



FEATURE

James Scotland - A true man o' pairts

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James Scotland – A true man o' pairs

David Northcroft

When James Scotland made his final Graduation Day speech, he was able to draw upon a richness of experience that stretched well beyond his 22 years as Principal of Aberdeen College of Education. Born in 1917, in an upstairs tenement in the East end of Glasgow, he had grown up to achieve an academic success which entitled him to be thought of as the authentic urban lad o' pairs. He was educated at his local Dennistoun schools, became Dux of Whitehill School, and then proceeded to take three First Class Honours degrees at Glasgow University, interspersed by a Bachelor of Law. After war service in Italy he embarked upon an energetically successful career in Scottish education, one that, within three years of his teaching qualification, propelled him into the post of Head of the Education Department at Jordanhill and then, in 1961, onwards to the Principalship at Aberdeen.

This was the position which enabled him to play a full part, and usually in a leadership role, in almost all the bodies which were then being set up in order to spearhead what proved to be, nationally, an era of extensive reform and development: the General Teaching Council, the Consultative Committee on the Curriculum, the Scottish Examination Board and the Council for National Academic Awards. He also maintained a strongly personal commitment to the Police Advisory Council and the Church of Scotland Education Committee. He was, moreover, a regular author and broadcaster on such matters; in 1970 he had published a definitive two-volume *History of Scottish Education*.

This was the official, public citizen. Throughout it all, he was sustaining a parallel career as a man of the theatre and of show business. Using the punning pen-name Kenn(eth) Little as his non-academic persona, he was a stage and radio comedian, and a prolific script-writer for such as Stanley Baxter, Andy Stewart, Una McLean and Duncan Macrae. With Alex Mitchell ('Parliamo Glasgow') he formed the writing team which as 'Ronald Emerson' wrote six of the famous Citizens' Christmas pantomimes in the 1950s; during the same period he was responsible for some 200 radio comedy shows, of which the long-running *17 Sauchie Street* was the best known.

Although his responsibilities as Principal necessarily curtailed these activities, he continued to involve himself in the world of theatre right to the very end: he was a great supporter of the Community Drama Association and ready author of plays both for that body, for the radio and for the professional stage. At

the time of his retirement it was claimed that not a week could pass by without some James Scotland piece being mounted somewhere or other, whether it was a village hall in Caithness or the Wednesday afternoon play on the BBC Home Service.

Even this was not the sum of the man for he sought to involve himself in a whole range of cultural activity. He pursued all ball games avidly and sustained a life-long passion for cricket and for tennis as well as an enthusiasm for Queen's Park and Jordanhill Rugby Football Club. He was also a secret poet and author of half a dozen historical novels, a collector of Commonwealth stamps and of esoteric cigar bands, a war-time expert on chemical weaponry, incorrigible bibliophile, international traveller and an irrepressible Glaswegian who spoke in its accents all his days, yet who became a fondly adoptive man of the North-east. Throughout his adult life he was an active member, and latterly elder, of the Church of Scotland.

In 1961 when he had first taken up office in the stony, barrack like building in downtown St Andrews Street, he had, for want of a suitable setting, presided over a ceremony which sought its place in a hired out Music Hall slot. From the very start, he had made it a chief aim of his Principalship to campaign for the College's removal to a more sympathetic site. By the end of that first decade he had succeeded: the Scottish Office had funded the inauguration of a fresh, purpose-built campus up on the open green spaces of Hilton. Now as he took the lectern for the final time it was on the stage of a building which he himself had helped to design as a fully appointed 'College Theatre' - and something more than the standard assembly hall which the SED had initially envisaged.

James Scotland's Graduation Speech of 1983 may be considered both to be a farewell and a characteristic slice of life as witnessed, and experienced, by its author. As ever, the aim is to induct the newly qualified into what he saw to be an honourable profession and to send them and their guests on their way rejoicing. But sadly was peering into a retirement that was never to come. Within two months of its utterance, and preparing for a last Monday morning of tidying out his office, James was struck down by a cardiac arrest. The words that were given on that midsummer day not only act as the closing of a career; they provide a memorial to a College Principalship which was vividly enacted, and a life that was fully lived.