Maurice Keens-Soper (1938-2018)

In Memoriam.

Maurice was a law unto himself. He was strikingly independent in spirit and had little time for convention. He thought things out for himself, and had no hesitation in expressing his views forcefully even if they were controversial. He was helped in this respect by having a rare feeling for words both written and spoken. There was indeed always a touch of the vagabond poet in Maurice, expressed not only by his way with words, but also by his strong feeling for nature. When he retired, not without acrimony, from Leicester University, he buried himself in the depths of the Welsh countryside, busied himself with planting trees, and managed his rural estate with great enthusiasm. In doing so he had, it goes without saying, the invaluable support and encouragement of his wife Wendy, herself an original artist and interpreter of nature.

Maurice’s independent and rather fiery spirit inevitably led at times to friction with others, but it must not be imagined that he was constantly bellicose or engaged in polemics. There was a deep fund of kindness and a very lively sense of fun in Maurice. He was a great generator of laughter. Who can forget his classic imitation of Professor Christopher Hughes - himself an unconventional figure - whom Maurice both liked and admired? Maurice could somehow catch exactly the timbre of Hughes’ voice as it swooped from a tentative and tremulous beginning to a deeply resonant conclusion. Nor can one forget the time when Maurice invited an elderly fan-dancer from Paris to enliven a student occasion at Leicester. This gallant lady did wondrous things with her ostrich feathers before a surprised audience, giving, as some wag commented at the time, a new meaning to the phrase ‘la plume de ma tante’.

Maurice taught politics for several years, chiefly under the aegis of Professor Hughes, at Leicester University. For all his unconventional free-wheeling spirit he was a true academic, in the sense that he had an original and enquiring mind that sought unfailingly to get to the bottom of things. He liked nothing better than a good argument about fundamentals, and had no time for amiable commonplaces and fine sounding platitudes. He once told me that he had wrestled with the concept of sovereignty until he was flat on his back! His liking for things intellectual was accompanied, it should be added, by a certain indifference towards things administrative, at a time when, for better or worse, administration assumed ever greater significance in the Department and University.
The depth of Maurice’s intellectual interests is demonstrated by the fact that he continued to write and research long after he left Leicester and took up country pursuits. Amongst other achievements during this later time he won an open essay competition set by the European Union with a work that was subsequently published. It seems almost certain that it was his conviction that illness was gradually robbing him of his mental faculties that drove him eventually to take the tragic decision to end his life.

The two academic subjects which primarily occupied Maurice’s mind were political theory and international relations, and by the end of his life he had published extensively on both. It would be wrong for me to try and summarise his ideas here. I will only observe that, although one might have expected Maurice, given his temperament, to take up a radical position in these two areas, he had in fact a deep respect for the historical and conservative viewpoint. Thus he had an abiding admiration for Edmund Burke, and for the wonderful combination of ideas and sonorous language that Burke’s writings manifested. In the field of international relations Maurice ranged widely, but I remember in particular his strong attachment to the ideas expressed in the writings of François de Callières, a distinguished diplomat of the ancien régime.

Maurice always guarded his privacy, but he also gave much to the world, and his original and engaging character will be sorely missed.

Murray Forsyth