

From Lectorship to Friendship

In 1961, I became Lector of German for the third term of the academic year 1960/61 at the Department of German, King's College, University of Durham. Head of the department, which was situated in Newcastle, was Prof. Duncan Mennie. In former times, he had been a student of Kiel University, written his doctoral thesis there, and as I came from Kiel University, we soon found common topics of conversation. Our discussions were about Kiel and Schleswig-Holstein, Kiel University and university life there. Former fellow students and friends of Prof. Mennie's were now professors of mine. In addition, we soon found out that we had similar, or the same interests. Like Prof. Mennie, I was mainly interested in linguistics, particularly in the history of words and names, and in history, especially in the history of common life and of civilization. Working under Prof. Mennie was quite different from what I knew from Kiel University. Here, there was a professor who worked with us (the members of the staff) and talked to us as a primus inter pares. Anyway, it was his humane attitude and behaviour, as well as the vast amount of knowledge in and beyond the fields of his professional interests that made us acknowledge him as head of the department, and as a friend. As a teacher, Prof. Mennie was particularly interested in students from working-class families. Thus he, who had an academic family background, tried to make their way into an academic life and into school life easier.

I enjoyed the three months in Newcastle, especially at the German Department, so much, that later I asked Prof. Mennie, if I might work with him again as a lector for the whole academic year 1963/64. Prof. Mennie agreed, and my second stay in Newcastle became a wonderful time, too.

Two years later, after my second stay in Newcastle, I became a grammar-school teacher. From then onwards, almost every year, I travelled to Newcastle to see Professor Mennie and his wife, Flora. When I was in Newcastle, I was usually not allowed to stay at a hotel, but I would have to stay with Prof. Mennie and his wife at their home. The room I used to take had already housed well-known German poets and writers, so I called it the Poets' Room.

The meals with the Mennies could be quite extraordinary. Once and again Prof. Mennie and his wife, or I and other guests were discussing the origin of an English or German word, or of a word of some other

language, when Prof. Mennie suddenly jumped up from his chair, left us, hurried to one of the bookshelves and got out a dictionary, from which he read out what he had been looking for. His wife Flora would just shrug her shoulders, but later, when her husband had to stay in hospital, she would continue his habit. All this was not unfamiliar to me. I came from a "linguistic" family background, so at meals we sometimes fought violent battles about the meanings and origins of words.

I don't exactly remember, when it was – in about 1994 – Prof. Mennie fell ill, I think due to a stroke. He had great difficulty in walking and in moving in general. His wife Flora tried to keep him at home to look after him there. But this was – physically – too difficult for her. So at last Prof. Mennie had to be taken to an old-aged people's home. This home was a set of converted rooms of a 19th-century hospital. The surroundings of the place, however, and, even worse, the social company, were quite inadequate. Twice a day, in the mornings and in the afternoons, Flora went to the place to provide her husband with what he needed, and to keep him company. I often accompanied her visits to her husband when I was in Newcastle.

Finally, in the early spring of 1998, Prof. Mennie got a single room at a modern old-aged people's home. So he could spend the last weeks of his life in adequate surroundings.

After Prof. Mennie's death, I continued my visits to Newcastle and to Mrs. Mennie. My impression is that she enjoyed my company, as well as the company of other people I met at her home. As before, I stayed at her home, did some shopping and would talk to her about this and that, quite often about fine arts, especially about painting. In her sixties or seventies she had started painting as a pastime (water-colours). Now two of her pictures decorate my living-room.

In about 2000, Flora's nephew Angus Fowler was awarded a German order (Bundesverdienstkreuz I. Klasse). The celebration took place in Germany (Marburg). Together with her niece Alison she went to Germany – by plane and train – to take part in the celebration. She was older than 85 years then, but she managed everything. She enjoyed having vivid discussions and even joined a group of singing people. I was reminded of what once a friend of hers had said, "She's a marvel". On April 24th, 2003, was her 90th birthday. I had come from Germany, also her nephew Angus. We – Flora, Angus, and I – went by train from Newcastle to Abingdon to celebrate the birthday there, together with her sister Elizabeth Snowden, with Elizabeth's husband Mac (Malcolm), and with other relatives. Though now being ninety years old, Flora was as fit and active as ever. – Yes, she was a marvel.

Toward the end of 2004/ beginning of 2005 – I got message that Flora had caught a flue. On February 2nd I was informed that she had died on 17th January 2005.

Today, forty-eight years after my first stay in Newcastle, I wish to say that what started as a three-month lectorship, developed into a close and long-lasting friendship. I was lucky enough to meet two wonderful people who were like parents to me. The memory of them fills me with great reverence and deep gratitude.

Brunsbüttel, May 6th,2009, Ludwig Scharbau, PhD