Comment

Remembering Donald MacKinnon

Donald M. MacKinnon died on 2 March 1994. The decade since then has only shown the importance of his influence on the practice of Christian theology in the United Kingdom.

This is entirely due to his influence on colleagues and students. Though a polymath, he composed no work of scholarship. He belonged, admittedly, to the generation, in philosophy and even in theology, who needed no Ph.D. let alone the opportunity for post-doctoral research, in order to pursue a career in academic life. He plunged straight into teaching, at Oxford, immediately after graduating. No doubt, because of the War, he had to undertake responsibilities a trifle earlier than otherwise would have been the case. Then, in 1947, at the age of 34, he was appointed to the chair in moral philosophy in the University of Aberdeen, which he occupied until 1960 when he moved to Cambridge, where he taught until he retired.

MacKinnon was not always the ideal teacher for a particular student. On an off day he could leave a whole class utterly baffled (even on a good day). He was not always a successful supervisor of doctoral students (and sometimes little short of a disaster). Nevertheless, he had such an impact on generations of students in all three places that his name comes up, often quite unexpectedly, in casual meetings at conferences, in the prefaces and footnotes of books, and suchlike, and smiles of mutual recognition are exchanged, anecdotes rehearsed, and mimicry attempted (sometimes very successfully). In Scotland, no one could study law or divinity as a first degree in the 1950s, which means that there are scores of lawyers, civil servants, school teachers, business men, ministers of the Kirk and suchlike, who never intended to settle in academic life, but who were affected by attending his classes.

Neither the Scottish nor the English system of higher education encourages the existence, in the arts and humanities, of the *Doktorvater*. Graduates in history or literature sometimes congregate round some eminent teacher (Christopher Hill, F.R. Leavis). Philosophy sometimes goes in for ‘movements’ (‘ordinary language’, ‘the Davidsonic boom’, ‘the Swansea Wittgensteinians’, and so on). In Scotland, with T.F. and J.B. Torrance and in an earlier generation the Baillie brothers, there is more of a European tradition of going to do postgraduate research under the guidance of a certain professor. In

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the English divinity faculties, while there have always been ‘charismatic’ as well as very learned professors, with whom students come a long way to study, it is hard to think of any who have founded anything quite like a ‘school’, in the Continental style.

None of the students who admired and loved Donald MacKinnon and, in a sense, learned everything from him, agreed with everything, or even very much, of what he maintained, in philosophy or theology. Yet, as the recently published histories all say, he counts as by far the most influential British theologian of the twentieth century, not on account of what he wrote but in virtue of the impact he had on those who attended his lectures. And, since many came to occupy important positions in the Church of England, as well as in academic life, his influence has extended deep into generations he never taught, for whom he is only a legend, while his conception of how to do Christian theology has had effects, through the preaching of some of his former students, on many people who have never heard of him.

Sixty years have gone by since MacKinnon taught at Oxford. One has to be a good age now to have had him as a tutor then. Perhaps it is permissible in this journal to record that he was among the first Oxford dons to have good relations with the Dominicans, quite recently returned to Oxford. He saw a good deal of Victor White, then thinking his way out of a certain Thomism into the more ‘apophatic’ interpretation for which he is remembered (‘of the nature of God we can say nothing’), as well as beginning to come to terms with the work of Carl Gustav Jung. (Victor White was introduced to John and Doris Layard by Donald MacKinnon.) Forty years later, when asked to write a preface to the posthumously published papers of Cornelius Ernst (whom he had met only once or twice), MacKinnon had no hesitation: he saw straightaway that Cornelius Ernst was among the inheritors of Victor White’s approach to Thomas Aquinas.

Unfortunately, in the flurry of interest in Iris Murdoch’s love affairs provoked by her widower’s reminiscences, the biographies by Peter Conradi and A.N. Wilson, and especially the film, her infatuation with MacKinnon is just about all that anyone remembers – even, and perhaps especially, among the dreaming spires – of MacKinnon’s years at Oxford.

As it turned out, anyway, theology, and especially philosophical theology, at Oxford, developed its own distinctive character, which, on the face of it, owes little or nothing to MacKinnon.

It is more than forty years since MacKinnon left Aberdeen for Cambridge but, since he and Lois chose to retire to Aberdeen, to a house ten minutes on foot from King’s College, there is a generation of students of theology who benefited, on many occasions, from his presence – more benign and less unsettling, by all accounts, than in earlier times.

MacKinnon was a deeply unsettling figure, intellectually, in his first period at Aberdeen. In the Scottish university tradition (then), there could be a hundred attending the courses for first-year students in subjects like Latin, French, History, English Literature, and so on, which the professor always taught – on the grounds that the interest of newcomers to the subject should be excited by none other. MacKinnon must have been largely instrumental in arranging for Gabriel Marcel to deliver the Gifford Lectures at the University of Aberdeen. While repudiating the label of 'Christian existentialist', he must have realized that his mode of teaching, moving between the 'problematic' and the 'mysterious', or anyway the repertoire of his allusions, went some way to justify it. There was always a *passion* in his engagement with a moral philosophical issue which was not likely to be visible in philosophy lectures at Oxford (not that MacKinnon lacked respect for the likes of Richard Hare, for example, whose 'prescriptivism' was fired in Japanese prisoner-of-war camps).

Recently, in Anglo-American philosophy departments, there has been a wave of books about the importance of studying ethics in the context of literature, especially the novel. In 1951 MacKinnon was lecturing on utilitarianism and Kant, citing the New Testament, Sophocles and Shakespeare, as well as Dostoyevsky, George Eliot and Joseph Conrad. He would quote Hopkins – 'O the mind, mind has mountains' – as he thumped the wall (more often than the lectern) with his fist. As he says somewhere, the moralist's 'theorizing is impoverished if he ignores the dimensions of human experience to which such writers admit him.' The yield of the early Aberdeen years is to be found, sketchily, in *A Study in Ethical Theory*, published in 1957.

In purely professional academic terms, no doubt, the stint at Cambridge (1960–78) had by far the widest influence on several generations of English-speaking theologians, whether as students or as colleagues. It would be invidious to name any lest one overlook some on whom the influence may be invisible. The names of most are to be found, anyway, among the contributors to the two *festschriften*, the first edited by Brian Hebblethwaite and Stewart Sutherland (1982), the second by Kenneth Surin (1987).

None ever adopted any of MacKinnon's positions wholesale, either to refine them or to bolster them with stronger arguments or better evidence. That would never have been how a student showed how much he owed to his teaching. Rather, as several of the essays in the *festschriften* show, one was more likely to try to refute, or at least to side step, positions that MacKinnon favoured. He never had disciples, if by that we mean students who adopted and promoted his theories.

Moreover, none of MacKinnon's students even dreamed of endorsing his most famous enthusiasms (Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Lenin* . . .respect for whom was supposed to cure one of the temptations of 'metaphysical idealism').

On the other hand, MacKinnon's early fascination with the theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar (reading it in the original) has proved to be prescient. No doubt he was attracted by Balthasar's book about Karl Barth and the quarrels over *la nouvelle théologie*, as well as the fact that he was in an ecclesiastical wilderness at the time, having just left the Jesuits. There is also something about the internal dramatics of Balthasar's contorted prose that resonated with MacKinnon – like Thomas Carlyle translated into German. He sympathized completely with Balthasar's tragic vision of the Church, *casta meretrix* ('holy whore') as well as *sponsa immaculata* ('spotless spouse'). Most deeply of all, for MacKinnon, Balthasar seemed the only theologian of the century who really tried to come to terms with the horrors of the twentieth century. Balthasar's emphasis on Holy Saturday, on Christ's death, burial, and descent into hell, thus on the reality of evil, confirmed intuitions already there in things that MacKinnon wrote years before he discovered the Swiss Catholic thinker.

Back in the 1930s, MacKinnon was among the first in England to regard Karl Barth's theology with sympathy. Neither a clergyman nor an Anglican but a lay member of the Scottish Episcopal Church, which, as he liked to insist, while in communion with the see of Canterbury, has its own distinctive tradition and autonomous status, MacKinnon was perhaps freer to be more appreciative of Barth's work than most Anglican theologians at the time (shocked by Barth's dismissal of natural theology, as Austin Farrer and Eric Mascall were, regarding this as an attack on one of the fundamentals of Anglicanism). Perhaps it was just one more sign of MacKinnon's capacious interest in positions he would himself finally not endorse.

Donald MacKenzie MacKinnon was born in Oban, in the west of Scotland, where his father was procurator fiscal, the only child of quite affluent parents. Educated at preparatory school in Edinburgh, then at an English public school (Winchester) and Oxford (New College), he had nothing about him of the 'lad o' pairts' – the talented son of poor crofters, in Scottish folklore, who makes his way to academic eminence in Oxbridge, from porridge oats to vintage port etc. At least to those with ears to hear, MacKinnon preserved something of a Highland lilt in his speech to the end of his days. On black tie occasions, at college feasts in Cambridge, he would turn out, magnificently, in the kilt.

Perhaps as an analytic philosopher most at home in European theology; a lay man in a (then) clergy- dominated subject; a Scottish Episcopalian among Anglicans; a Celt among sassenachs (including Aberdonians); admiring Hans Urs von Balthasar while totally rejecting the authority of the Roman church – these and other paradoxes, even contrarinesses, in MacKinnon's life, no doubt go some way to accounting for his lifelong engagement in 'the borderlands of theology' (the title of his inaugural lecture at Cambridge).

Apart from collections of essays, with a further collection of *Later Theological Writings* to come, edited and transcribed by the young Edinburgh theologian John C. McDowell, MacKinnon left only one other book, a much rewritten version of the Gifford Lectures which he gave in Edinburgh, published in 1974 as *The Problem of Metaphysics*.

Neither of the books adequately embodies his thought or even properly communicates his characteristic approach, at least to readers who do not hear the cadences of his voice. In the end of the day his gift was to teach his listeners to understand that discovering the truth, or anyway the truths to which one could oneself adhere, would always be achieved by way of asking questions – by cultivating the interrogative mode, always 'only within the context of the most rigorous discipline of silence', since after all we are faced, in Christianity, with 'the paradox that certain events which could have been otherwise are of infinite, transcendent import; and this without losing their character as contingent events'.

For MacKinnon, the *locus theologicus*, the 'place' to begin and end Christian theology, was Gethsemane, the 'agony' in the garden.

There are other ways of beginning and ending Christian theology; other insistences and emphases; one can only be grateful for the example of one great teacher who kept philosophical inquiry and Christian faith together, in a time when philosophers who are themselves devout Christians in 'private' life reject what they see as theology, and theologians steer clear of what they take to be the destructive effects of philosophy.

F.K.