



FOUNDING PRINCIPALS: SOCIOLOGY AT EDINBURGH¹

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Though the Department of Sociology wasn't formally founded as a teaching dept until 1964, 'sociology' at Edinburgh had a much older pedigree and not simply because Adam Ferguson was a professor here. He was appointed Professor of Pneumatics (not the physics of gases, but the study of the 'spirit') and Moral Philosophy, in 1764; his magisterial 'Essay on the History of Civil Society' was published in 1767. The Edinburgh School of Sociology was formed in the late 1890s by Patrick Geddes, its prime mover, and his disciple Victor Branford who later in London founded the *Sociological Review* (See John Scott's illuminating article in *Journal of Scottish Thought*, vol 1, issue 1, 2007, pp.89-102).

In the period after the Second World War, from 1949 onwards Tom Burns was a research lecturer, and subsequently Reader, in the Department of Social Studies and in what was then the Social Sciences Research Centre. He was the first Head of Department and was appointed to the Chair of Sociology in 1965. The Social Sciences Research Centre lives on because Frank Bechhofer took it over in 1984 with a slight change of title to Research Centre for Social Sciences, the original Centre having been reduced first to a data processing unit and then to a printing facility in the basement of the Adam Ferguson Building in George

¹ We have concentrated on the early history of the department, and in particular on Tom Burns' legacy. He created a departmental culture which was carried forward by his younger, now much, much older colleagues. In this way, we believe, he made sociology at Edinburgh what it is. We have said somewhat more about those appointed before 1987 than more recent members because in their various, and smaller, ways they too were 'founding principals'. It is, inevitably, an account of the department as seen through the eyes of the authors who are entirely responsible for any errors of omission and commission, and for misremembered detail. They are grateful to all colleagues, past and present, who have helped to put it together.

Square. One of the denizens of the pre-1965 Centre was Erving Goffman, whose research for his classic *Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* was actually carried out in Shetland while he was a PhD student in Anthropology. For a long time, pre-publication copies of his study gathered dust in the basement of the AFB, before mysteriously disappearing once he became famous. One of the virtues of the Research Centre was that it really was a research centre for social sciences – including anthropologists (especially Jimmy Littlejohn) and social policy analysts like Hewan Craig and Susan Sinclair, who, with Tom, went on to create a core of social science research at Edinburgh. The first teaching of sociology on a degree course was actually in the Department of Social Anthropology, where Kenneth Little, its Professor and Head of Department, created two parallel curricula, one of which contained a good deal of sociology. Michael Banton was a distinguished member of that department until he left in the summer of 1965.

Tom Burns was then the founding member of the Department and its first Professor from 1965 till his retirement in 1981. He served in the Friends Ambulance Unit between 1939 and 1945 and was a prisoner of war in Germany between 1941 and 1943. He came to the University of Edinburgh from a post as research assistant in the West Midland Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning which he had joined in 1945. Tom was a sociologist of international distinction, with a remarkable sociological vision and imagination which not only made him a leader in his field but often put him so far ahead of it that his contributions were only fully recognised many years later. He was one of the first sociologists to be elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy but was far more than an outstanding sociologist. His scholarship ranged widely and embraced philosophy, literature and history as well as sociology. He

was a profound thinker and an inspiration to his colleagues and students who, even if they did not manage to fully grasp his ideas, something which happened quite often, sensed that they were always original, and at the cutting edge of his subject. He was one of the first British sociologists to look beyond the United States, stressing and developing European links, and bringing current European work to the attention of a wider public. The department at Edinburgh benefited from this in many ways, not least from a steady stream of European visitors, including some from Eastern Europe. From the first, he emphasised the importance of teaching students not just about society, but about the methodologies and skills required to study it. This insistence pre-dated, by at least a decade, a debate which surfaced in British sociology about relatively poor methodological training, especially in quantitative methods, and which reverberates to this day.

Tom believed strongly that 'society' was much more interesting than 'sociology', and that doing empirical sociology was much more important - and difficult - than theory-building for its own sake. His inaugural lecture in 1965 ('Sociological Explanation', reprinted in *Description, Explanation and Understanding: selected writings*, Edinburgh University Press, 1995) remains a touchstone of what sociology is for, and how it is to be done. A key passage which could with benefit be engraved on the hearts of all sociologists, and which marked the subsequent work of many of his colleagues, runs:

The purpose of sociology is to achieve an understanding of social behaviour and social institutions which is different from that current among the people through whose conduct the institutions exist; an understanding which is not simply different but better.

The practice of sociology is criticism. It exists to criticise claims about the value of achievement and to question assumptions about the meaning of conduct. It is the business of sociologists to conduct a critical debate with the public about its equipment of social institutions.

Tom Burns was one of those relatively rare people who not only study organisations and institutions but know how to build them. He created a department at the University of Edinburgh which more than 40 years later still reflects his skill, and his sometimes idiosyncratic but successful judgement, in choosing colleagues with strong talents and skills across the board. He laid the foundation for the department's continuing excellence, which is reflected in its high grades in the Research Assessment Exercises and Teaching Quality Assessments of recent years. Paradoxically, one can be fairly sure that he would have been the first to condemn these developments as distorting of research effort and scholarship, and immensely consuming of time which could be better spent actually *doing* sociology. Echoes of his ability to forge a working department whose members identified strongly with it and often placed its interests above their own can still be detected to this day. This is partly because many of his colleagues chose, as he had done for over thirty years, to make their entire careers at the University of Edinburgh - eight of them retiring with or still holding personal or established chairs, sometimes in related parts of the University outwith the department. Others, who did escape from the department, hold or held major chairs in other Universities in Britain, Canada, Italy and in the United States.

He was an unusual, shrewd, and in truth sometimes infuriating Head of Department. For instance, he claimed not to be a great administrator and,

while there may have been grain of truth in this, his colleagues held well-justified suspicions that his claimed inabilities were more than a little disingenuous. This approach forced his younger members of staff to take on responsibilities beyond their years and experience, to their eventual benefit although work loads in the early years were extremely heavy. Having given them these tasks he was exemplary in backing them up and defending them in public even when they made mistakes. He was helped in every sense by the redoubtable departmental secretary, Violet Laidlaw (1966 to 1983) who kept the show, the students, the staff, and above all the Professor on the road. Indeed her role both in the department and as a union person cannot be overestimated and is reflected partly in her appointment as the first non-teaching staff member of the University Court. Her contribution to the department, the faculty of social sciences, and the university was marked by the award of an honorary degree in 1984.

Tom's policy of giving younger staff responsibilities led to a situation many years later, when in a time of severe financial pressure, a Dean justified not immediately filling the established chair which Burns himself had vacated, on the valid but at the time annoying grounds that there were at least five or six people who could easily run the department in the interim. He regularly put forward his colleagues for committees and other roles within the University and outside it, for instance in the British Sociological Association, and encouraged them to be active citizens in the University and the sociological discipline. He was also, in the best sense, a remarkable manipulator of people. During the late 1960s when sociology departments were often riven with discontent, and with younger staff at the throats of their senior colleagues pressing for changes, Edinburgh was an exception to this general rule. It only dawned

on his colleagues much later that Tom Burns' leadership style might have been deliberately designed to this end. He was continually arguing persuasively for change - in syllabuses, in methods of teaching, assessment and examining, in departmental organisation - so that the prevailing ethos was turned upside down with younger colleagues striving, sometimes desperately, to restrain their Head of Department from both his policy of constant change and his wilder schemes.

Tom Burns' continual ability to spark off untold numbers of good ideas could have other down sides apart from overburdening his colleagues. It led sometimes to the confusion of his luckless postgraduate students who would go in for supervision clutching one do-able idea and come out with six different ones, some marvellous and far better than the original, some quite impracticable. This often left the rest of the department to pick up the pieces and steer students through to the end of their thesis. Along with his many successes and achievements, he himself was prone to generate and start more work than any one man could ever finish, leading on one memorable occasion to his being black-listed by the Social Sciences Research Council as it then was. He would not have been happy working in the environment of the last decade with its emphasis on measurable outputs of 'product'; he knew from his professional work that the impact of really innovative research is not easily tracked, especially in the short term, and would probably have expressed his opinion robustly and with the contempt which he sometimes showed for ideas and people who fell short of his own very high standards.

Tom set about creating a department dedicated to covering what he especially but also his colleagues saw as the important core of the discipline, rather than one which specialised in a few limited areas of

expertise. That aim was however sometimes overtaken by his insistence that the department should always strive to appoint the best available candidate. It was then sometimes necessary to persuade existing colleagues to acquire new knowledge and skills, only tweaking the curriculum to suit the immediately available expertise as a last resort. Because he always ensured that the department as a whole was involved in appointments, any resulting complications were at least collectively imposed!

His insistence that basic statistics and research methods be taught as a compulsory part of the degree was, as can readily be imagined, not always popular with students and also focussed the brains of various members of the department who had to teach it. He was also someone prone to sudden enthusiasms, such as insisting, for a short while, that all undergraduate sociology students take computer science 1 as a requisite 'outside' course; a notion which collapsed under the weight of its contradictions.

1964 saw the first intake of 'sociology' students (the first in Scotland, one year ahead of Aberdeen) who graduated in 1968. The first two staff appointments were Gianfranco Poggi and Rosemary Johnson. Gian was a leading theorist who also had an interest in political institutions and had been educated in Italy and the United States. He was allegedly appointed by Tom after a brief interview at a French railway station. The truth is only slightly less strange than the fiction. Gian, at the time working at the University of Florence, applied for the post but there was some doubt as to whether the University would pay for his flight to Edinburgh. Tom was due to go to Paris for a meeting at OECD. Gian travelled over night by train to Paris, chatted to Tom for a couple of hours at OECD, and within a

few days he was offered (and accepted) a lectureship. It couldn't happen to-day!

Rosemary was already in the University doing research with Tom. She was a social psychologist who contributed enormously to the department by her scholarly approach to teaching, her involvement with students and support of her colleagues. She was super-critical of her own work and published very little. It is a sad reflection that she would not have fared well in the contemporary University. Brian Elliott and Frank Bechhofer joined the Department in 1965, Frank from his research post with the Affluent Worker project at Cambridge and Brian from his post as assistant lecturer at Glasgow which he had taken up immediately on graduating from Edinburgh's Department of Anthropology. Peter Nelstrop came from the LSE in 1966 to teach demography, but left after a few years (as one did in the 1960s), to join a commune.

Next came another example of the features of department building in that period. Tom Burns had persuaded the Cadbury Foundation with whom he had a connection, to provide the money for a three-year lectureship in family sociology, one of the gaps in the department's coverage of the discipline. Michael Anderson had been a research student at Cambridge, and was well known to Frank. He had recently completed his PhD on the family in nineteenth century Preston, and was appointed in 1967 to what inevitably became known as the chocolate lectureship. Mike was marked out early as a star, and by 1979 had become Professor of Economic History at Edinburgh, but not before embarking on his pioneering work on the 1851 census, and putting at risk the structure of sociology quite literally, as his collection of punched cards threatened to bring down the house (or rather, the office wall) of 18 Buccleuch Place. The department

had returned there in 1976 after a relatively brief spell in the Adam Ferguson Building, which it sought to leave from the day it was moved there a decade earlier.

The department doubled in size at the turn of the 70s, with the appointments of Mike, John Orr (1967), Tony Coxon (1969), Tom McGlew (1970), Stanley Raffel (1971) and Roger Jeffery (1972). All, with the exception of Coxon, spent their academic careers at Edinburgh. John Orr came to Edinburgh in 1967, having been a postgraduate at Birmingham, and a teaching assistant at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. He was appointed to teach social theory, and did so for a number of years thereafter. John began teaching film and cultural studies in the sociology department in 1984, and, a few years later, he founded, with John Ellis, the joint honours film course for Sociology and English Literature. Since 1998, he has been teaching on the MSc in film studies which is based in the School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures.

In those early days the curriculum allowed very little choice and one of the Honours courses was Family, Population and Environment. After the departure of Peter Nelstrop, a lecturer with a good grasp of demography was required if the remaining members were to be spared giving themselves a crash course in the subject! The department's reputation was spreading and in 1970, Tom McGlew, an American with research experience in Ireland, was appointed. Tom was a trained sociologist and demographer, educated at a major centre, Brown University. He was also interested in the sociology of the family. Tom remained with the department until he retired in 2006 and served the department in all

capacities, as well as the Faculty of Social Science, notably in his work for the International Office, recruiting students from abroad.

Stanley Raffel was another import from the USA, coming from Columbia originally to help teach research methods, but he subsequently developed interests in ethnomethodology, the sociology of culture and of language. He was then yet another early member of the department whose interests moved away from those he initially brought with him in a department which, in the more relaxed climate of those times, was prepared to allow such flexibility and accommodate it. Roger Jeffery was another graduate who had studied economics and sociology at Cambridge at the time when sociology was taught as part of the Economics Tripos and had subsequently done postgraduate work at the University of Bristol. He was engaged to broaden the interests of the department into development and the Third World, and subsequently taught medical sociology, later of course combining those interests to great effect in his research.

Tom Burns also spotted talent and opportunities in the sociology of education, and encouraged Andrew McPherson to set up the Centre for Educational Sociology (CES) in 1972. Andrew arrived in Edinburgh in 1968 as a research fellow. He came from Oxford via Glasgow University where he was a lecturer in Politics. CES, under Andrew's direction, achieved the rare distinction of being an ESRC Designated Research Centre for eight years in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Andrew took early retirement on health grounds in 1995. Charles Jones, who joined the department in 1971, was an early associate of Andrew's, and subsequently did path-breaking research with Tony Coxon. Tony, who came from Leeds in 1969 via a year at MIT was a highly sophisticated

empirical sociologist and together they gave Edinburgh an unusual edge in quantitative expertise, before Tony moved on in 1975 first to a chair at Cardiff and then later to Essex, while Charles moved to Toronto in 1975. Jim Bearden, an American who taught Methods, and worked on economic elites, replaced Tony from 1976 until 1980.

By the mid-1970s, a new generation of sociologists emerged: Donald Mackenzie and David McCrone were appointed in 1975. Both had been students at Edinburgh, Mackenzie graduating in Maths and doing his doctorate in Science Studies, and McCrone graduating in Sociology, followed a few years later by another Edinburgh graduate, Lynn Jamieson, all of whom ultimately received personal chairs. McCrone's route to his lectureship is again typical of the 1970s. After a Masters degree in Town Planning, he had gone off to be a town planner, thought the better of it, and rejoined the department as an urban sociologist in 1972, working as a research fellow on a study of urban landlords in Edinburgh along with Brian Elliott. Lynn Jamieson, who had been a PhD student of Mike Anderson's, was a founding member of CRFR. She worked with Mike Anderson, Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone on family and household strategies, funded by ESRC grants in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

One of the few members of the department who left to apply successfully in the commercial world skills learned in the university, was Trevor Jones who taught in the department from 1977 till 1981 at which point he moved to the Computer Service's Programme Library Unit, leaving the university in 1984. Trevor's most important legacy was to introduce the department early to desktop computing on a black-box tin Cromenco at which we queued clutching our large floppy disks, and to increase our

familiarity with the use of SPSS on distant main frames to which we sent stacks of punched cards. He even taught us Fortran programming, although most of us proved poor pupils despite his best efforts.

The department reflected Tom's commitment to research as well as teaching, although he was always insistent that teaching students was the first priority of a university department, arguing as he did that the two were inextricably linked. Sociology, after all, was something you 'did', practised, rather than simply read about. Frank Bechhofer and Brian Elliott (who in 1987 emigrated to Canada where he became head of sociology and anthropology at University of British Columbia) began research on the petite bourgeoisie; Elliott and McCrone did their work on Landlords in the Edinburgh property market; and all three cottoned on early to the rise of the New Right in the mid-1980s when they did research on middle class movements. Somewhat bizarrely, they were sometimes accused at conferences of being sympathetic to the New Right, simply because they chose to study it, as if you could only study something which you found congenial. Roger and Patricia Jeffery (the latter joining the department in 1978 from Anthropology) began their long and successful work on Bijnor in northern India. Donald Mackenzie also developed his path-breaking research on the sociology of scientific knowledge, and the social shaping of technology, for which he became justifiably famous, before applying it to understanding the ferociously complex world of international finance.

When Tom Burns retired in 1981, the chair of sociology fell vacant, until the appointment of Sandy Stewart (from Cambridge) in the mid-1980s, and when he left a couple of years later, Colin Bell in 1987, who came to Edinburgh via Essex, New South Wales, and Aston. Colin's skills as a

manager were quickly recognised by others in the university, and he became Vice-Principal, before leaving for the Vice-Chancellorship of Bradford University (and then Stirling). Colin's untimely death in 2003 robbed British sociology of one of its major kenspeckle figures. Sociology at Edinburgh benefited not only from the work of the 'department' proper, but the Centre for Educational Sociology (Andrew McPherson and David Raffe, and, later, Lindsay Paterson), and the Science Studies Unit (David Edge, Barry Barnes and David Bloor), as well as the Research Centre for Social Sciences (Frank Bechhofer and Robin Williams), and later on, the Institute of Governance (David McCrone). This meant that 'greater Sociology' had a considerable presence within and outwith the university, and made Edinburgh a considerable, and distinctive, centre of excellence in the discipline. RCSS in particular became a major centre of social science research on technology and its 'social shaping'. The Institute of Governance developed its successful series of studies on national identity and nationalism from the 1990s. Both centres won major research funds, and drew on the expertise across the sociology community and beyond.

The study of culture, and social theory, were also strengths of Edinburgh sociology, with John Orr's pioneering work on the sociology of film and art, and John Holmwood's work on social theory and social stratification. John Holmwood, appointed in 1980, left Edinburgh in 2000 for a chair of sociology at Sussex; Orr retired in 2002. Jan Webb transferred from Business Studies in 1993, and took up Tom Burns' mantle as the sociologist of organisations. New appointments included John MacInnes (1995) on research methods, gender and masculinity, and the media; Jonathan Hearn (1998), who worked closely on the national identity and nationalism programme; and Nick Prior (1998) on the sociology of art

and culture. As the older generation moved on, further new appointments included Jimmy Kennedy (2000), Hugo Gorringe (2001), Michael Rosie (2002) and Ross Bond, Steve Kemp and Alex Preda, all in 2004, and Kate Orton-Johnson in 2005 along with Liz Stanley and Steven Yearley, who were appointed to chairs in sociology in that year.

Over forty years on, what, if anything, has been the legacy of its founders, and in particular, Tom Burns? At a time, in the 1960s, when it was fashionable to focus on strength in depth, Edinburgh was unusual in going for a wide range of talents and expertise, and without the constricting insistence of believing there was one, true way of doing sociology. The world ‘out there’ was always deemed more important than intensive navel-gazing about sociology. The department was a collegial place which spent a lot of its time talking through how best to teach students, and in particular, to instil the importance of *doing* sociology, notably through the compulsory research project carried out in the summer term of the junior honours year and the subsequent vacation. Edinburgh was one of the first sociology departments in Britain to include such a project in its undergraduate curriculum, and few have ever devoted such a large chunk of time to it. This emphasis on what sociology *does* rather than arguing about *what it is* encouraged everyone to identify and do research on what was sociologically interesting. Indeed, the question ‘what’s sociologically interesting about that?’ remains one of the devastating questions we inherited, whether asked of neophyte students, graduate students or those applying for sociology jobs at Edinburgh.

More or less from the outset, the department was a pioneer in seeking feedback from its students on the content and teaching of the courses. It was also one of the first, possibly the first among Edinburgh departments,

to introduce assessed coursework as an integral part of the degree. Among the staff, collegiality was the key, and it came as a big surprise to members of the department that others did (and still do, in some cases) *not* make teaching and administrative loads transparent, so that everyone could see what others were signed up to, and thereby avoid the insidious feeling that others must be doing less than you. The department may not have come up with how best to calculate ‘teaching loads’, but the practice had the consequence, probably intended by Burns, of generating an *esprit de corps* and a commitment to sociology which could only have been thought up by a pre-eminent sociologist of organisations.

Do legacies matter? Possibly not, given that circumstances shape what people do, and the academic world of the 21st century is not that of the 1960s; in some respects better, in others, worse. This, however, is a somewhat unusual departmental history because so many colleagues chose to spend their entire careers in Edinburgh, something which is in itself sociologically interesting. They have for better or worse, carried a collective memory for a period of over forty years and are only now, finally, leaving the scene. Perhaps Burns’ greatest legacy was to create a flexible organisation, created and carried forward by all its members, which tried to retain its founding ethos while changing and evolving with the times. Without believing overmuch in fashionable and misleading metaphors, there is a good case for saying that the DNA of Edinburgh sociology contains the seeds of its own success and relevance to the modern world.