Obituary

JOHN McSHANE

6 August 1949 – 21 August 1992

Rarely does one find an academic who is both an excellent teacher and a good researcher; who copes easily with current theories, yet also carries out detailed empirical work; who is a lucid explainer of technical matters, and a whizz at computers; who is deeply serious about his research, yet great fun to be with; who is highly industrious, yet always generous with his time and his possessions. John was all of these. His premature death in a boating accident on Lake Garda in Italy this summer was a shock to us all. He will be sadly missed by those who knew him at each stage of his life: as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin (B.A. Psychology, 1st class honours 1974); as a research student at St John’s College, Cambridge (Ph.D. 1977); as a lecturer in psychology at St Andrews University (1977–80) and the London School of Economics (1981–8); as a research scientist at Hewlett-Packard (1989–91); as a Senior Lecturer and Reader at Hatfield Polytechnic (from 1991). He deservedly became well-known from his dissertation Learning to talk (C.U.P. 1980): he was one of the first to recognize that children do not necessarily realize that words are ‘labels’ – the ‘naming insight’ may not occur until well into a child’s second year. He wrote numerous articles, and another highly readable and insightful book Cognitive development (Blackwell, 1991), in which he argued that developmental change should be modelled as an information processing system, rather than in terms of Piagetian structures. A further book (written with Julie Dockrell) Children’s learning difficulties (Blackwell) has just appeared. John and John’s writing will live on in the memory of those who knew him, and in the minds of current and future students: his work is characterized by lucid exposition, insight and tolerance. When embroiled in academic debates, child language researchers might do well to remember his words ‘Explaining [child language] acquisition will require a bold theoretical approach coupled with methodological rigour... It is surely only by marrying the best parts of these approaches that we will achieve an adequate understanding’ (1991: 281–2).

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