



## **Sir John Wheeler-Bennett**

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## Sir John Wheeler-Bennett

Obituary (unattributed), *The Times*, 10 December 1975, 19f–h; the draft that survives in IB's papers was considerably revised for publication. See below for a supplementary contribution to his own notice.



SIR JOHN WHEELER-BENNETT GCVO, CMG, OBE, the distinguished historian and authority on international affairs, died yesterday in a London hospital at the age of 73.

John Wheeler Wheeler-Bennett was born on 13 October 1902, a son of J. W. Wheeler-Bennett CBE, a prosperous general importer, of Keston, Kent. His mother was a Canadian from Nova Scotia. He went to school at Westgate-on-Sea, and after that to Malvern College. His schooldays, he told his friends, were not particularly happy, in part because his health was always delicate, an impression that was reinforced in later years by the slight but noticeable nervous stammer which at times impeded his rapid and fluent conversation.

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Shortly after the end of the First World War, instead of entering a university he accepted the offer of a post as honorary assistant to General Sir Neil Malcolm, on whose staff he worked in the Far East and Berlin. This first awakened his interest in international affairs, and in particular in the role played by Germany in the post-war settlement of Europe, and laid the foundation of a lifelong curiosity about, and knowledge of, Germany and Germans. Adequately provided with private means, curious, perceptive, with a quick, darting intelligence and a romantic, slightly theatrical, sense of political life, he was intrigued, and indeed entranced, by anything that was picturesque, dramatic, out of the ordinary; this was allied, however, with an exceedingly sober and accurate sense of facts, so that, while he might tend to view a situation in terms of a political or psychological drama, he never left the solid ground of verified data, and did not exaggerate or colour the facts, even in his own imagination.

Beginning as a convinced internationalist in his youth, he worked in the publicity department of the League of Nations Union in 1923–4, and was closely associated with the work of the Royal Institute of International Affairs; indeed he was the founder and organiser of its information service in the 1920s, and founder and editor of its *Bulletin of International News* until 1932. He lived in Germany a good deal in the 1920s, and came to know the leading political personalities of that country better perhaps than any other Englishman. He remained all his life fascinated by Germany and the Germans: particularly by Junkers, generals, diplomats, politicians and other members of the military–political elites which flourished in Germany during the inter-war years.

His judgement of Germany always remained sharply critical: he was not deceived into accepting nationalistic German versions of the history of the twentieth century. He watched Germany, and took delight in his meetings with prominent Germans, like a specialist fascinated by particularly rich or exotic specimens of a genus which he had spent his life in studying, but towards which, with some exceptions, he preserved an attitude of absorbed and objective scientific curiosity. He spent much of his time in the 1920s in breeding horses in Northern Germany (interrupted by frequent and lengthy visits to England) and acquiring an expert knowledge of international affairs, on which he was to become a leading authority.

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His principal interest lay in the theory and practice of diplomacy, and in the interplay of personalities in that field. With his warm-hearted, gay, responsive nature he was ready to catch fire from anything that stirred his imagination. In the 1920s and 1930s his political views and interests brought him into contact with a good many of the best-known members of political London society at that time, particularly with those who shared his international interests; with many of these he remained bound by devoted friendships. He held at this time no official post, but he tended to be consulted by British officials on questions concerned with Germany, since he had early acquired a reputation as an expert on Central Europe, and he was the author of a growing number of articles and books principally dealing with problems of disarmament, security, reparations and the like, most of them published by Chatham House.

He sympathised with the moderate Right in Europe, and with his tendency towards interpretation of events in terms of arresting personalities (resembling in this his friend John Buchan, to whose works – as well as those of Anthony Hope – he was greatly addicted) he developed a great admiration for Dr Brüning, at one time Chancellor of Germany, whom he assisted to escape from Germany after Hitler's advent to power. Indeed Brüning was the hero of the first of Wheeler-Bennett's major works – *Hindenburg*, published in 1936, a full-scale analysis of the rise of German chauvinism between the wars. He came to alter his glowing opinion of Brüning as a result of differences during and after the Second World War. This book was followed by his masterpiece, *The Forgotten Peace*, a volume on the Peace of Brest-Litovsk, based on comprehensive and imaginative research, and in particular on interviews with General Hoffman, Kühlmann, Trotsky and lesser *dramatis personae*.

*The Forgotten Peace* gave Wheeler-Bennett a firm reputation in academic as well as government and journalistic circles. He was a passionate opponent of the settlement of Munich, and based his views on his expert knowledge of Germans and the German Army. The outbreak of war found him established as a lecturer on International Relations in the University of Virginia in the USA – he felt a nostalgic love for the Southern States, and found his deeply loved wife and a second home there – and his friends, Robert Bruce Lockhart, Lord Lothian and Sir Robert Vansittart, persuaded him to use his knowledge of Europe and America, and his very wide

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personal popularity in American political and journalistic circles, in the cause of Anglo-American understanding.

He was one of the triumvirate charged by the Ministry of Information with the task of overhauling the peacetime British information machinery in New York, and with A. N. Morgan and Alan Dudley he established the British Information Services in New York, an institution which played a significant part in the evolution of American opinion during the Second World War. His frequent visits to London during the war were highly valued by his friends in the Cabinet and the ministries, who looked to him as a unique source of accurate information and good judgement, based on his remarkably wide personal contacts.

In 1942 he became the representative in America of the British Political Warfare organisation, and later European adviser and Assistant Director General of the Political Intelligence Department. He worked in the Political Adviser's Department in SHAEF in the last year of the war, and was attached to the British Prosecution Team at the Nuremberg War Criminals Tribunal in 1946. He had no doubt that these trials were wholly just, and this caused a rift between him and some of his old anti-Nazi German friends. In the same year he was appointed British Editor-in-Chief of the captured archives of the German Foreign Ministry, and was retained as general adviser to the Foreign Office on publications of this type.

In the last year of the war he married Miss Ruth Risher of Charlottesville, Virginia, and came to live with her in the beautiful Manor house of Garsington, near Oxford, which a quarter of a century before had been made famous by the literary salon of Lady Ottoline Morrell. After the war he became a lecturer of New College and a Fellow of St Antony's, and taught international relations in Oxford. His generous and genial personality made him friends in Oxford, as everywhere. In 1948 he published a book on the Munich settlement, and in 1953 *The Nemesis of Power*, a notable volume on the German Army. In 1958 he published the official biography of King George VI, in 1962 a life of Lord Waverley, and in 1972 a record of the post-war period – *The Semblance of Peace* – written with Anthony Nicholls. He was made a KCVO, and appointed Historical Adviser to the Royal Archives, which of all his many posts and honours probably gave him the keenest pleasure. In 1974 he was advanced to GCVO. In that year he published his last book, *Knaves, Fools and Heroes*.

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All his life he laboured under an acute consciousness of his amateur status among professional historians, and remained modest, and indeed diffident, in the presence of experts; yet his own attainments were, judged even by the severest academic standards, as a rule higher than those of most of the specialists whom he held in such high esteem. Erudite and sagacious as he was, he looked upon the world to the end of his days with something of the freshness of an impressionable schoolboy brought up on historical romances.

What fascinated him most was the interplay of heroic or unusual personalities, the part played by audacity, by intrigue, espionage, by the sinister, the gallant, the unforeseen, the fortuitous in human affairs. He liked the pageantry of history. His vision was indeed somewhat Churchillian, but with this he remained an indefatigable, scrupulous and minute researcher, and his books, although not devoid of rhetoric and occasional purple, were based on vast and careful labours, and were free from facile generalisations.

He was happily married. He was a practising Anglican, much attached to his village church. He loved life in all its manifestations, and was a connoisseur of odd personalities and political situations. It seemed to him in the later years of his life that impersonal forces in world affairs were gaining upon the influence of individuals, and this depressed him. A generous, imaginative, amusing, affectionate, warm-hearted man, full of romantic loyalties and fancies and admirations, he was much and widely loved. With his life-enhancing talk, his many acts of kindness and his enchanting personality, he will be deeply missed by his many friends.

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Supplementary note, *The Times*, 13 December 1975, 16g

*Sir Isaiah Berlin writes:*

May I be permitted to add to your obituary of the late Sir John Wheeler-Bennett? His academic quality was recognised by his Fellowship of the British Academy, which he greatly prized, and by the honorary degree which Oxford University conferred upon him – it gave him particular pleasure to receive this at the hands of his great friend the Chancellor, Harold Macmillan. His last important

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public appointment was that of Historical Adviser, Royal Archives; as your obituary says, he took great pleasure in this activity and his generous and delightful nature made him as greatly loved in the Palace as he was outside it.

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