

OBITUARY: PROFESSOR STANLEY NISBET

JOHN NISBET

Stanley Nisbet will be remembered with affection by generations of Glasgow University students. He was Professor of Education there for 27 years, from 1951 to 1978, the first person to hold that Chair. His students were always his prime concern, and they in turn warmed to his quiet, gentle manner. He had a characteristic style of response in his seminars which many will recall – a pause, a quizzical look, a tilt of the head, and then the demolishing logic of ‘Does that really mean that...?’

His lectures and his writings were characterised by clarity and brevity, and he had little time for the jargon of the day. Possibly the most influential of his books was *Purpose in the Curriculum*, published in 1957. At a time when educational research was largely psychological and statistical, this book set out a structure for analysis of the content of school work, and marked the beginning of what is now known as Curriculum Studies. He also was closely involved in the formation of the Scottish Educational Research Association, chairing the committee which drafted its constitution, winning its acceptance by the research community.

He took particular pleasure in the Educational Colloquium which he started in 1954. This is a forum for former graduates which has continued over 50 years to meet regularly to discuss issues of interest in education. Stanley took an active part in all its meetings until a few months before his death. The 50th anniversary of the Colloquium was to have been a celebration of his contribution to education: he greatly appreciated this gesture, but, as he told me with characteristic modesty, he thought it wholly unnecessary.

The Department of Education in his time was celebrated for its postgraduate degree course, initially called Ed.B. and later M.Ed. Many of these graduates rose to senior posts in educational administration and psychology, in schools and in teacher education, and others became national authorities in specialist fields – Tom Bone, Margaret Clark, Frank Pignatelli, James Scotland, Lawrence Stenhouse, to mention only a few of those from the past. I myself, his young brother, owe him a special debt: our father died when I was a child, and Stanley, older by ten years, took over that role, introducing me to hill walking, hostelling and wild camping, and involving me as a schoolboy in his early research on spelling. His influence extended far beyond Scotland: in a visit to Kwazulu in the 1980s, I was received with honour by the Minister of Education who mistook me for my older brother.

Stanley was born in 1912 in Iceland where our parents ran a medical mission in the far North, and he spoke Icelandic until the age of seven when the family returned to Scotland. From Dunfermline High School, he went to Edinburgh University, graduating with First Class Honours in Classics in 1934. He taught in Moray House Demonstration School until September 1939. Then, after escorting his pupils to evacuation billets in the North, he enrolled in Godfrey Thomson’s B.Ed. class, graduating with Distinctions in both Education and Psychology. His future wife, Alison, was a fellow student: theirs was a very happy marriage.

In 1940 he joined the RAF as a wireless operator. After three years the Air Ministry discovered his qualifications in psychology, and he was commissioned and joined a small personnel research team. This was pioneering work in these days, and sometimes exciting: he flew the Atlantic in 1945 to study assessment procedures in USA, and was in a plane crash at Turnhouse from which he rescued the unconscious pilot.

On demobilisation, he was immediately offered a post in Manchester University; and then Queen’s University Belfast invited him to become their first Professor of Education. In 1951, Glasgow in turn decided (after forty years of debate) to

establish a Chair of Education and offered the post to Stanley. Here he built up a strong Department, working closely with Jordanhill College, until his retirement in 1978.

After his retirement, he dedicated himself to a passion of his younger days, Esperanto. He was a fluent speaker and was President of Glasgow Esperanto Association. Up to the age of 90, he was still supportive of the local group, attending congresses in Poland and Finland, and most recently translating some of the writings of the Orkney author George Mackay Brown. Esperanto had great importance for him: he saw it not as a linguistic experiment, but as an ideal, a means for better understanding among people of all nations. This philosophy was consistent with his thoughtful Christianity, and he and Alison were active in the local church.

His interest in public affairs became more focused by the formation of the Social Democratic Party. He was an enthusiastic constituency worker in support of Roy Jenkins, as MP for Glasgow Hillhead. Stanley remained loyal to the Liberal Democrats and in his late eighties was to be seen in his car on polling days 'taking the elderly to the vote'.

Stanley was devoted to his family and they to him. He tirelessly cared for Alison after she suffered a disabling stroke (she died in 2000), and he took great interest and pleasure in the busy lives of his children (Roger and Isabel) and his three granddaughters.

This obituary notice is reprinted with kind permission from The Herald newspaper where it was published on 4 March 2004