

Col. S. J. Watson's Locomotives

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During this summer the author was glancing through a newly received auction catalogue from Mealy's, Fine Art & Rare Book Auctioneers of Castlecomer (Mealy 2004) when something caught his eye. The description for Lot. No. 798, one of the many entries relating to railway history and memorabilia, was as follows:

Railways: [Watson (S.J.)] *Locomotives of the Great Southern Railways of Ireland*, sm. 8vo L. (Arthur H. Stockwell) 1937. FIRST EDN. VIII, +77pp, 34 illus. orig. blue cloth. Extremely Rare.

*Watson was reputedly a fitter in Inchicore works.

My eye had been caught by the name Watson, S.J. Could this be any relation to the late Col. S.J. Watson of Ballingarrane, Clonmel, a well known local historian and writer? I rang the auctioneers who told me that the information came from the collector who had only ever seen one copy of this book. However somewhere in my mind I had a memory which contradicted this attribution and after a search I found the reference.

In 1991 Col. Watson published a history of the Wills family of tobacco fame to which he was related (Watson 1991). Included among its many accounts of members of the family are some characteristically modest snippets regarding his own life. He joined the British Army on the outbreak of the Second World War to carry on the family tradition of service. His sense of duty is clear. He hoped to be sent to work with steam trains because, as he explains (*ibid*, 234), 'Like many other schoolboys Watson had been compulsively fascinated by railway trains; and, while still at Eton at the age of sixteen, had written a book grandiloquently called *The Locomotives of the Great Southern Railways of Ireland* and sent a copy to the Chief Mechanical Engineer. In return he was given a pass to travel 'on the footplate', and spent most of his school holidays learning to shovel coal, and unofficially to drive passenger trains'. Apparently, as a younger boy, he was encouraged in his interest by the driver of a steamroller working close to his home.

Having enlisted, it took some time for his skills to be recognised, being first sent to a training battalion of the Royal Engineers. He was then sent to a unit maintaining a railway service in Scotland and, in December 1941, to Persia to work on the line bringing essential war supplies from the Persian Gulf to the Soviet Union. Later in the war, he served in the Middle East and Italy. He wanted to be a railway engineer on the ending of the war but 'was deterred by the rundown state of railways in both England and Ireland after the war, and by their impending nationalisation' (*ibid*. 259). Instead he stayed with the British Army, having a career which included service in Korea and as military attaché in Persia, retiring in 1962 due to illness. He and his wife returned to Ballingarrane, outside Clonmel, where he devoted much of his time to the Church of Ireland, environmental matters, historical research and writing and fostering the 'concept of a plural society where distinctive cultures and traditions can cooperate with others without abandoning their own, and can interweave together so that their combinations may prove stronger than the sum of their separate contributions'.

He served faithfully on the committee of the County Museum in Clonmel for many years. He died in November, 1999 and the 2001 volume of this Journal contains an obituary by Margaret

Rossiter (Rossiter 2001, 227-8).

And Lot:798? It sold at auction for €230.

Bibliography

Mealy 2004. *Specialist Collectors Sale, Tuesday, May 18th, 2004, Castlecomer.*

Rossiter, M. 2001. 'Obituary: Colonel Sidney John Watson (1920-1999)', *Tipperary Historical Journal* 2001.

Watson, S.J. 2004. *Furnished with Ability: The Life and Times of Wills Families, Salisbury.*