

Sir Denis Brogan, 1900-1974

The death of Sir Denis Brogan on 5 January this year must mean for most of the readers of the *Journal of American Studies* that a great academic, intellectual and (to surprisingly many) personal landmark has disappeared – a landmark which seems always to have been there, as that small handful of us who were actual or potential Americanists before the war can testify.

I say landmark, not monument or institution, because there can seldom have been a less corporate man. In his view, for example, universities were indeed made for scholars and not scholars for universities. He was not a respecter of institutions as such and he was far from an indiscriminate respecter of persons either. His sardonic scepticism, often racy and earthy, made him a wonderfully penetrating and acute judge of men and their political and social artifacts, both in history and in life. If this genuine tribute to his memory, from one who met him first at a slightly terrifying tutorial in Corpus, Oxford, in 1937, has a somewhat less staid and solemn, if not sombre, tone than is customary on these occasions, it is in part because I learnt from him that the overwhelming, if not indeed the literally sole, objective of scholarship and teaching is the unvarnished truth. A full and formal obituary has appeared in *The Times* – and in any case I just cannot write a ‘pi’ memoir of Denis.

Yet it would be wholly inaccurate to depict him as a hard or unsympathetic man. He was tough, but in his personal life, which is not our basic concern here, he was capable of commanding – gaining is a better word – deep and lasting affection and love. Despite youthful and in a sense lifelong ill-health, he drove himself unmercifully, right to the end of his days. (His capacity – thirst or even addiction would not be words too strong – for travel, particularly to America, was legendary, and when it was maintained in his last years acquired a sort of heroic grandeur.) His personal problems – and he had them in no mean measure – no doubt derived in considerable degree from – or at least were greatly exacerbated by – this consuming intellectual and physical activity. Yet in his very last months, after severe illness, we saw him, at a party in the American Ambassador’s house, still dominate with his memory and wit a group of much younger and fitter men.

He was *élan vital* personified: he was indeed a natural force in himself, and much of his remarkable life’s achievement came from this. His sheer brain power – I would not say conceptual command or overall intellectual

organizing capacity – was extraordinary (his cranium would have delighted, and fortified the professional convictions of, any nineteenth-century phrenologist) and he had, as has often been observed, virtually total recall. But the speed and energy of his mind was quite as remarkable as its capaciousness.

I well remember, as co-editor of *British Essays in American History*, which was to be published to a special commemorative deadline in 1957, that, when his contribution did not arrive on the date due, I rang him up (in some trepidation) to enquire about its progress. He characteristically replied, ‘*British Essays?* What are you talking about, Harry? Look! I’ve just flown in from New York. Put down what you want on a postcard and send it to me.’ After anxious and hurried consultation with my co-editor, I did so immediately, saying that at a real pinch we could give him three weeks. By return of post, the very next day, his contribution arrived – a substantial and interesting piece which is there for all to see.

It was this facility, exploiting the vast open-cast mines of information which he early acquired and to which he never ceased to add by voracious reading, that made possible his remarkable secondary career in journalism, not merely in the Press and the journals (reviews and articles, ‘learned’ and learned, as well as many ‘leaders’), but – one of the very first of the many – on the radio too. (He was somewhat less at ease, I fancy, on TV, which came late for him.) Far from the ‘remote and ineffectual don’, he became, in the early and semi-serious forms of quiz programme in the late 40s and the 50s, a national, indeed an international, Anglo-American figure.

His teaching, both by lecture and tutorial, was all of a piece with his writing: it succeeded by a massive, sometimes seemingly relentless but fascinating and highly stimulating, flow of ultimately relevant facts. That first tutorial of which I spoke was characteristic. He was already a great academic figure and scholar (the only really great one by whom I had the good fortune to be taught). When I knocked somewhat timidly on his door, a voice said what I presumed was ‘Come in’ – his Glasgow-Irish accent never made for easy aural understanding. Initially I was unable to do so, by reason of the pile of books which had fallen down inside the door, and when I finally forced an entry I could at first see nothing but the omnipresent masses of books which covered everything, but eventually spied him, sitting in an arm-chair in the corner of the room, with a heap of French paperbacks on his lap and on the arms of the chair.

I was, I must confess, somewhat put about by the fact that all the time I was reading out my essay, he was cutting the pages of the paperbacks, which I half-suspected to be novels and half-believed he was reading as he cut, but be that as it may, when I stopped reading, the flood-gates opened and I learnt

more in forty minutes about the deficiencies of my own product (and the realities of the economic causes of the American Revolution) than one often learnt in many hours of tutorials.

His lecturing form was usually the same. I never saw him lecture with more than a postcard by way of notes, yet the performance (and it was in some sense a performance – a spate of information and anecdotes in illustration of his topic, marred only by a tendency to speak so fast that American audiences, especially, often missed much of what was said) was of the same fundamental character and much the same quality as his writing.

All this might make up a distinguished career on its own, but of course the heart of his achievement remains to be discussed – the extraordinary life-long production of stimulating, informative, original and highly pertinent works of scholarship. It is appropriate that in this place we should see his literary production through Americanist eyes, and the study of the United States (one could not quite say the same, for all his fondness for the place, of America itself) was both his first and his last love. Yet he was one of the very few scholars in recent times (R. G. Collingwood was the only other one I personally knew) who genuinely became and remained master of two quite distinct fields, for *The Development of Modern France 1870–1939* (1940) at once became and has remained a classic of French history and politics.

But it was his studies of the United States which constituted his outstanding achievement. He has only been surpassed as a British exponent of American history and institutions by his great predecessor, James Bryce. From his first work, *The American Political System*, in 1933, through some seven other books, to *American Aspects* in 1964, he produced a mass of scholarly material, both history and political commentary and analysis (the two very often so closely interwoven as scarcely to be perceptibly different genres), which can rarely if ever have been surpassed by other, including American, students of the United States.

His forte was never in philosophical, highly orderly, deep and classificatory analysis. In this respect he differed almost totally from his predecessor in the Cambridge Chair of political science, Ernest Barker. Brogan was essentially a vivid and lively descriptive historian and a perceptive observer of men and political systems, yet his *The Price of Revolution* was a genuine work of politico-historical generalization.

His greatness really lay in the unmatched range of his expertise, in the extraordinary volume of his high-grade scholarly work, in the remarkable relevance of his most powerful works (on the United States in 1933, on France in June 1940), and on the sustained and often intense impact of his teaching over some forty years, not only in London, Oxford and Cambridge

but throughout the United States. (I once asked him how many British historians of the United States were not his pupils or pupils of his pupils: he could call none to mind at that moment.) He founded American studies in Britain and dominated a generation of its scholars. We shall not see his like again.

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It is appropriate, in the journal of the British Association for American Studies, to record Denis Brogan's interest in and help to the Association in its formative years. He was, of course, from the first a member of the Advisory Council that helped the infant Association to establish itself, and his advice was of great benefit to the officers. For one outstanding act of generosity, however, the writer of this note has particular cause to be grateful. In 1957, in the University of Nottingham, the Association held its second annual conference, and as Conference Secretary I had been fortunate enough to secure Dwight Macdonald as the speaker for the opening session on the Friday evening. Expectation gave way to despair, however, when on the Friday morning a telegram notified me that he had been recalled urgently to New York. Knowing some of my fellow committee-members to be attending the Political Studies conference at Sheffield, I phoned for help in what seemed a hopeless situation. A reply came promptly: Denis Brogan was there and had offered to fill the gap. And so the conference assembled, to discover that, though the opening speaker had changed, the announced topic was still the same. In a superb impromptu talk Brogan offered us what he assured us Macdonald would have said had he been there, and then, for full measure, gave us his own commentary on it. Witty, eloquent, but impressively informed and documented, it was a *tour de force* that got the conference off to a flying start, and left the Conference Secretary profoundly glad to be a member of an Association that could call on friends of that calibre.

EDITOR