

Reginald Watson: An Appreciation

by Reginald Foort

When we heard of the untimely death of ATOE member Reginald Watson we immediately thought of Reginald Foort; the two had been close friends for more than 35 years. We contacted Mr. Foort in Chicago and asked the famed organist for a few words for the obituary. A few days later the story which follows arrived in the mail—a revealing account which Mr. Foort wants to share with all of us, of the great influence Reg Watson exerted on the life of his friend.

The first time I met Reg Watson was while I was practicing for a radio program at the Regal Theatre, Kingston-on-Thames, a suburb of London, in May, 1932. About 11 a.m., I heard an unmistakably American voice behind me, so I whipped around on the organ bench and there he was, the greatest organ fanatic in the world! Reg and I became buddies on the spot, a friendship which has lasted without a break until he passed away in his sleep on July 15 last.

Our first day together was, to say the least, unusual. My radio program was from 1:00 to 2:00, so Reg sat with me until I finished. Then we went out to lunch and came back to the theatre in time to play the first of my three 15-minute organ solos.

At that time, apart from playing audiences in and out, hundreds of theatre organists all over Britain used to play three properly presented organ shows each day between the movies, which thrilled Reg Watson to the core because nearly all the theatre organs in America had been closed down when the talkies came in.

After the second of my organ solos, we went out to dinner and returned to do my last show. Normally we should then have been able to go home but that particular night, I had agreed to do a kind of experimental broadcast for the B.B.C. from 1:30 to 2:00 a.m., the very first radio program they had ever given on short wave from an outside source. This was on the overseas transmission to U.S.A. and Canada. So naturally Reg stayed for that also. And while the broadcast was actually taking place, one of the B.B.C. engineers would periodically slip down to the organ console and whisper that the organ was coming through in Canada just as clearly as if it was from their own local station.

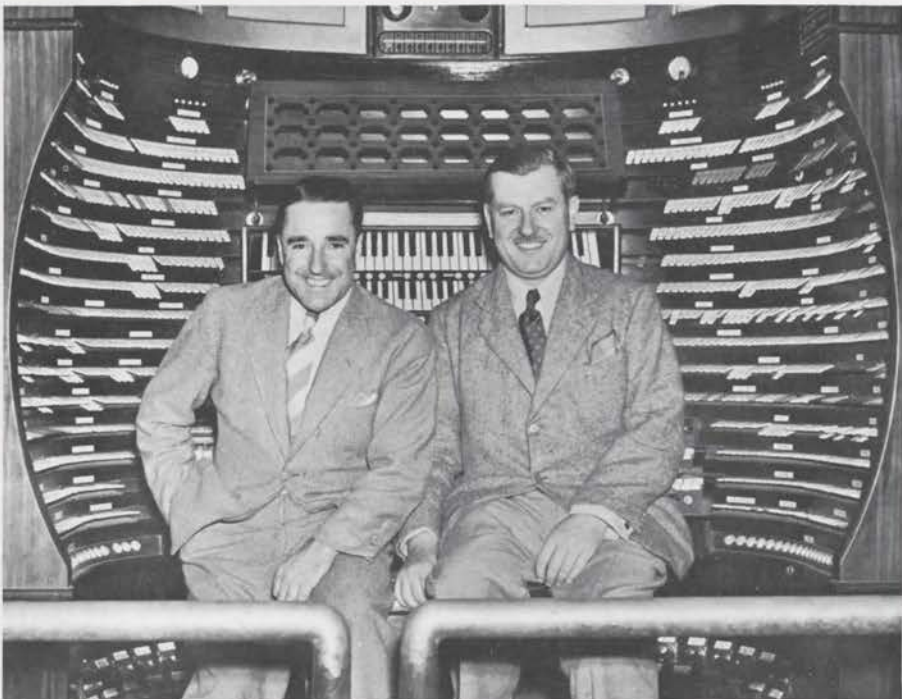


Finally I drove Reg back to his hotel in London in my Bentley racing car—with the top down—and nearly frightened him to death because he thought I drove much too fast and, as he had no hat and didn't then know me well enough to say so straight out, the chilly wind gave him the worst cold he ever had in his life.

Thus began our long and cordial friendship. Apart from my wife, there is no doubt that Reg Watson had a greater impact on my life than any other single person.

In his boyhood, he must have been quite a fair violinist and he never entirely got over the complex of wanting to play the melody with his left hand and the accompaniment with his right. Before I met him, he had already become an organ enthusiast but it was basically straight organ which he favored and he never lost his love for a fine big, four-manual church organ with a real diapason chorus and a thrilling Full Swell with lots of reeds and mixtures, and no tibias!

Later on, after he became accustomed to hearing all the hundreds of theater organs still going strong in Britain, he switched around and became an avid theater organ fan. He bought a style 235 Wurlitzer and had it installed in the basement of the home which he himself had specially designed and built to house a pipe organ. Over the years, he constantly acquired additional ranks and chests and relays and things to add to the instrument; but he never stopped kicking himself, so to speak, for not having bought one or other of the various big 4-manual Wurlitzers which came into his orbit. I feel pretty
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A SEA OF STOPKEYS: Reg Watson (left) and Reg Foort pose at the console of the huge Midmer-Losh in the Atlantic City Auditorium in this 1938 photo.

sure he realized deep down that, if he did buy a big 4-manual, there would never be room to install it properly in the space available. However, he did build up his 3-manual into a magnificent instrument.

He put in a lot of serious organ practice and ultimately worked himself up to becoming quite a fine organist. He could get sounds out of an organ that I never heard anybody else get. On occasion, when he happened to get the right combination of sympathetic friends who provided the necessary inspiration, he could and did put up a magnificent performance. And he had the same kind of effect on me. I remember one day when I was playing a prelude before the show at the London Paramount and Reg was sitting with me, I improvised a completely different arrangement of the *Londonderry Air* which was so thrilling that it made both his hair and mine stand on end. But I never managed to do it just like that again.

Reg used to come over to England on vacation nearly every other year, so when I decided to resign from my job as B.B.C. Staff Organist and go around the vaudeville theatres with a traveling pipe organ, he happened to be in England, so you can imagine how we discussed every detail of the proposition from every possible angle.

My original idea was a four-manual 16-rank organ but Reg held out—and rightly so—for a much larger instrument. So between us we designed the five-manual, 27-rank job which ultimately turned out tops. It was the greatest theater organ ever built in the world. It was second only—and the closest possible second—to the New York Paramount. Then Reg returned to America and not only persuaded the Moller Company to build the organ for me, but parked himself down in Hagerstown, Md., the whole time it was being built. He insisted that every detail, every pipe, every tremulant, every regulator, every bit of voicing, was exactly the way he wanted it.

Several years before, it had been Reg Watson who had persuaded Bernard Lamberge to get me the engagement to travel all the way from London, England, to Toronto to give a recital for what, in those days, was a fantastic fee. On the way back to England, I stopped off in New York and played for ten weeks at the Paramount. And I always felt that it was the prestige of having played in that theater which had a lot to do with

my getting the B.B.C. job later on as Staff Theater Organist. All of which was due, directly or indirectly, to the good offices of Reginald T. Watson.

In 1938, my wife and I came over on a visit and stayed with Ethel and Reg in their beautiful Manhasset, L. I., home. After spending some time in Hagerstown seeing the traveling organ being built, we all went down to Atlantic City and spent a never-to-be-forgotten day on and in the huge organ in the Convention Hall, with its seven manuals and 455 ranks and five Tubas on 100-inch wind which literally hurt one's ears.

When our 30-ton Moller organ came to England, Reg Watson not only came over with it but brought all the blue prints and took charge of the entire operation. This involved unpacking 65 packing cases and, in four days, converting the contents into the assembled and connected-up and tuned and regulated 5-manual, 27-rank organ on the stage of Drury Lane Theatre for press cocktail-party and newsreel publicity purposes and then, without a moment's let-up, taking the gigantic instrument all apart again, getting it out into the five 30-ft. road trucks, traveling it 186 miles to Manchester and reinstalling it over the weekend on the stage of the Palace Theatre in time to open on the Monday at 6 p.m. Normally one of the most friendly and easy-to-get-on-with people, our friend, Reg Watson, became transformed into a raging, yelling, slave-driving monster. Neither he nor any member of my 15-man crew slept a single wink for five days and nights. They were all crawling around like dead people. But he got the job done. And, but for him, I am convinced the job never would have been done. Ted Moller, Jr., himself took the trouble to come all the way over to England expressly to be present at the opening show. This was in November, 1938. Reg stayed on with us in England for several months until he got everything running smoothly and then he returned home to America. On account of the war, I did not see him again until years later when I was over in this country on a visit.

In the days before I knew him, Reg Watson had been a marble merchant on a big scale. Indeed it was he who had supplied the whole of the huge quantity of marble used in the construction of the Radio City complex. When the use of marble died out, to be replaced by various artificial substitutes, Reg Watson entered the construction field, at first building houses on Long Island and,

later, big apartment buildings and shopping centers in Pennsylvania and other states.

During World War II, he joined the U. S. Corps of Engineers and had an interesting career, attaining the rank of Major. If the war had lasted a few more weeks, he would have been promoted to Colonel. I often tried to draw him out but he rarely talked about his activities, though he did let out one day that he had a leading part in organizing the colossal camouflage scheme which completely fooled Hitler for three precious weeks into believing that our attack across the English Channel into Normandy was only a feint and that our real business invasion was going to come across the Straits of Dover.

While I was visiting with the Watsons after the war, Reg introduced me to George Wright and took us both out to dinner. We spent an unforgettable evening together. Around 11 p.m., while we were up in the roof garden of the Astor Hotel, George asked me if I'd like to go in and play the Paramount organ which he had vacated only a few weeks previously. So we waited until the end of the show, went into the theater and, between us, played the organ for nearly five hours. Dear old Reg Watson was on Cloud 9 in the Seventh Heaven, having two of his biggest pals in the world playing the greatest theater organ ever built for hours on end to a spell-bound audience of one.

The reason I moved over here permanently at the end of 1951 was primarily to be nearer Reg Watson, but it didn't work out that way. For the past 15 years, I have been more or less stuck in Chicago, while Reg was busy building all kinds of houses and apartments and developments in the East. Naturally, whenever I did manage to get to New York, we made a point of seeing each other. Reg was an enthusiastic member of the Builders' Association and never failed to attend their convention in Chicago each year in December, so we always enjoyed spending the best part of a week together; in fact, whenever he could, he came a few days early before the convention started. I generally managed to find one or two interesting organs for him to visit. Naturally, we both eagerly looked forward to these infrequent get-togethers. And now, alas! he is no longer with us. I and all his innumerable friends and admirers are sadly going to miss that dear, lovable, friendly, generous, smiling, argumentative, organ-crazy fellow far more than I know how to express.