

A REPLY TO ROBERT R. CALDER

Gavin Miller

Robert R. Calder's review of my book, **R.D. Laing** (Calder 2006), is a startling contribution to Scottish history of ideas. The book, published as part of the series **Edinburgh Review Introductions to Scottish Culture**, is 'rubbish' because its author is complacent – 'patting himself on the back'; a rabble-rouser – 'His method throughout is demagogic'; intellectually dependent – 'parasitical on [Daniel] Burston'; and incapable of rational thought – 'eschewing [...] self-doubt and attention to standards of argument, or evidence'.

I am mystified by Calder's attribution of demagoguery. I am alleged to have used Ken Kesey's **One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest** as 'evidence of the state of current hospitals'; when I both explicitly refer to it as a literary representation, and stress that it was composed in the 1950s. A similar wilful distortion and exaggeration occurs in Calder's claim that my brief reading of Valeriy Tarsis's **Ward-7**, a satire on Soviet psychiatric repression, 'bawls "Stalinists!" at [...] "orthodox psychiatrists"'. It simply does not. *Abusus non tollit usum*; a critique of Soviet abuses could not in itself convict Western psychiatry. But it surely invited concern about the possibility of Western psychiatric misuse.

A further allegation is that I fail in intellectual consistency. On the one hand, I laud Laing for his awareness of the 'contrast between the *understanding* which a patient might share in respect of his condition, and *explanation* by way of sheerly causative factors'. Yet my brief biographical chapter supposedly provides 'sheer *explanation*' by referring to Laing's troubled family life. Calder fails to appreciate the distinction that he invokes. Had I argued that Laing's mother, by prohibiting jam and jelly-babies, in some way affected her child's brain development, then I would have provided 'sheer explanation'. But I say no more than what is understandable and highly plausible: Laing's family life gave him a motive and material for his intellectually accomplished explorations of madness.

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Calder also claims that I have over-estimated the importance to Laing of the Scottish philosopher, John Macmurray. He correctly points out that Laing ‘quotes only *one paragraph* from Macmurray in **The Divided Self**’. However, the chapter which surrounds Laing’s fourteen-line exegesis of Macmurray is quite clearly a synthesis of Macmurray’s personal relations theory with the existential-phenomenological tradition. It is also worth pointing out that Laing devotes only a one-line sentence to Karl Jaspers in **The Divided Self** (Laing 1965, p.27), even though (and on this, Calder and I agree) Jasper’s intellectual influence is quite apparent in the text. Calder must play fair. If he wishes to gauge Laing’s intellectual influences by the length of explicitly expository passages, then he must also conclude that Macmurray is fourteen times as important to Laing as Jaspers.

A further accusation is that I commit the fallacy of the undistributed middle term by conflating Macmurray’s ‘denial that you can licitly claim to *know* anything which you do not also *believe*’ with the thesis that ‘you should regard as knowledge anything you happen to believe’ (i.e. confounding ‘All knowledge is belief’ with ‘All belief is knowledge’). But Macmurray does indeed make something resembling these claims, although with considerably more nuance and plausibility than Calder’s nebulous restatements. Macmurray argues that knowledge must be believed in action, not merely verbally espoused as the conclusion of a train of theoretical reasoning. He *also* argues that unexamined belief cannot be abstractly dismissed. It is knowledge until a real, rather than imagined or theoretical, doubt interposes: ‘if I find myself possessed of a certain belief, and know no reason for questioning it, I *cannot* doubt it; and if I could my doubt would be irrational’ (Macmurray 1957, p.76).

I am also supposed to have diminished the influence upon Laing of the Abenheimer-Schorstein group (a discussion group active in Glasgow during the 1950s), and to have exaggerated Laing’s relation to the psychoanalytic ideas developed by Scots such as W.R.D. Fairbairn and Ian Suttie. Thus: ‘Miller pooh-poohs mention of one spat between Laing and [W.R.D.] Fairbairn (trust Miller, it is [*sic*] irrelevant!?)’. But there is no reference in the book to such an incident. Calder is perhaps referring to a disagreement between Laing and John D. Sutherland. The author of **R.D. Laing** also, claims Calder, ‘pooh-poohs suggestions that Abenheimer and Schorstein influenced Laing’. Yet Calder’s exaggeration is quite at odds with the modest tone of my argument that Laing’s ‘professional context, in which Fairbairn was an important figure, would seem to be at least as influential upon Laing as any informal philosophical group centred around Abenheimer’ (Miller 2004, p.99). As further evidence of this

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counterbalance to Continental influence, I would like to point out that chapter six of **The Divided Self** (Laing 1965, pp.94–105) clearly combines existential philosophy with the psychoanalytic account of the ‘schizoid’ personality developed by Fairbairn. ‘The false-self system’ described by Laing is explicitly both ‘inauthentic’ and ‘schizoid’.

Calder’s review prosecutes those whom he imagines are the ventriloquists behind the dummy that is Miller: ‘Miller parrots the Beveridge/Turnbull travesty of Macmurray’; ‘Neither he nor anyone else responsible for this book can have any sound knowledge of John Macmurray’s work’; ‘those guilty of publishing it are ignorant of their own responsibilities’. The culprits are more clearly identified when Calder refers to ‘**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’. The colon is clumsily placed, but the assertion is clear enough: Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull are the series editors responsible for my book.

It is foolhardy to denounce the series editors so forcefully when one of them has been invented by the reviewer. The series editors of **Edinburgh Review Introductions** are not Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull; they are *Cairns Craig* and Ronald Turnbull.

Such inaccuracy is indicative of Calder’s overall approach: his attempted indictment is a purée of awkward syntax, reckless misstatement, and straightforward factual inaccuracy. Such a review can convict no-one but its author.

REFERENCES

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