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Obituary: Sir Edmund Compton

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Edmund Gerald Compton, civil servant: born 30 July 1906; Assistant Secretary, HM Treasury 1942-47, Under- Secretary 1947-49, Third Secretary 1949-58; CB 1948, KCB 1965, GCB 1971; KBE 1955; Comptroller and Auditor General, Exchequer and Audit Department 1958-66; Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration 1967- 71; Chairman, English Local Government Boundary Commission 1971-78; Chairman, BBC Programmes Complaints Commission 1972-81; married 1934 Betty Tresyllian Williams (died 1987; one son, four daughters); died London 11 March 1994.

EDMUND COMPTON was the first and trail-blazing government ombudsman. Much depended on the behaviour of the first incumbent of the office, properly titled the 'Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration'. He was appointed by the Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, in 1967 and charged with protecting the rights of individual citizens against central government maladministration. Wilson regarded Compton as the ideal choice for the post: and, in the following four years, Compton built solid foundations for what has become a respected institution.

With his quizzical twinkling eyes and riveting smile Edmund Compton was one of the most charming and cultivated of mandarins. He was the possessor of a razor-sharp mind and his colleagues in the Treasury, in the Comptroller and Auditor General's department, and in the office of Parliamentary Commissioner speak with awe of his capacity for work and for detail.

what Edmund Compton advises and learn from him. He is one of the shrewdest, cleverest, and nicest, men in Whitehall.' Wilson went further: 'Edmund Compton has taught me a very great deal about how government operates in Britain.'



Compton was born of a family that was involved in trade on his father's side with Chile and other South American countries. His father, also Edmund, had won a gallant Military Cross in the First World War. His mother's family were mostly scholarly Church of England clergy, and his Christian faith was to matter to Compton throughout his life.

A scholarship to Rugby, which he remembered with affection as going through a civilised period and where as a very small boy for his age he was not bullied, gave him an excellent start. And the school regarded music as central and not peripheral to the curriculum; outstandingly talented masters fostered Compton's love of music which was to bear fruit in a lifelong devotion to Bach choirs and enable him to become a Fellow of the Academy

In 1925 when Compton arrived in Oxford as a Major Scholar the Warden of New College was HAL Fisher - Herbert Fisher, former President of the Board of Education and later, in 1935, to publish his 1,200-page History of Europe putting him in the class of his brother-in-law FW Maitland, Bryce, Morley and Gibbon, as a great historian. Indeed, RHS Crossman, Compton's contemporary, compared Fisher with Thucydides, who lost a battle in the Peloponnesian war and consoled himself in exile by writing the greatest history of war. Fisher, an MP only from 1916 to 1919, put through a major Education Act (1918), went down with Lloyd George in 1922, but turned defeat into victory by producing the History of Europe.

Late on Sunday evenings, Fisher would invite some undergraduates to his study in the Warden's Lodging, to be in the company of Gilbert Murray or Hilaire Belloc, Graham Wallas or General Smuts. There Fisher would recapture the ecstasy of public life which he had tasted, all too briefly, and he would live himself back to his seat at the Cabinet table in Downing Street, or to the Council of the League of Nations at Geneva. But it was not only the Sunday evenings. A few - very few - undergraduates were invited by Fisher to his country cottage. Among them was Edmund Compton, clearly destined to get First Class Honours in Literae Humaniores. At the close of the weekend Fisher and his guests would walk up to Churt for dinner with Lloyd George. 'There at either end of the table,' as Crossman recalled, 'sat thesis and antithesis, the well-born academic and the self-made Welshman, united by their passion for the game of politics from which both had been forcibly retired.' It was at this point, Compton told me, that he became determined to serve in public life.

In 1929 Compton entered the Home Civil Service and was then transferred for a year to the Colonial Service, during which he was sent on business for an eye-opening visit to Nigeria. He returned to the Treasury in 1931. Sir Thomas Padmore recalls: 'I was shot into a room with Edmund Compton. At once I realised that he was a very good civil servant indeed and entirely straightforward.' Padmore, later to be Permanent Secretary at the Department of Transport in Barbara Castle's time, adds: 'Rather unusually in the Treasury, Compton was a man with no enemies.'

man who could ask the most awkward questions in a non-awkward way. Thirty years when I worked with him, or rather was tutored by him, when he was Comptroller and Auditor General, he had perfected this art. I have never known a man who could pose such difficult questions and yet give so little offence to those to whom the questions were put. Like many others I was often reduced to a watery, resigned smile and an ungrudging 'You win the point'.

1934 was also the year when he married Betty, daughter of Hakewill Tresyllian Williams, of a Quaker carpet-making family from Kidderminster. The flavour of Compton's humour can be gauged from his often-made remark 'Don't ask me as a Kidderminster person to take personal responsibility for Gerald Nabarro - though I admire his use of ribaldry to get purchase tax changes.'

I remember Betty as a warm hostess. She was chairman of many worthwhile organisations who could be spied cycling round Chelsea from one good cause to another. When she died after 43 years of marriage, in 1987, Compton's life quite simply lost a dimension.

At the beginning of the Second World War Compton was seconded from the Treasury to the Ministry of Aircraft Production - the Treasury wanted one of their own most gifted to be Private Secretary and general factotum 'to handle the minister'. The minister was Lord Beaverbrook. Like other unlikely people, his friends Frank Owen and AJP Taylor, Compton came to have a great admiration for the Beaver, and treasured Michael Foot's marvellous essay 'Tribute to Beelzebub'.

In 1942 Compton returned to the Treasury as an Assistant Secretary. He had a reputation as an enormously effective operator in wartime.

In 1949 he became Third Secretary at the Treasury, where, says Sir Philip Allen, Lord Allen of Abbeydale, he had an outstandingly safe pair of hands and showed great versatility.

In 1956 Lord Sherfield, then Sir Roger Makins, came as Joint Permanent Secretary. 'Edmund Compton was extraordinarily good, extremely sensible and invaluable on home finance,' Sherfield says. 'I had been imposed on the Treasury as Permanent Secretary. I did

It was generally thought that Compton for all his talents was not a natural Permanent Secretary to the Treasury - a job which he candidly told me he would himself have liked. But Douglas Allen, now Lord Croham, contends that his colleagues thought Compton fitted in like a glove to the important job of Comptroller and Auditor General. Not only did Wilson as my first chairman have the greatest admiration for Compton's work. My second chairman, Douglas Houghton, Lord Houghton of Sowerby, describes Compton as an example 'of the highest standards in British public administration. A unique man of a philosophical turn of mind who could make fair judgements about maladministration.'

The Conservative chairman of the Public Accounts Committee, my third, Lord Boyd-Carpenter, regarded Compton as 'enormously knowledgeable on public finance' and Lord Barnett, a member of the PAC with Compton and later to be chairman, describes him as a person who was not only a great help in the work of the PAC but the kind of man who helped to make the PAC the most effective of all the select committees of the House of Commons.

In 1967 when, as Prime Minister, Harold Wilson had to choose the first ombudsman he called in Douglas Houghton and they agreed that there was no other candidate for the key post of first occupant than Compton, with whom they had both worked. My colleagues and I as MPs going to the ombudsman on a rather exploratory basis found that his interpretation of the remit was narrower than we might have liked. But his fastidious sticking to his terms of reference meant that the office developed an authority which might not have been the case in less careful hands.

From 1971 to 1978 Compton was the Chairman of the Boundary Commission, to which he brought yet again his impeccable sense of fairness. From 1972 to 1981 he was the chairman of the Programmes Complaints Commission of the BBC and in that post was even-handed, not only to the public, but also to imaginative programme producers.

Edmund Compton was a very considerable public servant of the British state.

(Photograph omitted)