

## REVIEW: R.D.LAING

*Robert R. Calder*

Gavin Miller, **R.D. Laing**, (Edinburgh Review Introductions to Scottish Culture), Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005, 144 pp, pb, £9.99, ISBN 1-8593-3270-6.

This monograph is not an exploration of R.D. Laing's Scottish intellectual background. It is a regrettably spurious endeavour to foster belief that, other than peripherally, Laing's intellectual roots were in what Gavin Miller calls 'Scottish Thought'. The book is declared a bridgehead in a campaign to rescue *neglected Scottish thinkers* from **The Eclipse of Scottish Culture** which the series editors responsible for this volume affected to diagnose in their book of that title: Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull. Miller praises their 'pioneering' in an attempt to engage readers' sympathy. Further special pleading is ventured by way of self-identification with the critiques of American routine/mechanical/dehumanising psychiatric practice rehearsed in Daniel Burston's fairly sound biography of Laing. Though parasitical on Burston, Miller has so shallow a grasp of the complexities of real problems he is more liable to foster the British problem of not taking severe psychic disturbance sufficiently seriously.

His method throughout is demagogic, claiming to be against tyranny and concluding with a triumphalist assertion. Some evils have been exposed, and Laing vindicated (at least among what is implied are right-minded people). I am sure Burston is correct in regarding Laing's 1960 **The Divided Self**, and its intellectual context, as the basis of better understanding, and regarding Laing's

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later work as a confused falling-off. Whether Miller so agrees is another matter: he seems to endorse this not at all unusual perspective on Laing almost out of political correctness. If he says that Laing's later celebrity has nothing to do with his earlier real merits, how can he and the publisher tout Laing as probably Scotland's major twentieth century 'public intellectual', a title Laing disclaimed, when the sole basis of any such claim is only the later 'notoriety'?

Miller's account of **The Divided Self** is founded on a contrast between the *understanding* which a patient might share in respect of his condition, and *explanation* by way of sheerly causative factors. The detail of this distinction can be found in the Existenz philosophy (Karl Jaspers et al) which the Glasgow philosophical group of the Jewish exiles from Nazism Karl Abenheimer and Joseph Schorstein was important in naturalising and disseminating. Miller refers a great deal to the literature of that philosophy in his exposition of Laing.

Yet, in writing of Laing's biography, Miller churns out sheer *explanation*, Laing's mad mother, not to mention (actually anti-Laingian!) implicit contrasts between the Laings and the hypothetical 'normal' family. Laing's own autobiographical references are milked for lurid gossip, with no awareness of the specific historical/cultural context of Laing's upbringing: emotional and not merely sexual repression; the broad Scottish Senior Secondary School curriculum, both science and the humanities taught to a high level; ideals of learning manifested in imperatives and in the provisions of municipal libraries such as hardly exist now. To say that this book lacks historical sense flatters it unduly.

Chapter Two mentions Laing's name only twice, and only in passing. It is a journalistic set of notes on a routine list of critics of orthodox psychiatry contemporary with him ('goodies' rather than 'baddies'). Other people currently active and supposedly on the right side are discussed in a later scrappy chapter on 'Critical Psychiatry'. Miller's notion of arguing affinities between thinkers, patting himself on the back for supposedly discovering these affinities, is just a matter of listing views they have in common, without appreciating that these views are so basic to the field, hardly anybody competent would differ on them. Thomas Szasz deplored Laing, who deplored David Cooper? Shush! In Miller's discussion of *literary presentations of abuse of psychiatric practice*, **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** is regarded as evidence of the state of current hospitals. With the same self-parodying hubris of believing oneself preaching to the converted, his citation of Valeriy Tarsis's satire of Soviet practice merely bawls 'Stalinists!' at Miller's *bête noire*

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‘orthodox psychiatrists’, doubtless reassuring them of the stupidity of their critics.

Miller’s discussions of Laing’s supposed relation to ‘Scottish Thought’ are not those of an insider who knows what he is talking about. Neither he nor anyone else responsible for this book can have any sound knowledge of John Macmurray’s work. Miller parrots the Beveridge/Turnbull travesty of Macmurray (which I long ago criticised in print). I repeat, Macmurray neither felt nor articulated any emotivist recoil against the ‘soullessness’ of ‘science’. On the contrary! Indeed, much of Stephen Jay Gould’s last book is an independent restatement of Macmurray’s views, Gould the scientist, Macmurray the scientist manqué. Miller credits Macmurray’s philosophical allies and contemporaries with the same recoil at soullessness, but from among them mentions only one cranky, justly forgotten, endlessly self-contradictory book by the ex-Hegelian James Black Baillie.

Laing quotes only *one paragraph* from Macmurray in **The Divided Self**, and not even an argument. That paragraph merely expresses very clearly the distinction between recognising individual human valuing as a determining factor in reality, as against allegations that all can be *explained* by reference to theory in biology and the physical sciences. Margaret Thatcher could have included the Macmurray paragraph in her ‘there is no such thing as society’ speech. (On ‘there is no such thing as society’ see **John Macmurray, Selected Philosophical Writings**, ed. Esther Mackintosh, Library of Scottish Philosophy, Imprint Academic, 2004, pp. 95-109). Individuality is one thing, individualism another. Laing’s therapeutic advocacies of the latter, against denials of human autonomy and rights, were inevitably provisional and one-sided. Thus, unfortunately, they remained. Miller observes that Laing was not a systematic thinker. Whoever supposed he was? Far from Macmurray’s philosophy ‘harmonising’ (as Miller has it) with Laing’s views, a Macmurrayan *critique* of Laing is the only feasible prospect.

Assuming *ab initio* that Laing and Macmurray were saying the same thing, or used the term ‘person’ in the same sense (confusing and losing sight of both of them), Miller reveals one key to his procedure. He ignores entirely the texts of the books he cites (professionally footnoted) apart from the paragraphs he himself prints. Certainly he pays no heed to Macmurray’s prefatories to **Persons in Relation** in his parroting of Turnbull and Beveridge.

In Macmurray’s denial that you can licitly claim to *know* anything which you do not also *believe* – when you might merely feel there was something badly

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wrong with you for not believing it – Miller finds the view that you should regard as knowledge anything you happen to believe. When does the next war start? Miller is certainly consistent in eschewing the self-doubt and attention to standards of argument, or evidence, which that implies. He should not blame Macmurray.

In his chapter ‘Scottish Psychoanalysis’, Miller pooh-poohs suggestions that Abenheimer and Schorstein influenced Laing. Consistent again, his habit of ignoring the texts of books extends here to his own: to this very one, to what he has already himself written, and cited regarding Laing’s identification of Schorstein as his abiding mentor. Miller insists that Laing’s work was in direct continuity with that of the *Scottish* Freudian revisionists W.R.D. Fairbairn and Ian Suttie, whose own account of the genesis of his views Miller ignores and contradicts. Miller pooh-poohs mention of one spat between Laing and Fairbairn (trust Miller, it is irrelevant!?) and argues as a basic agreement what he does not recognise as only the agreement on basics common to Fairbairn, Szasz, Abenheimer, and anybody not wholly incompetent.

Miller’s yen to relate Laing to Fairbairn and disassociate him from Abenheimer is manifested by really ignoring Abenheimer, faking not making a comparison. Presumably he has read nothing of Abenheimer (whom he does not cite, even out of context!). Abenheimer’s critique of Fairbairn’s forever Freudian doctrine and jargon gets passing mention only by way of a dismissive reference in Fairbairn’s disciple J.D. Sutherland’s book about his master. But Laing echoed Abenheimer, not least on the jargon.

Miller has no anxiety about potentially dangerous misunderstandings of **The Divided Self**, or such grotesque trivialisation of crucial issues as were implied by the inclusion of that work in a recent selection of **100 Best Scottish Books**, accompanied by off-hand uninformed remarks from a novelist. Miller’s book is rubbish, and those guilty of publishing it are ignorant of their own responsibilities.

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