

INTRODUCTION

[by Murdo Macdonald and Richard Gunn]

George Davie: Life and significance

George Davie's *The Democratic Intellect: Scotland and her Universities in the Nineteenth Century* was first published in 1961. It pioneered the process of linking the intellectual traditions of the Scottish Enlightenment to those of today. Here and in its sequel, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: The Problem of Generalism and Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland*, George Davie demonstrated with skill, humour and historical grasp the need to reassess and to properly evaluate the generalist tradition of education in Scotland, a tradition in which philosophy played a central role. The value of Davie's understanding of the philosophical underpinning of interdisciplinary education has been recognised both as a guide to the development of educational provision and as a significant commentary on the relationship between expert and community. Davie's publications have become reference points for the discussion of cultural thought. However often those who use the term 'democratic intellect' have only a vague notion of what Davie actually wrote, and it is to be hoped that they will actually read this new edition. *The Democratic Intellect* has a claim to be the most significant single volume written by a Scottish academic in the last fifty years. It sets out to defend not only the intellectual culture of Scotland but the whole notion of what an intellectual culture can be, by showing that all its parts should benefit from all its other parts. As human beings we require both poetry and mathematics. They are not in competition.

George Davie was born in Dundee in 1912. He was educated at the High School of Dundee and then at the University of Edinburgh. Dundee could not at that time provide him with an education in his chosen fields of classics and philosophy but it should be noted that during his childhood both Patrick Geddes and D'Arcy Thompson were professors at University College

Dundee. Geddes' thinking in particular is characterised by both an intellectual generalism and a regard for the visual, and it is these precise areas that were to emerge for Davie as the key aspects of the Scottish intellectual tradition which he went on to defend. In *The Democratic Intellect* Davie identifies Geddes as one of the last representatives of a Scottish philosophical approach to science teaching. It is interesting to note what Davie's friend Hugh MacDiarmid said about Geddes: 'He knew that watertight compartments are useful only to a sinking ship, and traversed all the boundaries of separate subjects.'¹ In the same book he devotes a chapter to *The Democratic Intellect*. The point is not to speculate about any direct influence of Geddes on Davie but rather to indicate that Davie grew up in the last years of a powerfully articulated intellectual tradition that had generalist thinking at its core. Davie's significance for the history of ideas in Scotland is that he noticed that threatened aspect of his own culture and reflected on it when he became an academic. Nearby in St Andrews was the classicist and advocate of early Greek philosophy John Burnet. Burnet was another inspirational generalist thinker and Davie paraphrases him to give one of the clearest statements of his own vision: 'the most important side of any department of knowledge is the side on which it comes into contact with every other department.'² That notion that any aspect of knowledge, culture, or society benefits from the illumination of all other aspects is key to Davie's thinking; for him the task of education was to facilitate that process. The social approach to knowledge that took for granted the role of the wider community in the process of establishing and maintaining bodies of knowledge also implied for Davie that within universities different disciplines should be juxtaposed for mutual illumination, and that a key role for the discipline of philosophy was to enable such juxtaposition to be understood.

While studying at the University of Edinburgh, Davie was one of a group of students that included Sorley MacLean and J. B. Caird. Slightly younger was Stuart Hood. It was Caird and

¹ H. MacDiarmid, *The Company I've Kept* (London: Hutchinson, 1966) p. 83.

² G. E. Davie, *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1986) p. 15.

Davie who introduced Sorley MacLean to the poetry of Hugh MacDiarmid, and it was Davie who introduced MacLean to MacDiarmid in the flesh in Rutherford's bar in 1934. Davie would have considered it only proper that these two poets were introduced to one another by a student of classics and philosophy. He was to be among the first readers of MacLean's *The Cuillin* in typescript, describing it in a letter to the author as 'a classic of our time' an assessment that it is now so easy to echo.³ On graduating in 1938 he was appointed assistant at Edinburgh to the outstanding Kant scholar and translator, Norman Kemp Smith, who was a lifelong influence. In 1944 he married Elspeth Dryer, who, as Elspeth Davie was to become a highly respected writer, winning the Katherine Mansfield Prize in 1978. Elspeth was as acute a questioner of the nature of reality in her medium as was George in his. She had studied painting at Edinburgh College of Art before focusing on her writing and that again echoed George's enduring interest in the visual. That interest emerges in a profound way in *The Democratic Intellect* through Davie's consideration of the Scottish advocacy of the philosophical benefits of the study of geometry as against algebra. This was to a degree a defence of the high value placed on a visual approach to science and mathematics by Isaac Newton, at a time when the merits of such an approach were being overlooked south of the Border. A crucial example, for Davie, was Robert Simson's edition of Euclid, published (complete with Simson's philosophically informed notes) by Foulis of Glasgow in 1756. The implications of this 'visual thinking' aspect of *The Democratic Intellect* have still not been fully explored, but from a Scottish cultural point of view it finds its echoes everywhere from the engineering of Thomas Telford or James Watt to the photography of Hill and Adamson and the architecture of Charles Rennie Mackintosh. *The Democratic Intellect* is a book that practices what it preaches. It advocates an intellectual generalism and at the same time demonstrates just that on every page. Another example, again as yet not fully explored, is Davie's exploration of the influence of Robert Burns as a philosophically informed thinker at the heart of the Scottish Enlightenment.

³ Quoted by Christopher Whyte's in his introduction to MacLean, S., *An Cuilithionn 1939 and Unpublished Poems* (Glasgow: Association of Scottish Literary Studies 2011) pp. 19-20.

After the Second World War, George Davie was appointed to head the Department of Moral Philosophy at Queen's University, Belfast. It was there that he conceived and wrote much of what was to become *The Democratic Intellect*. In 1953 his D. Litt was awarded by Edinburgh University. His thesis *A Scotch Metaphysics – the Theory of Knowledge in the Scottish Universities 1730-1860* was accepted by Routledge but not published at the time due to the publisher requesting that Davie write a historical introduction to the book. This 'introduction' became *The Democratic Intellect*. In 1960 he returned to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh, where he stayed for the rest of his career. The following year *The Democratic Intellect* was published. It attracted wide praise not least from a figure concerned with the failure of interdisciplinary understanding in English education, C. P. Snow, and its influence on the deliberations of the Robbins committee has been recognised. Nevertheless it appeared at a time of relentless specialisation in higher education, and its generalist message was by no means universally welcomed, even in his own university, and Davie was only too well aware of the challenge offered to then current thinking by his historical analysis. Today it is as relevant as ever, as we struggle with fragmented efforts at interdisciplinarity instead of adopting a philosophically informed approach such as Davie advocated.

In 1983 George Davie was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh, one of the first philosophers to be so honoured in recent times. Davie's continuing contribution at this time is evident from Derrida's invitation to him to contribute to the conference, *Victor Cousin, les ideologues et les ecossaise*, which resulted in another notable paper, *Victor Cousin and the Scottish Philosophers*, first published in French in 1985 and published in English the next year in *Edinburgh Review*.⁴ In 1986, prompted by continuing enthusiasm for his work among his students, he published *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect: the Problem of Generalism and*

⁴ G. E. Davie, 'Victor Cousin and the Scottish Philosophers' (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Review, no. 74, 1986) pp. 108-125.

Specialisation in Twentieth-Century Scotland. As with *The Democratic Intellect* that book drew together philosophy, poetry, education and wider cultural issues. *The Glasgow Herald* reviewer commented 'Davie may yet transform our ideas of twentieth-century Scotland'. The *Times Higher Education Supplement* suggested that 'the chapter on MacDiarmid is the best account of the poet yet written' while *The New Statesman* remarked that 'if Davie had done nothing else in this fascinating book, his elucidation of the philosophical bearings of one of the greatest twentieth-century poets would have been sufficiently momentous'. The *London Review of Books* called it 'a substantial achievement in the chronically underdeveloped area of post-Enlightenment Scottish studies'. The *Times Literary Supplement* struck an appropriately interdisciplinary note: 'Davie displays on page after page the virtues of an education that encourages a free interplay between special knowledge and general understanding.'

Having made his mark again at an age of well over seventy, Davie continued to produce and to influence. In 1990, along with Noam Chomsky, he made a notable contribution to the Free University of Glasgow's *Self Determination and Power* conference, which the writer James Kelman had helped to organise at the Pearce Institute in Govan. Introducing Davie's essay collection published later that year, Kelman wrote 'as well as offering an introduction to the intellectual struggles in Scotland in the 18th and 19th centuries, these essays by Davie offer an insight into some of the more crucial issues in modern times'.⁵

In 2001, with the help of his friend and colleague at the University of Edinburgh, the philosopher John Llewelyn, a version of his 1953 thesis, now entitled *The Scotch Metaphysics*, finally took its place on Routledge's list, half a century after its original proposed publication date. Despite increasing physical frailty, in 2003 Davie published an extended essay, in association with *Edinburgh Review*, on the philosopher James Frederick Ferrier, a consideration

⁵ G. E. Davie, *The Scottish Enlightenment and other Essays*, (Edinburgh: Polygon 1990).

of whose work lies at the heart of *The Democratic Intellect*.⁶ The word that Ferrier coined for theory of knowledge 'epistemology' has become common currency. The fact that he considered a theory of ignorance to be just as important has been itself ignored. But its importance was not lost on George Davie, for at the heart of Davie's thinking are those blindspots that lie outwith the methodological possibilities of one discipline, but may nevertheless be approached from the perspective of another. The continuing appreciation of his cultural contribution was noted in 2007 when he was appointed an honorary fellow of the Educational Institute of Scotland, the very body that had first published Hugh MacDiarmid's *Contemporary Scottish Studies*. That advocacy of the poet's views by the EIS had been a point of departure for Davie in his writing of *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*.

Lindsay Paterson, Professor of Education Policy at the University of Edinburgh, whose words preface this present edition of *The Democratic Intellect*, wrote in *The Herald* after Davie's death in 2007: 'George Davie was one of that very small group of Scottish intellectuals who have shaped the way the nation thinks of itself.'⁷ That comment sums up Davie's cultural significance. The opportunity here is to reflect further on its philosophical underpinnings.

Common Sense and the Democratic Intellect

An important chapter in *The Democratic Intellect* is headed 'A Metropolis of Common Sense'. In it, Davie remarks that the 'social-cultural life of the Scots' remained 'fairly intact' for more than a century after the 1707 Union. He continues: 'Edinburgh still remained a sort of debatable land where rival spheres of influence, English and French, British and Continental, might conflict with one another'.⁸

⁶ G. E. Davie, *Ferrier and the Blackout of the Scottish Enlightenment*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Review 2003).

⁷ Lindsay Paterson, 'George Davie: An Appreciation' *The Herald*, March 28, 2007.

⁸ *Democratic Intellect* p. 261

The passage sheds light on Davie's own concerns. First, there is the metaphor which it employs: clubs and salons of the Scottish Enlightenment are likened with Scotland's borders where, historically, diverse and conflicting claims held sway. Debate, and the interaction which debate involves, is essential to Davie's notion of intellectual history. The *Democratic Intellect* is above all a dialogic work, where a range of voices obtain.⁹ Second, the passage underlies the international – Continental as well as Anglophone – perspective in which debates in Enlightened Scotland are to be seen. And, third, the passage and the chapter in which it is situated make clear the central role of philosophy in Scottish ideas.

What sort of philosophy? The one-word (or one-phrase) answer given by the *Democratic Intellect* is: the philosophy of common sense. But more than a single word or phrase is needed because, as will become apparent in the paragraphs which follow, the term 'common sense' can be understood in various ways. A brief exploration of the term and its meanings supplies background to the *Democratic Intellect's* discussions and, moreover, points forward to Davie's subsequent work.

In the opening paragraphs of the chapter already quoted, Davie draws upon the post-French Revolutionary theorist Theodore Jouffroy to indicate how common sense may be seen. In Davie's words, summarising Jouffroy: the appeal of *la philosophie ecossaise* lay in 'its idea of common sense as a primitive version of the whole, obscurely implicit in all human beings, presupposed as a point of agreement between philosophical and political differences [and] capable of being appealed to as a check on extremism'.¹⁰ The examples that Davie adduces of 'extremism' are the doctrines that virtue has nothing to do with pleasure and that a 'material'

⁹ On 'dialogic', see M.M. Bakhtin *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1981) and V. Brown *Adam Smith's Discourse* (London: Routledge 1994).

¹⁰ *Democratic Intellect* p. 255.

or external world does not exist. Perhaps the best way of stating the point that Davie wishes to draw from Jouffroy is to say that common sense sets its face against not 'extremism' but doctrines which philosophical scepticism affirms.

What understanding of common sense is implied in the passage summarising Jouffroy? Setting aside questions concerning 'extremism' and scepticism, one meaning in particular occupies pride of place. If the term 'common sense' refers to a world-view 'implicit in all humans', it signifies (in part at least) a sense or meaning or pattern of ideas shared by a number of individuals – say, individuals who comprise a group or community. But – it may be asked – does a reference to ideas shared by a number of individuals tell the full story, where the notion of 'common sense' is concerned? In order to see that this is not the case, and to bring Davie's thought into focus, we broaden our discussion.

In the history of philosophy, the term common sense has two meanings. Sometimes, it does indeed signify a sense or meaning or set of ideas shared by a number of individuals. When, for example, Hutcheson translates the Latin expression *sensus communis* as 'Publick Sense',¹¹ he has this conception of common sense (or a version of it) in mind. At other times, however, the expression *common sense* refers not to a sense shared *by individuals* but *by the senses* (sight, touch, hearing, taste and smell). So to say, common sense is viewed as a "sixth sense" which totalises, or draws together into a coherent picture, data supplied by the other, more familiar, five. Thomas Reid, as quoted by Davie in his *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect*, underlines the importance of 'common sense' in this meaning of the term.¹² The question of how and why distinct senses should have an interconnected meaning – why should a cube which *looks sharp-*

¹¹ F. Hutcheson *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections, with Illustrations on the Moral Sense* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 2002) p. 17.

¹² T. Reid 'Curia Prima on Common Sense' (Appendix to L. Marcil-Lacoste *Claude Buffier and Thomas Reid*, Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, p. 189; see G. Davie *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1986) p. 187.

cornered also *feel* sharp-cornered whereas a sphere which *looks* smooth also *feels* smooth – was thrown into relief by Bishop Berkeley in 1710¹³ and formed a focus of philosophical interest in the work of eighteenth-century Scots.¹⁴

Both meanings of common sense play a part in Davie's writings. The phrase *democratic intellect*, which Davie sets at the head of his work,¹⁵ invokes first the social and then the epistemological significance of the term. In *The Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* (the *Democratic Intellect's* sequel) the relation between the meanings is an explicit theme.¹⁶ *Ferrier and the Blackout of the Scottish Enlightenment* – Davie's last book – tells the story of how a resurgence of Calvinism in Scottish society diverted Ferrier's philosophical attention at a time when, perhaps, a clear conception of the five senses' interrelation was in his reach.¹⁷

What overall significance should we attribute to the complex conceptual continent – that of common sense in its two-fold meaning – which Davie's writings bring into view? Our suggestion is that the significance is difficult to exaggerate. Although Davie's focus is on the history of ideas during a specific period, the ideas he draws to a reader's attention resonate internationally and from the eighteenth century to today. This is especially so if we ask how the two senses of common sense are related, and go on to propose a fashion in which this is the

¹³ G. Berkeley *A New Theory of Vision* CXXXII.

¹⁴ D. Hume *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978) p. 25; A. Smith 'Of the External Senses' in his *Essays on Philosophical Subjects* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund 1980) p. 148. See G. Davie 'Berkeley, Hume and the Central Problem of Scottish Philosophy' in his *A Passion for Ideas* (Edinburgh: Polygon 1994) pp. 40-69.

¹⁵ See *Democratic Intellect* p. 75.

¹⁶ A striking instance comes in *Crisis of the Democratic Intellect* p. 259, where Davie refers to Adam Smith on intersubjectivity to show how knowledge of 'causality' (or at any rate 'causality as it occurs in the social fact of people's influence on one another') is to be seen.

¹⁷ The passage in Ferrier which Davie, in conversation, presented as especially worthy of attention – a passage which, when almost blind, he asked to have read aloud – runs as follows: 'And here we may hazard an observation, which, simple as it is, appears to be new, and not unimportant in aiding us to unravel the mysteries of sensation; which observation is, that, in no case whatever, does any sense inform us of the existence of its appropriate organ, or of the relation which subsists between that organ and its objects, but that the interposition of some other sense is invariably required to give us this information.' And again: 'while it is the touch which establishes an interval between the organ and the objects of sight, it is the sight which establishes *no* interval between the organ and the objects of touch. Sight thus pays back every fraction of the debt that it has incurred to its brother sense.' (J. Ferrier *Lectures and Philosophical Remains*, Edinburgh: Blackwood 1864, Vol. II, p. 366.)

case. Perhaps either meaning of the term 'common sense' comes into its own only when the other is present? Perhaps a socially shared sense is possible only amongst a group or community of totalised individuals? And perhaps, conversely, a group or community of totalised – coherent, well-integrated, humane – individuals is conceivable only where shared sense in its social meaning obtains? Read in this way, Scottish common sense philosophy opens on to a host of twentieth and twenty-first century positions: these include the linguistic turn in analytical philosophy, the later Wittgenstein's conception of social or public meaning, Hegelian and neo-Hegelian views of mutual recognition as a precondition for 'scientific' thinking, the early Habermas's advocacy of a 'consensus' theory of truth and – to return to a Scottish example¹⁸ – object-relations psychoanalysis where actual people as well as inner fantasies play a part in individual development. Here, we do not insist on any one of these examples. Our aim is to illustrate the immense richness and fertility of the intellectual world which, in *The Democratic Intellect*, is introduced.

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¹⁸ W.R.D. Fairbairn *Psychoanalytic Studies of the Personality* (London: Tavistock 1952).