

Robert Brodie MacLeod

January 31, 1907 — June 19, 1972

Robert Brodie MacLeod, Susan Linn Sage Professor of Psychology, died on June 19, 1972, less than a month before he was to retire. Only ten days before, colleagues and former students from all over the country had gathered at Cornell for a two-day symposium in his honor. Although already ill, he was able to hear the papers relating to his many interests, to respond to them and to express his appreciation at the closing session. The breadth of his influence and the number of his students who have become prominent psychologists was made very evident at this symposium. A book containing a record of the symposium, a biography, and a bibliography of Professor MacLeod's writings is now being published.

Professor MacLeod was responsible, as much or more than any other American of his generation, for introducing Gestalt psychology into the United States. As a student, he became acquainted with the leaders of this movement. Later, he was able to bring Wolfgang Kohler to Swarthmore. He promoted the establishment of what might be called the Swarthmore-Berkeley axis, the mutual exchange between those two institutions of ideas, of students, and of jobs for psychologists.

He was a true internationalist. He understood and sympathized not only with the Berlin school of Gestalt theorists, but also with David Katz at Stockholm and Albert Michotte at Louvain. These two especially were his friends. Like him, they looked at phenomena and made experiments but never tried to establish a theory or found a school. He was a tolerant thinker. He did not argue against behaviorism; what he argued for was the importance of phenomenal experience and the possibility of a disciplined phenomenology.

He was also an internationalist in that he had an unusual ability to read and speak languages other than English. More particularly, he was a European; he understood the development of European culture and the part that psychology played in it from the Greeks to the present. Of all the courses he taught, the two that interested him most were the psychology of language and the history of psychology.

There are few good historians of psychology, but MacLeod was one of them. So much scholarship is required that it is hard to avoid pedantry, but he was the very opposite of a pedant. He had broad interests outside of scientific psychology. He knew the theatre, and he read philosophy for pleasure. His ability to take the long-term view saved him from the blind alleys of his discipline in the last thirty years. He was not tempted by narrow specialties or by fashionable laboratory technologies. He kept his eye on what he called the persistent problems of psychology.

Professor MacLeod was born January 31, 1907, in Canada, the son of a Presbyterian minister. His early schooling and undergraduate education were in Canada, where he received the B.A. and M.A. from McGill University in 1926 and 1927 respectively. He spent the next two years in Germany on a Morse Travelling Fellowship, studying principally at the University of Berlin. There he became acquainted with the founders of the Gestalt movement and their students, as well as many other European psychologists. This period was undoubtedly of great influence in shaping his later interests. He returned to complete the Ph.D. in 1932 at Columbia University under R. S. Woodworth. While completing his thesis at Columbia, he became an instructor at Cornell from 1930 to 1933. He then took a position at Swarthmore College, where he remained until 1946, with interruptions for government and war service. In 1946 he returned to McGill as professor and chairman of the Department of Psychology. He had been there only two years, however, when Cornell persuaded him to become chairman of the Department of Psychology. He served in this position from 1948 to 1953, when he returned to full-time teaching.

While his teaching and his students at Cornell took first place during this period, he also managed to find time for many other activities during vacations, weekends, or occasional leaves of absence. He was much in demand for committee assignments in the American Psychological Association and was active in the formation of a new division on the History of Psychology. He served on the governing board of the International Congress of Psychology for many years. He made a study trip to East Africa and was strongly interested in African affairs, hoping to return there after his retirement. One sabbatic leave was spent at the University of Michigan in charge of the honors program in psychology, and he was frequently consulted on the development of new honors programs at other colleges. Another leave was spent at the University of Pennsylvania, where he was charged by the president with making a complete study of the College of Arts and Sciences and preparing recommendations for the rehabilitation and improvement of the College.

In the course of his career, he spent a great amount of time as a departmental chairman. He can be said to have built or rebuilt a department first at Swarthmore, then at McGill, and finally at Cornell. Successful as he was in administration, he was above all a superb teacher. He could interest freshmen, he could arouse upperclassmen, and he could stimulate graduate students. He never tired of it and he knew all the ways in which teaching can be done, from having tried them all himself. He encouraged young instructors to try new methods and to experiment with their courses, but he knew that there was no simple formula for success.

There was a special quality about MacLeod as a teacher that reflected his special qualities as a human being. His aim, as he himself put it, was to enable the learner to think in a disciplined way about undisciplined problems. But

the inchoate ideas of his students and younger colleagues were to him more precious than his own. He nurtured them with such patience and gentle probing that the learner believed all the ideas were his own. So did MacLeod. His wisdom became the wisdom of others, for which he claimed no credit. This was the measure of his generosity and greatness as a teacher and as a man. A generation of scholars is indebted to MacLeod for their intellectual identity. The hallmark of their heritage is a humane commitment to thought and teaching about the mind and its way of perceiving reality.

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