



Brian Foss, 1921-1997

BRIAN Foss is best known for his editorial work, but most fondly remembered as a teacher. He made significant contributions to psychology, despite having no degree in the subject.

Both Brian's parents were from the Channel Islands, a place for which he retained a lifelong affection. He attended five different schools, but nevertheless won an exhibition in Mathematics to Cambridge, going up to read Natural Sciences (Mathematics and Physics) at the beginning of World War Two. Following graduation he entered military service and served in the Military Operational Research Unit under Bernard Ungerson, who introduced him to the National Institute of Industrial Psychology's library. A Further Education and Training grant enabled him to take a diploma in psychology at Oxford: degrees in psychology were not awarded until 1949. Brian sufficiently impressed his superiors to be appointed Junior Lecturer at the Institute of Experimental Psychology, Oxford in 1948. From his colleague, Oliver Zangwill, he claimed to have learned two things: to provide biological explanations for social behaviour and to be kind to students who asked questions in lectures.

In 1951 he proceeded to a Lectureship in Psychology at Birkbeck College London. Here he kept Indian myna birds in his room; wrote the music for, and performed in, the highly acclaimed and widely attended 'psychoshows'; and became General Psychology Editor for Penguin Books. The enormous success of *New Horizons in Psychology* — which earned him the job — subsequently translated into eight languages and known to almost every undergraduate, such that Brian with typical modesty came to refer to it as 'Old Horizons', led to a publication explosion. Over 70 titles

were published under his editorship during the next 10 years. As Programme Secretary for the Society he met many

psychologists, but it was his broad knowledge of the subject — and his skill and diplomacy — which brought these projects to fruition and did much to publicise and promote British psychology. He edited a number of series in both general and developmental psychology, of which the four-volume *Determinants of Infant Behaviour* is probably the best known.

Brian's own publications spanned an extraordinarily wide spectrum, from animal behaviour to aesthetics and values. He was concerned by the fragmentation of the discipline and sought to minimise differences (e.g. by revealing some to be more apparent than real) and to integrate diverse approaches. His particular interests lay in the psychology of learning and education, especially imitation and infant development. The early experiments on myna birds convinced him that imitation was not a matter of reinforcement-dependent learning: the birds readily imitated his telephone and the sounds of nearby motorcycles, but feeding them grapes had no effect whatsoever on their behaviour. Later in his career he directed an externally funded research team for 15 years, partly in collaboration with the paediatric unit at St Mary's Hospital,

which focused on mother-infant interaction. The team investigated such topics as the development of face and voice recognition and the effects of maternal analgesics on neonatal behaviour.

Brian was appointed Professor of Educational Psychology at the Institute of Education in London in 1964, and became Professor of Psychology at Bedford College London in 1968. A wise and tolerant head, he was held in great respect and deep affection by his colleagues and students. With the merger of Bedford and Royal Holloway Colleges in 1985, it fell to him to preside over the move of his department to the

Egham site. It is a tribute to his cheerful diplomacy and his devotion to the Department's welfare that staff and students were delivered in good spirits to the prefabs that became their temporary home. A year later, delighting in the new purpose-built accommodation, he made psychology's advent a high-profile event by arranging a series of colloquia to be given by some of the greatest names in British psychology, all of them his friends.

Brian was President of the Society from 1972-73 and for part of that time also President of Section J of the British Association. As Chair of the Psychology Board of the Council for National Academic Awards from 1972-78, he did much to assist the development of new psychology departments in polytechnics. He thought it was a pity that they felt compelled to ape the universities rather than create their own identities.

Teaching was what Brian most enjoyed. For him psychology was the most wonderful subject — the best education possible. He took great pride in getting to know each first year undergraduate individually, and was always on hand to advise and encourage them. It is a tribute to his open-mindedness that his many postgraduates have pursued careers in different fields, but especially developmental and clinical psychology.

Brian was a charmingly modest man, who delighted in telling jokes against himself and constantly downplayed his own contribution: he had a talent for recognizing, encouraging and developing the skills of others. He was a sympathetic and discreet colleague; a witty, adept and generous host. A keen gardener and an accomplished musician, he could occasionally be inveigled into singing psychological ditties to his own accompaniment. Going well beyond his self-description as a facilitator, he positively enriched the professional and personal lives of others.

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