

Life as a student 50 years ago

by Anthony Stanforth, former student of German at Newcastle

The year 1959 did not see the start of German studies in Newcastle; the subject had been taught here since before the Second World War. Rather, the date marks the year in which Duncan Mennie was promoted from Reader to the Chair. This happened while I was a third year student spending (intercalating, as the course regulations put it)

my year in Germany. On my return I didn't notice any change beyond the need to refer to Dr Mennie as Prof Mennie. After all, he had been Head of Department since 1945 and had developed his own way of running things which was not likely to be altered by a change of title. However, looking back on my time as an undergraduate fifty years ago the differences between then and now are indeed such as to bring to mind the appositeness of L.P. Hartley's famous dictum that "The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there." So what was life like as a student of German in 1959 in the days before modularisation, semesterisation and before the demise of individual modern language departments? Inevitably, my memories focus on the extraordinary personality and influence of Duncan Mennie.

Duncan Mennie's Department was his own creation, and was unique in that it combined German with Scandinavian Studies. This was not simply an administrative convenience grouping closely

related languages, it informed the tenor and ethos of the Department.

As a student of German I was required to start the study of a Scandinavian language even though my subsidiary subject was French. Given the emphasis placed on Germanic philology in the Department this knowledge of a North Germanic



We dressed differently in those days, as the photograph taken at a German Society party about that time illustrates. We were more formal: men's waistcoats were in, jeans for either sex unknown.

At the party Duncan Mennie and his wife Flora (sitting to his right; on the far left of the front row is Robert Sinclair, his second-in-command) instructed us and the German exchange students in Scottish country dancing. The lady to Duncan's left is Elisabeth Baldus, the senior *Lektorin* at the time.

language was invaluable, quite apart from the practical advantage of graduating with a knowledge not only of German but also Danish, or Norwegian or Swedish. Regrettably, Scandinavian was axed during the cuts of the 1980s.

The physical contours of this 'foreign country' are different, too. In the late 1950s the area to the north of the Hancock Museum had not been redeveloped. German and Scandinavian Studies and Spanish and Latin American Studies occupied adjacent late Victorian premises in Sydenham Terrace, fronting the Great North Road, while round the corner in the rather grander Devonshire Terrace one found the French Department. With the modern language departments grouped physically in this area, each with their own building and their own Head of Department – in those days Headships were permanent appointments – it was almost as though the rivalries that had plagued continental Europe were being played out anew. Certainly as a student of German with French as

my subsidiary subject I was aware of leaving one fiefdom and entering another: it behove one to respect the local customs. Presiding over German and Scandinavian was the fiercely egalitarian Aberdonian Duncan Mennie, bluff, dressed in tweeds and given to singing Lutheran hymns as he moved about his domain, while round the corner in the French Department the august, ascetic scholar Cuthbert Girdlestone, clad always with pre-war formality, represented the refined world of French intellectualism. This clash of cultures had to be negotiated with care: leaving Sydenham Terrace to attend a lecture in the French Department saw us hastily donning our black academic gowns, a prerequisite of entry to that building. Returning to the German Department we had to shed (and hide!) them just as hastily, since Duncan Mennie considered the wearing of gowns disgracefully élitist.

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Re-entering the Department you were confronted with anti-smoking posters: "Don't be a nit, quit!" Childless himself, as Head of Department Duncan Mennie was paternalistic to an extent unthinkable today. He designed the timetable to ensure first year students had a 9.00 am lecture every day to get them out of bed – and he took note of who wasn't there. He encouraged us to make the most of the wider cultural life of King's College (Newcastle didn't separate from Durham to become a University until 1963), wanting to know how many of us had attended this or that event and expressing his displeasure at our lack of interest. And although not the snappiest of dressers himself he held very strong views on how students should be attired. Once he threw out a young man for turning up in his study in a shabby raincoat, only

After completing his undergraduate studies in 1960, Anthony returned to Newcastle University in 1965 as a Lecturer, later becoming Senior Lecturer and Head of the German Department here. He left Newcastle in 1981.

to discover it was not a student but a new colleague from another department. The most famous dress incident, however, was the dress code he gave to all students before embarking on their year abroad – this one made press headlines.

We attended lectures in his large study on the second floor, a huge desk at the back, several rows of chairs in front, and books all round. Such was his passion for philology that an ill-prepared student could easily distract him with a well-timed question on the etymology of this or that word. This would invariably be enough to send him to the bookshelves and with any luck the bell would go, saving the student for another week. He believed in making us learn poetry by heart and teaching us to sing German folk-songs. First year students had a weekly introduction to the geography, culture and institutions of Germany (called by one of my wife's contemporaries "a guided tour of the pubs and churches of Germany"). But he gave real guided tours as well, taking his British undergraduates together with foreign exchange students in the Department along stretches of Hadrian's Wall and by train to Edinburgh, where he would expound on the history of the castle to the annoyance of the official guides. Only official guides may lecture inside the premises, he was told. "Very well, can you do it in German, Danish, Swedish and Norwegian for the benefit of my party?" came the retort as he marched us outside.

Paternalistic, yes, but benevolently paternalistic. He knew all his students personally and was always ready to advise, encourage and to offer practical help. He summed up his philosophy in the closing words of his Inaugural Lecture by quoting from John Galt's *Annals of the Parish*: "I thanked Thomas, and went in with him, and we had some solid conversation together, and I told him it was not so much the pastor's duty to feed the flock, as to herd them well; and that although there might be some abler with the head than me, there wasna a he within the bounds of Scotland more willing to watch the fold by night and by day". And he did indeed live by these words. Another time, and a foreign country. I, and many others, have cause to be grateful to him.