

OBITUARIES

Donald Davie

Poet and critic, 'the defining poet-critic of his generation'*: Donald Davie, who died on 18th September aged 73, was one of the founders of the University of Essex in 1964. He was its first Pro-Vice-Chancellor, first Dean of Comparative Studies, founder and first Chairman of its Department of Literature.

I am writing this commemorative note still in the shock and sadness of the news of his death. Many, hearing it, felt, as I did, suddenly cut adrift: - 'an era has ended ..', 'our ties with history have been loosened..', 'the ground seems cut from under my feet..'

I shall not write here about his major importance in British literary life nor all the matters that have been mentioned in obituaries elsewhere and will doubtless be developed in books and essays about him: the influence of his many works of poetry and of criticism; his lifelong concern with 'purity of diction' and 'articulate energy' (titles of two of his earliest books); his ability to speak of the long reaches of history as they entwine with the detail of poetry; his controversialism and involvement in argument.

Rather I want here to recall his significance for the University of Essex, especially for the Department of Literature, and at the same time to remember that this was a man people felt strongly about, whether as friends, colleagues, ideological opponents or supporters.

He was teaching at Cambridge University when, in 1962, Albert Sloman, the appointed Vice-Chancellor of the projected new University of Essex, invited him and the political scientist Jean Blondel to help set up a 'School of Comparative Studies', originally containing two Departments only, Literature and Government. Those were freer and wealthier times than ours and the three originators - soon joined (in the Department of Literature) by George Dekker - held vigorously optimistic discussions.

At a Literature 'retreat' in July this year, some of us spoke with nostalgic warmth of how Donald Davie started the Department along a path it has never lost sight of. His vision was of a break with narrow conceptions of 'Eng.Lit.', and similarly with the limitations of the traditional Modern Language department; a move outward into the study of literature as such, in several languages and with a radically comparative approach.

His own talent for engaging with writers beyond the English tradition (notably the 'Black Mountain' poets, Ezra Pound, the Russian Boris Pasternak, the Polish Czeslaw Milosz) and for refreshing the English scene with new voices was reflected in the new kind of academic department he was now constructing.

He brought together specialists in English, North American, Latin American and Russian literature. He also brought poets into the Department, including the celebrated Edward Dorn. All of us met at weekly staff-graduate seminars where the voices of Dudley Young, Gabriel Pearson, Stanley Mitchell, Gordon

Brotherston and others, along with Donald's, were regularly to be heard in lively debate.

The breaking out from insularity through sensitive practice of foreign perspectives, so warmly promoted by Donald Davie, became part of the School's 'original contract'**. His vision included, moreover, the happy possibility of large numbers of students of English becoming as fluent in a foreign literary language as he had himself become in Russian, out of love for Russian literature. And indeed, in those very early years, when the study of languages in Britain had not yet entered its present lamentable decline, the vision was realised: everyone studied another literature alongside English and everyone studied another language; discussion of foreign-language texts in class attained a remarkable sophistication. Donald Davie held all this together. We felt the impetus of his faith in the project and in us. His leaving at the end of 1968 to take up a Chair at Stanford University, USA, was a very great loss for Essex.

The Department has, of course, seen changes since then, but it has remained decidedly 'comparative'. The largeness of scope and boldness of enquiry that still inspire us are the legacy of Donald Davie. It was a great pleasure to have him back with us for the Department's quarter-centenary celebration in 1990, the same year in which Essex awarded him an honorary degree.

Even his house had a trans-national character. With his wife Doreen and their three children, he lived in a charming, eccentric chalet in Kirby Cross, near Frinton, which had been transported whole from Norway at the beginning of the century.

But he wrote a good deal about local places and in 1969 published a volume called Essex Poems. Particularly fine among these are 'Tunstall Forest', 'A Winter Landscape near Ely' and 'Sunburst'. The last, set by the sea-wall near Holland-on-Sea, asks questions about the nature of light: surely, the poet asks, light is not 'limp', as we suppose, but has a 'furious virtue?'

'Furious virtue' says much about Donald. Working with him in 1966-67 on translating Russian poetry, I met the pressure of a rare intellectual integrity, a poetic conscience exact and exacting, as well as a great humility toward the difficult virtues of the original texts. He well understood, in Pasternak's poetry, the controlled passion, the endless astonishment at the world's beauty. One of his versions, 'The God of Details' (included in Essex Poems), ends: 'I do not know the riddle / Of the pitchdark past the tomb, / But life is, as the autumn's / Hush is, a minuteness'.

A quarter-century later, the last words of the last poem in the last book of his own poetry (To Scorch or Freeze, 1988) read: 'And how He tempers our exile / with an undeserved planting of willows': again the grateful raptness with detail in the sight of eternity. - *Angela Livingstone, Department of Literature*

* Michael Schmidt in The Independent, 20.9.95.

** the term introduced by Simon Collier in 'The Story of an Innovation', 1974, page 2.

The following is from the collection of poems written mostly while Donald Davie was Professor of Literature at Essex and published in a book entitled "Essex Poems".

SUNBURST

*The light wheels and comes in
over the seawall
and the bitten turf
that not only wind has scathed but
all this wheeling and flashing, this
sunburst comes across us.*

*At Holland on Sea
at an angle from here and
some miles distant
a fisherman reels back blinded,
a walker is sliced in two.
The silver disc came at them
edgewise, seconds ago.*

*Light that robes us, does it?
Limply, as robes do, moulded
to the frame of Nature? It
has no furious virtue?*