

# BULLETIN

OF THE BRITISH PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY  
TAVISTOCK HOUSE SOUTH, TAVISTOCK SQ., LONDON, W.C.1

Editor: THELMA VENESS

Assistant Editor: C. C. KIERNAN

VOLUME 16, NUMBER 53

OCTOBER 1963

## REX KNIGHT

1903 -1963

### AN APPRECIATION

By ALEC MACE

Rex Knight (Arthur Rex Knight in full) was born on 9 May 1903 in a little town called Wilcannia on the Darling River, some 500 miles east of Sydney, and he died at Bucksburn, Aberdeen, on 12 March 1963. His life of sixty years was one of unbroken success. At school "he was always the smallest, always the youngest member of his class and always at the top of it". At Sydney University he was medallist and prizeman and obtained a scholarship which took him to Trinity at Cambridge where he gained first class honours in the Moral Sciences Tripos and was Hooper Prizeman. He spent five years as assistant to Charles Myers, the Director of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology, and then returned to the academic world. After a very productive year at St. Andrews he went to Aberdeen to be successively Lecturer, Reader and the first Professor of Psychology at that University. While developing that distinguished department he contributed in many ways to the application of psychology in education, in industry and generally in the public services.

His own research interests were chiefly those of an applied psychologist. While providing his colleagues and post-graduate students with every facility for 'fundamental' research, he would concern himself more deeply with such questions as: Is television viewing a bad thing for children? He insisted that the answers to such questions are to be found not in the *opinions* of the wise and the good, however wise, however good, or however eminent, but in *factual* inquiries. He gave his life, literally, to promoting human welfare, and improving the quality of life, by guiding and advising on research of this kind. Certainly the unrelenting pressure of demands for his services on committees contributed to his final breakdown in health.

Among notable writings on the subject of greatest interest to him are



PROFESSOR REX KNIGHT

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his paper on 'The Scientific Background to Educational Change' in the Symposium edited by C. H. Dobinson on *Education in a Changing World* and another on 'Children's Needs and Interests—Contemporary Psychological Theories of Motivation' in the University of London Institute of Education *Studies in Education* No. 7 (Evans, 1955).

In a warm Obituary Notice in *The Times* it was said "He will not be remembered as a great scholar in the narrower sense of the term, nor was it his particular talent to become immersed in the *minutiae* of academic research. His outstanding abilities lay in those two other fields of university life—administration and teaching".

This is fair enough, as fair as any brief appreciation can be, but it calls for a footnote. Rex Knight was certainly not a scholar in *any narrow sense*. A narrow specialist is one of the few things he could never have been; but he *was* a scholar. He contributed to scholarship through scholarly reviews and commentaries on contemporary trends in psychology. He was a historian of the psychology of his times. His paper in this BULLETIN on 'Psychology at Aberdeen' is an important document for historians of psychology in Great Britain. His Presidential Address to the Psychology Section of the British Association on 'Present-day Trends in British Psychology' was a scholarly review. So was his Presidential Address to the British Psychological Society on 'The British Psychological Society: Problems and Prospects'. Many of his scholarly lectures are buried in the pages of ephemeral journals. Many are lost for ever by reason of his ability to deliver a polished lecture from a few brief notes.

The only book he wrote by himself alone was *Intelligence and Intelligence Tests*. This is by way of being a little classic, still widely recommended by teachers some thirty years after its first appearance. His *Modern Introduction to Psychology* was written in collaboration with his wife Margaret. Many people think that this is the best text of its kind. His talent for collaboration is seen also in his contribution to *Current Trends in British Psychology* (1953)—*On Contemporary Studies of Motivation*—written jointly with A. J. Laird, a Research Fellow in his department at Aberdeen. As Alec Rodger notes in his Memoir in the *British Journal of Psychology*, Rex Knight was also a "facilitator of the work of others". In his year at St. Andrews he made G. F. Stout collect and republish the papers contained in *Studies in Philosophy and Psychology*, and at the same time he helped to plan a programme of research, the results of which were published in the I.H.R.B. Report 'Incentives—Some Experimental Studies'.

His flight through St. Andrews pioneered some remarkable movements in the academic world. We came to think of St. Andrews as the first stop on one of the main escape routes from the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. This, of course, was a quite scandalous misdescription of what was happening. The facts were simply that Charles Myers had a flair for talent-spotting and attracted to the Institute a number of very able young men and women few of whom expected to find there a life-long career. Some passed on to posts of responsibility in industry and the public services: others to careers of academic distinction. In this process some odd pegs had to occupy some rather uncomfortable

holes. There was, for instance, John Wisdom, destined to become Professor of Philosophy at Cambridge, doing research at the Institute on 'the response to rush of work' with a dotting machine. So he had to be brought to St. Andrews. Then Bernard Babington Smith had to be brought to St. Andrews *en route* for Oxford. A few years later Margaret Horsey was "to fly direct to Aberdeen to marry Rex without even touching down at St. Andrews.

Rex Knight's contributions to scholarship, teaching and administration are recorded in the minutes of a meeting of the Senatus Academicus of the University of Aberdeen dated 1 May 1963. This minute in its perspicacity and felicity must surely be unsurpassed by any minute in any Sassenach University. After reviewing his career and the offices he had held the minute goes on:

"During his tenure of these offices Professor Knight made many contributions to the literature of his subject in books and articles, and his eminence in his subject was recognized by his fellows when in 1953-4 he was elected President of the British Psychological Society. But perhaps his most outstanding achievement was to develop the small psychology class with which he began as sole lecturer into a great modern department, which has not only attracted undergraduates in ever-increasing numbers "but has become known everywhere as a centre of psychological research. He accomplished this transformation because of the great gifts which made him one of the best university teachers of his time. From his student days he has been known as an effective speaker and a skilful debater, and he had a remarkable power of lucid exposition, but even more important was the quality of personality which enabled him to establish ascendancy over his audiences and capture their interest from the start. His relations with his students were admirable. He did not cultivate any easy arts of gaining popularity with the young; his attitude towards them was firm and unsentimental but sympathetic, and many of them will remember him as one to whom they could turn with confidence for help and advice."

The minute goes on to record how "the qualities which he showed as a teacher were seen also in the councils of the University", how "his interventions were always effective" and "he displayed an easy and self-confident mastery in all situations".

The strength and warmth of his personality shone through his scholarship, his teaching and his work on committees. It shone most brightly in the company of his friends.

"A master in every situation." Wilfred Taylor, the clever columnist of the *Scotsman*, who so often records in his Log nostalgic memories of his student days at St. Andrews, uses this phrase and illustrates it by his recollection of the day when, as Rex was about to begin his lecture, a young lady with red hair brought out from under her scarlet gown a bag of flour and broke it open over the head of a divinity student whom presumably she did not much like. The whole operation was conducted slowly and deliberately, and riveted everyone's attention. Everyone gasped, except Rex, who just appeared interested. "Tut! tut! Miss McWhanell," he said. "Tut! tut!" and proceeded with his lecture.

Around all great teachers there grow up cycles of legends. Rex is no exception. His students did not fail to notice his disposition to orderly exposition of a subject under *three* or more points, frequently more than three. It is recorded that in one of his lectures he said, at the fifty-ninth minute, "And the seventeenth objection to the theory is . . .": but the seventeenth objection would be stated and the lecture concluded at the appointed hour.

Rex often gave vocational guidance to his students, and there is a background story to his paper in *Occupational Psychology* on 'The Reluctance to Teach'. It is said that to all his women students he gave precisely the same guidance. "Miss McWhadden, Miss McBridie" (or whoever she might be), "you have a *vocation* for teaching." He concluded, after elaboration, "And remember Miss McWhadden (or Miss McBridie, etc.), that to enter the teaching profession will not in the least prejudice your chances of marriage." This absurd and incredible story must have arisen from confusion with a more authentic story. Instead of giving a lecture setting out the seventeen objections to the theory that character could be read in handwriting, he made his seventeen points in one practical joke. He invited all his students to give him a specimen of their handwriting. At the next meeting of the class he gave all these students a sealed envelope containing a delineation of their characters. After the students had read these they were asked to hold up their hands if they thought the delineations to be substantially correct. After all hands had been held up Rex invited them to compare notes: they found that all his descriptions of their characters were precisely the same.

In my personal associations with Rex Knight I became increasingly aware that his lovable traits were to be traced back to the formative years of his home life and his schooldays. This was confirmed by letters from his friends and relations in Australia. The Case of Rex Knight is one for the case-book of a child psychologist. Unlike most such cases it is a story illustrating the beneficent influence of a happy childhood and loving parental care. His father was a head master and his mother had also been a teacher. Rex was thought to be a delicate child so his parents took him to Norfolk Island where from the age of 3 to 7 'life was one long picnic'. The Knights then went to Maclean on the Clarence River, where they met the Dee family. That was the beginning of a life-long David-and-Jonathan friendship between Rex Knight and Arthur Dee. It was on the Clarence River that Rex acquired his expertise as a genial host. He and Arthur had made a boat out of packing cases—"complete with cabin, engine room, deck and bridge". When 'in port' Arthur's sisters were entertained on board with cake and ginger wine. Rex and Arthur joined the local church choir and as choir boys engaged in many ecclesiastical pranks. Rex was not gifted musically, but in this choir he acquired his addiction—a life-long addiction—to jocular hymn singing. There was a serious side to his churchgoing. He intended 'to enter the Church, and what an impressive bishop he could have been! Arthur also intended to enter the Church. Then Rex was beset by honest doubts. Arthur became similarly beset. Both graduated with high honours at

Sydney. Then Rex came to England. Arthur soon followed, to become a successful teacher in several public schools. Their friendship ended only with the death of Arthur Dee in 1957.\*

The associates of his school days remember Rex as the talented mimic his friends and colleagues found him to be in later life. When young he irreverently mimicked ecclesiastical dignitaries. He even more irreverently mimicked his mother 'blinking like an owl' when pondering the problems of her domestic economy. While Rex and his father were wrestling and romping all over the house, his mother would be thinking about the investment of her husband's savings. This was delegated to her and apparently she carried the family through more than one financial crisis. From his mother no doubt rather than from his father Rex derived his interest in, and his judgment on, things that happen on the Stock Exchange. He might have been an impressive bishop, but he might also have been a successful financier. This boy, the young Rex Knight, the mimic, the practical joker, the lover of fun, was never far below the surface in the eminent professor.

The story of Rex's married life is part of the story of his great friendships. He was married twice, first to Helen and then, some years later, to Margaret. With both he enjoyed the pleasures of civilized living which he enjoyed also with Arthur Dee, E. H. Dowdell and other friends.

Rex and Helen were students of philosophy together at Cambridge. Rex became more and more involved in psychology. Helen continued research in philosophy. She has the distinction, according to academic gossip, of having presented the briefest thesis for which the Ph.D. degree in philosophy has ever been awarded. Her interest then turned to aesthetics. She arranged the background decor of their married life, first in Bloomsbury, and then in the little house in College Street at St. Andrews—a house that later John Wisdom *twice* nearly set on fire. A few years later Rex and Helen came to feel that their marriage had been a youthful mistake, a mistake to be corrected. They corrected it without resort to any of the real or pretended improprieties commonly expected in the correction of such youthful errors. They just parted, without acrimony, and retained friendly feeling for each other to the end.

Margaret had also been a student of philosophy. Like Rex, she started her professional career in psychology at the National Institute of Industrial Psychology. After her marriage to Rex she was appointed to a lectureship in his department and, during the war, when Rex was a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Personnel Selection Department at the War Office, she took care of Psychology at Aberdeen. She has established a place of her own as the Hypatia (and the Boadicea) of humanism. Rex and Margaret enjoyed twenty-six happy years together as colleagues in the Department of Psychology, and as man and wife at Hope House. The duality of roles

\* I am indebted to Mrs. Grace O'Neil (a sister of Arthur Dee) and to Mr. K. R. Wilson (a cousin who thinks of Rex more as a brother than as a cousin) for recording their recollections of Rex's childhood and youth. I am also indebted to Mr. E. H. Dowdell, a friend and colleague of Arthur Dee at Marlborough, and himself one of Rex's closest friends and holiday companions in the post-war years.

presented no problems. Each was the only child of a schoolmaster, and accustomed from childhood to addressing their father as 'Sir' at school and 'Pops' at home.

Hope House, in Bucksburn, a few miles from Aberdeen, had been a small farm house. It is surrounded by a large, rather wild, garden in which there are a number of clearings. The neatest clearing is that in which Margaret grows her Russell lupins. There are several abandoned clearings in which (one suspects) Rex had tried to grow his favourite fruits and vegetables. He was always nostalgic for the fruits and vegetables of New South Wales, but philosophically accepted defeat in his attempts to grow them in Scotland. (Once he had been invited to a chair in the South. He turned it down, but told me "I considered that offer most seriously. What weighed with me most was the thought that in the south you can grow outdoor tomatoes".)

The largest clearing is an extensive patch of grass which does duty as a lawn. At the far end of this Rex erected a revolving summer house. This summer house was the joy of his life. Early in the morning he could be seen in pyjamas and dressing gown—the girdle of his dressing gown trailing in the dewy grass—as he made his way to the summer house with a large armful of books and papers. By breakfast time he had done as much work as many do in a day.

In the evening, after the day's work, his external examiners and other guests were entertained first in the dining room with good food and good wine and good conversation, and then in the main living room. "You sit there, Marjorie, you sit there, Alec," Rex would say, and so on, each guest being accorded comfort in accordance with some undefined rules of precedence. (This was pure ritual, since all the chairs were equally comfortable.) Conversation would be resumed when the telephone bell would ring. Rex was always on tap by telephone to colleagues and students. He would dispense his wise advice and would put the receiver down. A master in every situation, he did not need to say, "What was I saying?" As he re-entered the discussion he seemed to be merely completing the sentence which he had begun when the bell rang. Serious discussion of momentous issues was relieved by Rex's anecdotaly. He combined his talent for mimicry with a verbal memory of the kind attributed to Macaulay. He would reproduce in voice and facial expression, and with accuracy, notable deliveries of distinguished academics, slightly impishly but never unkindly. Or he would reproduce a legal argument with the case of the defence and the case of the prosecution and the judge's summing up, all with incredible fidelity. If he had not become a professor or a bishop or a financier he might well have become a distinguished barrister.

His mimicry of facial expression was apt to be complicated by his own slightly guilty, whimsical expression when he was about to begin one of these delightful performances. There is, so far as I know, no photographic record of this expression, but there are records of many others—photographs which show him as the father figure advising students or apprentices, or interviewing reporters. (The portrait selected for this memoir

shows him poised to intervene in a committee discussion, about to draw attention to the *three* facts most relevant to the issue which the committee was supposed to be deciding.) His external examiners, Leslie Hearnshaw, myself and others enjoy many memories of those long midsummer evenings at Hope House.

His life ended at Hope House. For several years there had been signs that his powers and his energies were stretched beyond human endurance. Ken Murray (Psychologist to the Civil Service Commission, and himself an Aberdeen graduate) has spoken of Rex's 'perennial youth'. But the ageing body could not stay the pace of the perennially youthful mind. Early in December 1962 there appeared in the Aberdeen Press the ominous headline PROFESSOR REX KNIGHT ORDERED TO REST, with a rather sad portrait. (The photograph might have been taken when Rex received his doctor's order.) 'Suspected Coronary' we were told. But resting was one of the things which he found difficult. In the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary he had a second attack but recovered sufficiently to be allowed to return home. Early in the morning of 12 March 1963 he had a further and fatal attack. Margaret writes "He had a happy last day. It was one of those lovely sparkling, cloudless days that we get here sometimes in spring, and he spent most of it in the summer house engaged in all the sorts of avocations he liked best. Two or three friends received letters from him (showing, as one of them said, only concern for my health and giving me lots of good advice) on the same morning as they opened *The Times* and read his obituary". As the minute of the Senatus concludes: "His friends will not easily forget him".