

GEORGE DAVIE 1912-2007: AN APPRECIATION

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In the entry devoted to him in **Chambers Scottish Biographical Dictionary**, George Davie is described as a pioneer in studies of the Scottish Enlightenment. This is an apt enough description, and his two volumes of essays on the Scottish Enlightenment give emphasis to it, yet it hardly begins to do justice to his influence. He is most widely known for his seminal work, **The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century**, which was published in 1961 and began the process of linking the intellectual traditions of the Scottish Enlightenment to those of today. Here, and in its sequel, **The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: The Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland**, published in 1986, he demonstrated with skill, humour and historical grasp, the need to re-assess and to value the generalist tradition of education in Scotland, a tradition in which philosophy played a key role. His work has provided a philosophical underpinning for interdisciplinarity in our institutions of learning. It has also been recognised as a significant commentary on the relationship between expert and community. Thus it has become a reference point for the discussion of cultural thought in Scotland, straddling, as it does, the fields of education, history, philosophy and politics.

George Davie was born in Dundee in 1912. He was educated at the High School, but he did not attend University College Dundee, electing instead to study at Edinburgh University, for Dundee could not provide him with a training in his chosen fields of classics and philosophy. Nevertheless, during his childhood the presence on the professoriate of University College Dundee of Patrick Geddes should be noted. Geddes's thinking is characterised by both generalism and a regard for the visual, and these precise areas were to emerge

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for Davie as key aspects of the Scottish intellectual tradition which he went on to defend. He was certainly conscious of Geddes as a Dundee figure; indeed one of his older relatives had attended Geddes's lectures. In his writings his regard for Geddes is clear. Indeed, in **The Democratic Intellect**, he identifies Geddes as one of the last representatives of the nineteenth century Scottish philosophical approach to science teaching. Much later, Davie's friend Hugh MacDiarmid was to place Geddes and Davie side by side in his intellectual autobiography, **The Company I've Kept**.

While studying at the University of Edinburgh, Davie was one of a group of students which included Sorley MacLean and J. B. Caird. Slightly younger was Stuart Hood. It was Caird and Davie who introduced Sorley MacLean to the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid, and it was Davie who introduced MacLean to MacDiarmid in the flesh in Rutherford's bar in 1934. Davie would have considered it only proper that these two poets were introduced to each other by a student of philosophy: a symbol of the cultural importance of that discipline in Scotland. On graduating he was appointed as assistant to the Edinburgh University philosopher, the notable Kant scholar, Norman Kemp Smith, who was to be a lifelong influence. After war service from 1941-45, George Davie was appointed to head the Department of Moral Philosophy at Queen's University, Belfast. While in Ireland he got to know MacDiarmid's friend the poet John Hewitt, who introduced him to the work of Robert Burns's admirer and younger contemporary, the Ulster Scots poet James Orr, an interest he shared with Hamish Henderson at the time. In 1944 he married Elspeth Dryer, who, as Elspeth Davie, became a highly respected writer, winning the Katherine Mansfield Prize in 1978. Elspeth was as acute a questioner of the nature of reality in her medium as George was in his. Their daughter, Anne, was born in 1946.

In 1953 he had been awarded the degree of D.Litt by the University of Edinburgh for his pioneering thesis 'A Scotch Metaphysics – the Theory of Knowledge in the Scottish Universities 1730-1860'. This was accepted for publication by Routledge, but was not published due to a timely distraction which became the basis of Davie's achievement. This was the preparation of an introduction to the proposed book, the subject of which was to be the history of philosophy teaching in Scotland. In due course this 'introduction' became a book itself, namely **The Democratic Intellect**. In 1959 he was appointed Reader at Queen's University, Belfast; however, wanting to return to his philosophical roots, in 1960 he accepted a Lectureship in the Department of Philosophy of the University of Edinburgh, where he stayed for the rest of his

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career. The following year **The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century** was published by Edinburgh University Press. This book on the generalist tradition of education in Scotland attracted wide praise and its contemporary importance was recognised in its influence on the deliberations of the Robbins committee. Nevertheless it appeared at a time of relentless specialisation in higher education, and its generalist message was by no means universally welcomed. Davie was well aware of the contemporary relevance of his historical analysis. It is relevant still, as we struggle with fragmented efforts at interdisciplinarity instead of the philosophically informed approach Davie advocated. The second edition of **The Democratic Intellect** was published in 1964. It was reprinted twice in the early 1980s and is still in print. It is perhaps the most significant single volume written by a Scottish academic in the last fifty years, not in terms of sales and public perception, but through the multitude of Scottish thinkers it has influenced. The democratic intellect defends a culture by showing that all its parts benefit from all its other parts. Poetry requires mathematics and vice versa. They are not in competition.

In 1973, in a return to his native city, George Davie presented the Dow Lecture at the University of Dundee, entitled **The Social Significance of the Scottish Philosophy of Common Sense**. 1981, as well as seeing the first paperback edition of **The Democratic Intellect**, saw the publication of Davie's illuminating essay, **The Scottish Enlightenment**, by the Historical Association. In 1982 George Davie retired from teaching at Edinburgh University, having had a profound influence on generations of students. In recognition of his achievements, in 1983 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, one of the first philosophers to be so honoured in recent times. A further honour was paid to him in 1984 in the form of a Festschrift dedicated to him and entitled **Philosophers of the Scottish Enlightenment**. This was edited by Vincent Hope of his old department.

Davie's continuing contribution at this time is evident from Derrida's invitation to a conference in Paris, **Victor Cousin, les idéologues et les écossais**, which resulted in another notable paper, **Victor Cousin and the Scottish Philosophers**, first published in France in 1985 and published the next year in English in **Edinburgh Review**. By the mid 1980s one might have assumed that George Davie was ready to sit back, content with his achievement, but this was the time that his influence began to reassert itself on a new generation, not least the then editor of **Edinburgh Review**, Peter Kravitz. In his role as editorial director of *Polygon*, Kravitz applied the inspiration of Davie's democratic

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intellectualism to the development of a remarkable mix of publications which included early work by James Kelman, A. L. Kennedy and Janice Galloway. In 1986 Polygon published Davie's second major book **The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: the Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland**. This was received with considerable enthusiasm. As with **The Democratic Intellect** the book drew together philosophy, education and wider cultural issues, not least the poetical and the scientific. The following quotations give some idea of the international and national appeal of the book. In the Australian journal **Quadrant**, the philosopher D. M. Armstrong commented 'Davie traces the Scottish view through this century, in the Edinburgh philosophy of Kemp Smith, in MacDiarmid, in John Anderson, right down to Anderson's Australian pupil John Passmore'. **The Glasgow Herald** commented 'Davie may yet transform our ideas of twentieth-century Scotland'. Turning to the book's significance for literary studies the **Times Higher Education Supplement** suggested that 'the chapter on MacDiarmid is the best account of the poet yet written' while **The New Statesman** remarked that 'if Davie had done nothing else in this fascinating book, his elucidation of the philosophical bearings of one of the greatest twentieth-century poets would have been sufficiently momentous'. The **Times Literary Supplement** struck an appropriately interdisciplinary note: 'Davie displays on page after page the virtues of an education that encourages a free interplay between special knowledge and general understanding'. **The London Review of Books** called it 'a substantial achievement in the chronically underdeveloped area of post-Enlightenment Scottish studies'.

Having made his mark again at an age of well over seventy, Davie continued to produce and to influence. Introducing a collection of Davie's essays published in 1990, James Kelman wrote that 'as well as offering an introduction to the intellectual struggles in Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries, these essays by Davie offer an insight into some of the more crucial issues in modern times'. It was around this time that Davie, along with Noam Chomsky, made a notable contribution to the Free University of Glasgow's Self Determination and Power conference, which Kelman had helped to organise at the Pearce Institute in Govan.

Perhaps inspired by its treatment of David Hume in the eighteenth century, the University of Edinburgh never managed to appoint George Davie to the chair he so clearly deserved. But he was made Reader Emeritus in 1987 and in the late 1990s he was awarded an honorary doctorate. This period also saw him honoured by the Saltire Society as recipient of the Andrew Fletcher of Saltoun

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award, an event which was accompanied by the presentation of a portrait by Alexander Moffat, who had in earlier years painted so many of Davie's poet friends, including both Sorley MacLean and Hugh MacDiarmid. In a fitting tribute, Moffat's contribution to the 2007 Royal Scottish Academy Summer Exhibition was a portrait drawing of Davie. Moffat was himself part of Davie's wide circle of friends and it has to be remembered here that, in Elspeth, George had married a woman who was not only a remarkable writer but an artist who had trained at Edinburgh College of Art under Gillies and Maxwell and had numbered among her fellow students Alan Davie and William Gear. Elspeth thus reinforced George's broad cultural inclinations, and whatever neglected intellectual paths his writings took us into they always led firmly back to the cultural realities of Scotland.

In 2001, with the help of his old friend and colleague the philosopher John Llewelyn, a version of his 1953 thesis, now entitled **The Scotch Metaphysics**, finally took its place on Routledge's list, a mere half a century after its original proposed publication date. Despite increasing physical frailty, in 2003 he published an extended essay, in association with **Edinburgh Review**, on the philosopher James Frederick Ferrier. He was honorary editor of the **Journal of Scottish Philosophy** and the continuing appreciation of his cultural contribution is indicated by the fact that only months before his death he was appointed an honorary fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland, the very body that had first published Hugh MacDiarmid's **Contemporary Scottish Studies**. This linkage between poet and educational institute was one of his points of departure when he was writing **The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect**.

Until the last George Davie remained his philosophically acute self, calling on his son-in-law Julian to read to him passages from Ferrier's **Institutes of Metaphysic** until shortly before his death. George Davie leaves a mark on the intellectual culture of Scotland which is every bit as important as the contributions of his friends Hugh MacDiarmid and Sorley MacLean. His work will continue to inspire. Lindsay Paterson summed it up when he wrote in **The Herald** that 'George Davie was one of that very small group of Scottish intellectuals who have shaped the way the nation thinks of itself.'

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