

Alan Small

On the 24th of September 1999 Alan Small died after a brief illness at the early age of 62 and Scotland lost a great natural talent and dedicated teacher.

My first contact with Alan was in 1955 as fellow freshers in the Geography Department at Aberdeen University. Prior to that he had been dux at Laurencekirk Junior Secondary and won a university bursary from Mackie Academy, Stonehaven; but it was during the summers of our undergraduate years that the fires of his academic passions were kindled. His interest in the historical geography of Scotland between 1000 BC and 1000 AD stemmed from the excavations on St Ninian's Isle in Shetland instigated by Andrew C. O'Dell, research which Alan completed after the Professor's death in 1966 (with C. Thomas and D.M. Wilson, *St Ninian's Isle and its Treasure*, Oxford University Press, London, 1972, 2 vols). We were not there, however, when the hoard of Celtic silver was unearthed because three days previously four of us had set off on a six-week tour of Norway, Sweden, Finland and Denmark in preparation for O'Dell's Senior Honours Option on Scandinavia. Thus began Alan's love affair with Northern Europe.

After graduating with first-class Honours in Geography and a six-month teacher-training course in Aberdeen, Alan spent a year as assistant Geography teacher at Aberlour but his wit and intellect were wasted on the callow loons of the North-east and he took up a lectureship at Aberdeen University in 1961. As his passion for all things Scandinavian grew, to no-one's surprise, it extended to encompass Sigrun, a charming Norwegian girl with whom he was to spend the rest of his life and have two daughters, Alison and Audrey.

In 1969 he was appointed Senior Lecturer at Dundee University and in 1975 promoted to Reader as a result of his research and meticulous archaeological work. His natural affinity with his students and appreciation of their problems led to his appointment as senior adviser in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, a position which he held throughout the

period of rapid student expansion between 1983 and 1996. Both the University as a whole and the individual students he advised, benefited greatly from his administrative skills in this capacity.

However, it was his ability to enthuse an audience that the majority will remember him for. Before the arrival of his own children, *en famille* I visited Alan and Sigrun in what was then a toy-free environment. Alan decided to entertain the children by showing them his stamp collection, another of his passions. As my daughter sat fascinated on his knee, I thought only Alan could make a row of penny-blacks interesting to a six-year-old! This enthusiasm for imparting his knowledge of his specialist subjects led to him becoming a much sought-after guest lecturer on educational cruises for the National Trust for Scotland and a very popular extramural lecturer. As an Honorary member of the Norwegian Geographical Society, he had also lectured at the Universities of Oslo, Bergen and Trondheim.

Alan's interests in the Picts and the Vikings are reflected in publications such as 'The Viking Phase in Northern Scotland', in E. Meldrum, *The Dark Ages in the Highlands*, 1971:69-90; 'Dark Age Scotland' in G. Whittington and I.D. Whyte, *Historical Geography of Scotland*, London 1983:25-45, and in the book he edited, *The Picts in Angus – A New Look at Old Problems*, Dundee, 1987. An interest in old Dundee is reflected in an article for *Northern Studies* 29 (1993:1-18), and the focus on Scandinavia is evident in several publications on the geography of the coastline of Norway (Department of Geography, University of Dundee, Occasional Papers) and in 'Reluctant Europeans: Norden' in D.A. Gowland et al. (eds.), *The European Mosaic*, 1995:113-26.

Janet Mowat of the Adult Education Centre in Halkirk says: 'I first met Alan Small in 1989 during the Viking Congress meetings held in Caithness and Orkney. My next contact was early in 1995 when our Department, in conjunction with Alan, commenced arrangements for a 2-week overseas tour – the Norwegian Coastal Voyage. During that time Alan guided me through everything that was necessary to make sure that the tour was successful. He told me that this was a

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trial run because next time I would be doing it all by myself! How prophetic his words turned out to be. The following year we were meant to travel together to Spitzbergen but owing to family illness, I was unable to go. Last summer Alan was to accompany me again for the Scandinavian Capitals tour but by that time he was too ill. I shall always be grateful for his guidance, knowledge and expertise of all things Scandinavian.'

Donald Omand sums up his outstanding qualities in these words: 'Alan had a warm and ready smile allied to a gentleness of character, a wry humour, dry wit and sharp intellect that made him an excellent tutor. For almost 30 years we had contact because of his willingness and enthusiasm to be involved in adult education programmes, whether they be lectures, seminars, conferences or field study weeks. He was ever ready to make lecture tours to some of our remote communities, oblivious to the vicissitudes of the weather and the associated disruptions that could ensue to plane, boat, rail or car! He was an excellent planner and would insist on having all details in writing before a course began. Should some unforeseen hiccup occur, he turned out to be the most unflappable of people, would philosophically shrug his shoulders and calmly analyse the best route to proceed. As well as being an excellent colleague, he was humorous relaxing company over a mellow malt whisky.'

Over all the years that I knew him, Alan never changed. Sometimes four or five years would elapse since our paths last crossed, but he had that capacity to continue the conversation where we had last left it as if it had been yesterday – a true friend to all who knew him.

Eve M. Soulsby