

Professor Emeritus Duncan M. Mennie (1909 – 1998)

Duncan Mennie was born in Aberdeen on 19 January 1909, the son of John Henderson Mennie, M.A., a schoolmaster, and Jane Ewen Rae, who had also been a teacher until her marriage. He had all his schooling in Aberdeen, first at George Street Public Elementary School and then at Robert Gordon's College Secondary School, where he was a 'foundationer' – a 'scholarship boy'.

From 1925 Duncan attended Aberdeen University, graduating in 1929 with First Class Honours in French and German and being awarded the Senatus Gold Medal for Modern Languages. As a student he came under the benign influence of the Reader in German, Walter Bruford, later Professor of German at Edinburgh and at Cambridge.

After a summer semester at the University of Jena in Germany in 1928, Duncan returned to Germany in 1929 to the University of Kiel, studying German and German history. In Jena he had already begun to learn Swedish; in Kiel he extended his knowledge of that language, and also studied Old Icelandic. He was awarded his Dr Phil degree in Kiel in 1933 with a dissertation on the development of the description of persons as a stylistic device in the later Medieval German Courtly Epic.

Returning to Scotland in 1933, Duncan then trained as a teacher at Aberdeen, spent a year in Edinburgh doing post-doctoral research on the reception of German literature in Scotland, and taught for two years as Assistant in the German Department at Aberdeen under Dr Douglas Yates. In April 1937 he was appointed Lecturer in German in the Department of Foreign Languages at Armstrong College, later King's College, now the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. His attempts to build up a Department of German there came to an abrupt halt with the outbreak of the Second World War.

That war he spent in London, seconded in March 1940 to the German Section of the European News Service of the BBC as

Deputy Editor and broadcaster under Hugh Carleton Greene. In August 1940 he married Isabella Flora Macdonald.

Duncan returned to Newcastle in 1945 as Reader in German with the task of organizing an independent Department of German and Scandinavian Studies, being appointed Reader in both subjects in 1946. Encouraged by Lord Eustace Percy and influenced by his wartime experience of Britain's dire lack of linguists familiar with the languages of her European allies and neutral friends, he persuaded the university to fulfil the governmental request for universities to teach more so-called minor languages by having lecturers appointed to teach Swedish, Danish and Norwegian.

By the mid-1950s there were Honours courses in Scandinavian Studies as well as in German available in Newcastle, and, perhaps more important, almost every single German Honours graduate had a basic knowledge of either a modern Scandinavian tongue or else Dutch. Duncan's pioneering work in this field was acknowledged by the conferment of the Swedish Order of the Polar Star and the Norwegian Order of St Olav.

Duncan was a firm believer in residence abroad as the foundation of proficiency in a foreign language in its spoken and written form. As soon as post-war conditions permitted, he sent his undergraduates to spend a year at universities or as English language assistants in schools or People's High Schools in the appropriate countries. He also insisted on his Honours students acquiring a good working knowledge of the geography and political and cultural history of the country or countries they were interested in. 'It is no use writing learnedly about German classical literature if you cannot find Weimar and Jena on the map and don't know what German *Kleinstaaterei* entailed' was a typical utterance.

Another of his beliefs was that a University teacher has a duty to pay special attention to first-generation aspirants to University study and to help them over any psychological or financial difficulties where possible. Over the years hundreds of students, British and foreign, enjoyed the hospitality of Duncan and his wife Flora in their home. Many went walking with them in the Northumbrian hills and forests, and many

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had Duncan as their guide on their first visit to Edinburgh.

In his retirement Duncan took a special interest in the Scottish Society for Northern Studies at Edinburgh University, reading papers and contributing to its periodical. He was pleased that his former student Nicholas Furness held the Chair in German at Edinburgh University, that another of his graduates held the Chair of Modern Languages at Heriot Watt University, and that the only Department of Scandinavian Studies in Scotland was headed by myself, another of his 'academic children' and, on my retirement, by Peter Graves, an 'academic grandchild'. Although he believed in the benefits of a United Kingdom, he was always a Scot, and saw these appointments in a way as a repayment of the debt he felt to his native country. It was a great pleasure to him when the University of Edinburgh conferred the degree of Doctor of Letters on him in 1990. .

Those of us who knew him remember with gratitude and affection his erudition, his enthusiasm, his encouragement, his kindness and his sense of humour – his booming laugh was often heard reverberating through his Department. Many working in the field of Germanic Studies both at home and as far afield as Australia will have been influenced by him either directly or through graduates inspired by him. He and Flora had no children, but we who had the privilege of studying under him are all 'Duncan's bairns'.

Irene Scobbie