Chapter 2

Life of William Montgomery Watt
Biography of William Montgomery Watt

William Montgomery Watt is considered to be a renowned and legendary figure among Islamic scholars. Watt was one of the foremost non-Muslim interpreters of Islam in the west. He was an enormously influential scholar in the field of Islamic Studies and a much-revered name all over the Muslim world.

Buaben has collected substantial information about W.M. Watt on the basis of a questionnaire that was sent to him in 1994. Moreover the 1993 edition of "who's who" an annual biographical dictionary provided him relevant information on Watt being the only published source. Apart from this a private interview with Watt supplied facts about his personal background.

William Montgomery Watt was born in Ceres, fife, on 19th March and died 24th October 2006, 1909 and lived for 97 years. Watt, like many other famous Scots, was son of the manse. His father died when Watt was only 14 months of age and he was brought up, as an only child by his mother, uncle and aunt in Edinburgh.

Though Watt describes his mother as a truly religious woman, but we do not actually know which religion she practiced. Most probably she followed her husband Andrew Watt's religion who was a presbyterian minister.
His father's untimely death affected both his own life and his attitude to life. He had to change his abode and lived in Billet which too was a temporary refuse. Though he wanted to be either a scientist or a philosopher but he ended up as a Clargyman and an academic.

Professor Watt was constantly busy in intellectual and spiritual pursuits. He promoted a dialogue between Christians and Muslims. A little stability of life resulted in his education at George Watson's College Edinburgh. Here he was awarded three degree's in six years classics at Edinburgh, and Litltum and Blitt (for a thesis on Kant) at Oxford. He spent the 1934 summer semester studying philosophy at Jena, Germany. His thesis on "free will and pre destination in early Islam" is very comprehensive which proves that he spent sufficient time in the study of philosophy. He traveled to Germany for the same purpose.

He became interested in Islam in 1937, when it was introduced to him during his study for a doctorate at Edinburgh due to his interaction with a Muslim lodger K.A. Mannan. As he himself declare "My interest in Islam with a personal contact. In the autumn of 1937 a veterinary student from Lahore come to share my flat for six or eight months. He belonged to the Qadiani Ahmadiyya and was rather argumentative, and the arguments which began over the super-table argued my interest in the religion of Islam. This in a sense my religion Islam began with dialogue. I
had the impression, too that I was confronting not just this individual, but a whole centuries old system of thought".  

Mannan was a Veterinary student and a member of Ahmadiyya sect. After this W.M. Watt himself admitted that now he learned something about Islam which he had been unaware.

To make his study more profound he also had a dialogue with the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, named George Francis Graham Brown. Being responsible for the religious needs of People Brown William agreed to work on the intellectual approach to Islam. He was interested in working on inter-faith relations. The main purpose of Watt’s trip of Jerusalem was to work at the intellectual approach to Islam. As a result Watt’s interest in Islamic studies at the intellectual level also increased and he was appointed as a religious leader just below the rank of priest cuddesdon and they remained together for about three years (1943-1946).

A little stability of life provided him a real emotional foundation, he continued his pursuits at Saint Mary’s the Beltors, Kensington where he served as an assistant to the Vicar. He also studied Arabic at the school of oriental studies and after returning to Scotland in 1946 he worked as lecturer in Arabic at Edinburgh University. He was awarded a personal
chair both in Arabic and Islamic studies in 1964. He provided his services to the institute until 1979.

W.M. Watt worked on his doctoral thesis i.e. "Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam" during the time when St. Mary's was closed because of bomb damage and he returned to Edinburgh. At the time he had finished his training as a curator at old St. Paul’s and returned to Jerusalem. He wrote his Ph.D. thesis, presented to the university of Edinburgh in 1944 and published four years later, in 1948. Islamic studies were still an undisputed Waqf of the Europeans.  

After that he returned to Edinburgh University where he worked as a lecturer and later on he became professor of Arabic and Islamic Studies. Therefore he dedicated his life to study of Sirah, history and theology, specially during (1946-1964) during his tenure as a lecturer in Edinburgh university he produced 'Muhammad at Mecca' and 'Muhammad at Medina' in 1953 and 1956 respectively, and much before his retirement he brought out a popular abridgment of these two entitled Muhammad Prophet and Statesman in 1961.

His commitment to study of Islam led him to study Norman Daniel who is the author of 'Islam and the West: the Making of an Image', subsequently it dawned to him that historical prejudice of west against Islam had been created by the 12th and 14th century scholars. It was
simply a war propaganda. These wars were fought in Palestine by European Christian countries against the Muslims.

W.M. Watt believed that to make a long determined effort to distort the image of somebody can not be justified. He considered it to be negative aspect of European identity. He therefore believed that distortion of image “was a negative aspect of European identify”.10

Buaben found Watt to have a reserve nature with deep introspection. He remained chairman of the Association of British Orientalist between 1964-65. He acquired an honorary degree from the university of Aberdeen. He was also awarded the level Della Vida Medol in Los Angeles.11

Though Watt remained a Christian and worked for many years as a priest for the Scottish Episcopal Church, he studied passages from the Holy Quran. He also studied various Islamic mystical works. Charles De-foucauld a French priest who lived among Algerian tribes, influenced him a great deal. In order to show his positive identity as a Christian he spoke of something which was more profound. Though apparently he spent his life battling against the tide of intolerance, along the live, by focusing on the historical prejudices of the west against Islam, he turned out to be both on explorer and theological reconciler, who acquired a due place in the study of Islam.
Watt has produced an indepth study material on almost all aspects of Christianity and Islam. We have observed that the inter-faith encounter (with a Muslim friend) has been at the root of his thinking which gave way to deep introspection.¹²

Watt’s writings sometimes were described as propagandistic or possibly didactic by John Van Ess. It was observed in his interview that Watt expresses his concern regarding the rise of fundamentalism in almost all religions. But he had a belief that inter-faith relations would improve because he emphasized and appreciated the strengths of the positive assertions of the other side. His conscious effort to have a dialogue in this direction is remarkable and it is seen to grow tremendously throughout his life.¹³

W.M. Watt retained enormous respect for the Presbyterian tradition, and respected the decision of his wife, Jean, whom he married in 1943 to become a catholic. He joined the Iona community in 1960 because he found its brand of radical, exploratory faith congenial. Indeed he continued to be both an explorer and theological reconciler to the end. His best book, "A Christian Faith for Today" was published in 2002 when he was 93. It was as distillation of the sort of generous Christianity to which he had given his life.¹⁴
Watt and Jean bought their first house, the Neuk, at Bridgend, Dalkeith in 1947, and it remained an anchor for the family. In 1956 they acquired another house, in Crail, Fife where, during summer holidays by the Sea, William worked hard to create a small beach for his five children. He moved rocks, dug channels and battled seaweed to provide them with a clear space on the rocky shore. By summer’s end, it would be almost perfect, but when the Watt’s were duck in Dalkeith, the Sea would destroy what he had created. The following summer he would do it all over again.\textsuperscript{15}

William Montgomery Watt Islamic scholar and priest, died October 24\textsuperscript{th}, 2006.

\textbf{Watt’s Place in Islamic Studies:}

Professor William Montgomery Watt, was a legendary figure among Islamic scholars. He dedicated his life to the promotion of dialogue between Christian and Muslims. He is famous for his three books entitled \textit{Muhammad at Mecca}, \textit{Muhammad at Madina} and \textit{Muhammad prophet and Statesman}, acknowledged by experts to be classics in the field. In Scotland he was a member of the Ecumenical Iona community since 1960. The Muslim press terms him as “The last orientalist”.\textsuperscript{16} From 1947 to 1979, he was head of the department of Arabic and Islamic Studies at the university of Edinburgh. From 1964
with the title of Professor and later as Professor Emeritus, from 1963 – 1978 and at Georgetown University, Washington, 1978-79. He delivered lectures at Makerere University, Uganda (1967), at Kuwait University (1970) and at the college de France, Parris (1970). In 1981 he received the Levidella Vida Medal from the university of California, Los Angeles. Watt held visiting professorships at the university of Toronto, the college de France and Georgetown university, and received the American Georgio Levi Delles Vida Medal and was the first recipient of the British society for Middle Eastern Studies award for outstanding scholarship.

**His Interest in "Islam and Christianity"**

He had studied classic at Edinburgh University an “Great’s” – Philosophy and ancient history at Oxford. From 1934 to 1938 he taught moral philosophy at Edinburgh University. After the death of his mother 1937 his interest in Islam developed consequent upon his conversation with Khwaja Abdul Mannan, a Veterinary student from Pakistan and a member of the Ahmadiyya sect, Abdul Mannan was an argumentive Muslim, who enabled professor Watt realize that Islam was “ a centuries old system of thought of life” this interest later developed further and led to his authoring over thirty books and over hundred and fifty articles.
Watt’s Scholar

C.V. Muhammad Benaboud

Muhammad Benaboud was a Watt’s scholar he was born in Tetoun, Morocco on the 23rd of June 1980. He studied at and graduated from American School of Tangier and pursued his University studies at the United States International University, San Diego, California from which he obtained a B.A. in political science.

He obtain a Ph.D from Edinburgh University (Scotland U.K.) in 1978. His doctoral dissertation was entitled “A Political and Social History of Sevilla under Banu Abbad”, and it was supervised by the famous Scottish orientalst William Montgomery Watt. The Arabic translation of this work was published in Morocco in 1983 and was awarded the prize of Morocco for the Human and Social Sciences by the Morocco Ministry of Culture during the same years. An abridged version of this work was published in Spanish under title Sevilla Enelsinglo XI. 1992.17

Watt’s Teacher

Watt write about his teacher Richard Bell in theses words in his book Bell’s introduction to the Quran. “When the suggestion of a revised edition of Richard Bell’s introduction to the Quran was first made in
discussion with the secretary of Edinburgh University Press, I was attracted by the idea of doing something to maintain the influence of a great scholar, and was emboldened by the success of Theodor Noldek’s pupil in revising and continuing his work. The task, however, as I soon realized, is not without its difficulties. Richard Bell was my greatly respected teacher under whom I did much of my study of Arabic and who guided me in the Free Will and Predestination in Early Islam. The sincerest tribute to such work a scholar is to take his views seriously and criticize them frankly. Bell’s followed his European predecessors in speaking of the Quran as Muhammad’s own, at least in his introduction, various remark he made lead me to think that he would have a considerable measure of sympathy with the views I have expressed about Muhammad’s prophethood.
References

9. [http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2006/nov/14/guardianobituries.higheerdution](http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/2006/nov/14/guardianobituries.highereduction)
20. *Ibid*.