 (January 1947), p. 81.

Salvador de Madriaga, First Principles I: World Government & R. M. MacIver, First Principles II: Fundamentals of International Order, IA, 23:1 (January 1947), p. 82.

'The March of History', on D. C. Somervell's abridgement of Arnold. J. Toynbee's A Study of History I-VI, The Observer, 5 January 1947, p. 3.

Viscount Samuel, Persuasion or Force, IA, 23:3 (July 1947), p. 379.

Winston Churchill, Victory: War Speeches, IA, 23:3 (July 1947), pp. 379-80.

J. L. Brierly, The Covenant and the Charter, IA, 23:3 (July 1947), pp. 381-82.

W. E. F. Ward, A History of the Gold Coast, IA 23:3 (July 1947), p. 384.

David Mitrany, A Working Peace System, IA, 23:3 (July 1947), p. 384.

A Christian Yearbook, IA 23:3 (July 1947), pp. 377-378.

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Reinhold Niebuhr, *Discerning the Signs of the Times, IA,* 23:4 (October 1947), pp. 558-559.

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A. L. Rowse, *The Use of History* & R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, *IA*, 23:4 (1947), pp. 575-577.

W. W. Rostow, The American Diplomatic Revolution, IA 23:4 (1947), pp. 610-611.

William C. Bullitt, The Great Globe Itself, IA 23:4 (1947), pp. 611-612.

Fances Perkins, The Roosevelt I Knew, IA 24:1 (January 1948), pp. 144-145.

Ruhl J. Bartlett, The Record of American Diplomacy, IA 24:1 (January 1948), p. 148.

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John Gunther, Inside U.S.A, IA 24:2 (April 1948), pp. 304-305.

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Halford L. Hoskins, The Atlantic Pact, IA 26:3 (1950), p. 382.

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