

Obituary

George Westby

George Westby was best known in British psychology as the creator of two first-class departments of psychology, first at Hull and then at Cardiff and as a critical enthusiast for psychology and psychologists.

George came late to academic life. At the age of 33 he gained the Oxford University Diploma in psychology with distinction in 1946 and almost immediately afterwards was

appointed Lecturer in Psychology at the University of Hull; the first appointment in the subject at that university. Almost single-handed he developed and taught an honours degree course and eventually headed a separate department of psychology. Although the university never gave him a chair his department quickly acquired a reputation as one of the very best teaching departments in the country. He was able to do this despite many difficulties because he was able to pick good students who, because of indifferent school records had been rejected by other universities. He then persuaded these academic rejects to believe in their own ability and study accordingly. At that time Hull was a University College so that the good degrees obtained by his students in the London University examinations could be correctly attributed to the excellence of his department rather than, as they might have been, explained away as a consequence of low standards of marking. Because of this a good degree from Hull was highly regarded and very many of his students, somewhat to their own surprise, went on to achieve distinguished academic careers.

Not content with this enviable achievement, George was determined that his department should also have a reputation in research. Fighting for facilities and space, making judicious appointments as the university grew, he was able by 1962 to build a broadly based department, strong in both research and teaching.

In 1962 he was offered the foundation chair in psychology at Cardiff. After much heart searching, he accepted and started yet again to do the job he was best qualified for and most enjoyed; that of creating around him a human environment which fostered teaching and research to the mutual enrichment of both. It was no surprise to his friends that he was able to repeat the achievement by applying his great gifts for detecting, encouraging and inspiring excellence whether in undergraduates, postgraduates or academic staff. His own intellectual interests were wide, his views strong and passionately held but always with respect and even affection for those who disagreed with him. His enthusiasm, persistence, eloquent advocacy and sheer intelligence made him an effective academic politician trusted by his colleagues and respected by his competitors for a slice of the academic cake.

These same qualities of humanity and wisdom made him an effective participator in the offices of The British Psychological Society. He was president in 1965/66 and a respected member of its central committees for a long period during a time of great upheaval with the gaining of the Royal Charter and the growing financial problems which eventually forced the Society to give up its London headquarters and put itself on a much more businesslike footing. He was also a member of several important committees of inquiry, notably that on corporal punishment. He was always very clear about the extent to which psychology should influence public and private behaviour. He never claimed too much influence but was a reasoned and effective advocate when there was something important to say for example, in relation to corporal punishment.

The sum total of his contribution to British psychology was recognized in the Honorary Fellowship granted to him by The British Psychological Society. This was a more significant honour than many may realize since all other Honorary Fellows had very significant achievements in research. George did not. But the Society recognized his unique contribution to the teaching of psychology and to clarifying the role of psychology in teaching, research and in public affairs.

IAN HOWARTH