

PROFESSOR D. M. MENNIE

Irene Scobbie

An important chapter in the development of Scandinavian Studies in Britain draws to a close with the retirement in September 1974 of Dr. Duncan M. Mennie, Professor of German and Scandinavian Studies in the University of Newcastle upon Tyne and Chevalier of the Order of the North Star (Sweden) and the Order of St. Olav (Norway).

Duncan Mennie, a native of Aberdeen, studied modern languages at Aberdeen University, where in 1929 he took a First Class Honours degree. There was no Scandinavian taught at Aberdeen at that time but even so Duncan Mennie was already showing an interest in Old Norse. In his early twenties he read a paper to the Aberdeen Modern Language Society (an undergraduate society long defunct) on Norse sagas. A senior colleague fortunate enough to have heard it testifies to the fervour with which the young Mennie in his ringing Scottish accent quoted from the sagas.

After graduating Duncan Mennie studied at Kiel University where in 1933 he took his doctorate. His specific field was Middle High German, but he also took the opportunity of studying Scandinavian philology. From 1935 to 1937 he lectured in German at Aberdeen and then went as lecturer in German to what was then Armstrong College (later King's College in the University of Durham and subsequently University of Newcastle upon Tyne).

During the war Dr. Mennie was seconded to the B.B.C. where he acted as sub-editor of the German News Service. This kept him au fait with North

European affairs at critical periods of the war and also brought him into contact with Scandinavians, including free Norwegians operating from Britain. One of Professor Mennie's wartime reminiscences concerns the unexpected visit to his section at the B.B.C. of a tall, gaunt Norwegian who was none other than the exiled King Haakon.

After the war Dr. Mennie returned to Newcastle and began building up his Department. His interest in Scandinavian culture was keener than ever and he established general courses in all the Scandinavian languages. From 1945-46 he was Reader in German, from 1946-59 he was styled Reader in German and Scandinavian Studies, and from 1959 when Newcastle University got its own charter, Professor of German and Scandinavian Studies.

This post-war period marked the golden age. He had on his staff people like James W. McFarlane who has become a leading Ibsen scholar; Georg Roppen, an erudite scholar who returned to his native Norway to become Professor of English; Harald Naess, who is now Professor at the University of Wisconsin; Åke Leander, now principal of Nordens Folkhögskola, Bishops-Arnö; Leif Sjöberg, now Professor at the State University of New York. An Honours course in Scandinavian Studies was instituted in 1952, and as the first student to embark on it I benefited from the tremendous enthusiasm generated in the Department at Sydenham Terrace at that time. I was the only Honours student in 1952. Readers who saw Professor Mennie's report in the first issue of Northern Studies in 1973 will be able to gauge the development of the Scandinavian section of his Department: "135 students preparing for degree examinations in a modern Scandinavian language. Of these 2 are post-graduates ... 59 are Honours Scandinavian students and 74 are students reading a Scandinavian language as a subject for the General Degree

of B.A. with Honours or as a subject subsidiary to Honours German or Honours French."

Part of Professor Mennie's philosophy in building up a Department has involved the welfare of his students. Generations of students can witness to the time, patience and concern he has devoted to them. He is always available and has always found time to advise, to write letters on students' behalf to education ministries and local education authorities, to help procure grants and bursaries, to help students out of difficulties and supply unlimited numbers of testimonials. He has also found time to organise excursions to places of cultural interest. Many a student has been marched briskly along Hadrian's Wall under his expert guidance. It was typical of the man that when the newly-formed S.S.N.S decided to hold meetings in Edinburgh on Saturday mornings he not only attended whenever possible but shepherded a party of students on to the Edinburgh train at day-break and included a guided tour of Edinburgh into the bargain.

Even Duncan Mennie's day has only 24 hours and he has not published a great deal. His achievements lie in other directions. From a small beginning he leaves behind in the Scandinavian section of his Department a Professor, a lecturer in Danish, a lecturer in Norwegian, 2 lecturers in Swedish, a Norwegian lector and 3 language assistants, dealing with almost 150 students. Not only that - few British universities with Scandinavian teaching have not benefited from his influence, and university members of staff as far away as the United States and Australia have studied under him: I studied under him and have in turn taught people now lecturing at Bristol, Hull, Aberdeen, Kansas, Los Angeles, etc. Nor is it just universities that derive benefit: thanks to his influence there are Scandinavianists working at

Edinburgh College of Commerce, in schools as far apart as Bristol and Shetland, in libraries, in British Rail, Glasgow Transport, in branches of architecture, design, etc., etc.

It is strange to envisage the Newcastle Department without his strong personality, his Aberdonian greeting and his booming laugh. He has, however, made his mark and is already something of a legend. He is also very much alive and well, and while wishing him an enjoyable liberation from the responsibilities of office, we are confident that his expert knowledge and his energies will not lie fallow. One chapter may be drawing to a close, but those of us engaged in Scandinavian Studies hope he is going to remain in our midst and help us with the next chapter.

The Second Conference
of the Scottish Society for Northern Studies
held in Lewis and Harris

Giovanna Halford-MacLeod

"But why," asked a surprised voice, "did the Vikings want to settle in Lewis, of all places?"

Lewis lay all about us, flat, dun-coloured, seamed with peat-cuttings and dotted with lochans. Here and there on the low skyline a row of little houses, each with two chimneys like pricked ears, stood guard over their strips of croft, but in the main the landscape seemed chiefly inhabited by black-faced sheep and hoodies. Even the grander, mountainous prospects of Harris looked dour and forbidding - peat and rock, rock and peat as far as the eye could see.