David Abercrombie

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The thirty-two years that David Abercrombie spent at the University of Edinburgh were one of the most remarkable episodes in the history of phonetics in Great Britain. In terms of scholarly life 30 years is not all that long a time, but within this period Abercrombie built up, from very modest beginnings, a centre of study in the phonetic arts and sciences that was generally recognised as outstanding by any standard, and, within Britain, a clear rival to the much longer established department at University College, London.

He was appointed to the post of Lecturer in Phonetics in 1948, moving to Edinburgh from a similar post in Leeds held for only a year. Before that time, his university appointments had been in English, at the London School of Economics from 1945 to 1947 and at the University of Cairo from 1940 to 1945, and these were preceded by five years as Director of Studies at the Institute of English Studies in Athens. But he was a phonetician by training and from the very beginning of his professional life, and his training was of the highest calibre; in Daniel Jones' Department of Phonetics at University College London – and for his IPA Certificate he was examined by none other than Paul Passy himself at his 'Christian Socialist' commune in France.

Abercrombie's years in London before the Second World War, firstly as a student at University College, and then from 1934 to 1938 as Assistant Lecturer in English at the LSE, fell

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within a time of much stimulating activity in the study of phonetics and linguistics there. The University's teachers in the field included J. R. Firth, A. Lloyd James, H. Coustenoble and I. C. Ward, active alongside Jones, and Malinowski, who was lecturing at the LSE – and 1935 brought to London the Second International Congress of Phonetic Sciences, where he was to hear papers by, amongst others, Trubetzkoy, Hjelmslev, Uldall, Vachek, Chao, Scripture, Menzerath, Stetson, Gram-mont, Paget, Sommerfelt, H. E. Palmer and van Ginneken. He also made the acquaintance at this time of C. K. Ogden, whose Basic English attracted his life-long interest and admiration. From this background he drew a deep and humane interest in language and all its workings that was later to influence his own teaching and writing and set them somewhat apart from the work of some of his contemporaries, often guided by narrower preoccupations. This broad perspective was further extended by an interest in matters of speech rhythm and prosody that he inherited from his father, the poet Lascelles Abercrombie, who held Chairs in English Literature at the Universities of Leeds and London and whose Principles of English Prosody had been published in 1924. When first appointed to Edinburgh in 1948 as Lecturer in Phonetics, Abercrombie was the sole teacher of his subject. But by 1961, when I arrived to do postgraduate

work together with the Editor of this journal, his department had grown to six teachers, including Elizabeth Uldall and Peter Ladefoged, and in 1957 he had been appointed Reader. There was a general Phonetics Laboratory staffed by two technicians and a special laboratory that housed the PAT (Parametric Artificial Talk) project; this was one of the earlier programmes in speech synthesis, and was distinguished from most others then in operation, as its name suggests, by its use of a non-segmental input to the sound generators that produced the 'speech'. There were also, within the University, departments of General Linguistics and of Applied Linguistics, and the offices of the Linguistic Survey of Scotland.

Virtually everyone in these departments attended at some time the Phonetics Department's one-year Ordinary Course so that the teaching of Abercrombie and his colleagues became the basis of an approach to the subject that was common to the generality of linguists at the University. The course that he designed had a very practical basis, comprising in its weekly five hours, an hour of ear-training and one hour of performance alongside a tutorial and two hours of lectures, many given by Abercrombie himself, who approved of the Scottish tradition that the Professor should teach first-year students. At this level of work, the lectures, which were very carefully planned and ordered, also had a firmly practical orientation, and included an introduction to transcription theory together with regular transcription work, and to a simple and workable phoneme theory. Those who were lucky enough to follow it were given an unshakable grasp of the rudiments of phonetic theory and practice. But there was nothing rigid or doctrinaire about the teaching, which was in fact in some respects iconoclastic. For instance, Abercrombie was an RP speaker -but he had no special regard for RP as an accent of English and no special place for it in his teaching. Scottish students were encouraged to transcribe their own accents and, as a result, the department, staff and students, built up a good deal of expertise in the phonetic and phonological detail of Scots varieties of English, types hardly known about outside Scotland at that time. In the same way, the Ordinary Course contained, towards its close, lectures on the Prosodic Analysis associated with the name of J. R. Firth and his colleagues – almost certainly the only undergraduate course in Britain to do so. This was presented as an il-

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luminating alternative to the phonemic analysis in which the students had been initially trained, opening another door and introducing them to a style of phonological analysis of which several of their teachers had had firsthand experience. The Diploma in Phonetics course also had a firm strand of practicality running through it and showed up well in the department's commitment to theoretical work against a solid background of language material; it included work with informants and performance classes at an advanced level in particular languages, as well as a laboratory course in experimental phonetics and work in the PAT laboratory. It was in this postgraduate course, too, that Abercrombie taught his specialist subject on the history of phonetics in Britain, generally taking a text such as Sweet's *Primer* as its central concern, but in fact having a much wider range. On this subject he was without dispute one of Europe's leading authorities. He had begun reading the works of early writers on phonetics, spelling reform, orthoepy, language teaching and related subjects in the British Museum during his student days in London and had built up a fine personal collection of texts in this area of his interests as well as an invaluable series of notebooks, ultimately over thirty in number, in which he made notes on persons, publications, artefacts and technical terms occurring throughout the history of the phonetic sciences. He was always intent on showing links in tradition between our predecessors and ourselves, and his own theoretical work built quite openly on these foundations, as a reading of his *Elements of Phonetics* of 1967 shows. Students passing through his Diploma course went

on to fill senior positions in phonetics all over the world, including Chairs in Amsterdam, Cambridge, Kiel, Los Angeles and Edinburgh itself.

The teaching and research in Abercrombie's department put language firmly at the heart of things. He emphasised that laboratory work was nothing if it consisted of simply recording and measuring, that it had to be related to categories of linguistic analysis and language functioning. For all this, some of his statements were misinterpreted – by those, for instance, who looked for physical isochronicity in the duration of rhythmic units, taking their cue, as they thought, from one of his best-known papers. But in it he had discussed the values of such units as a phonological property of language. In this same spirit he had little time for the display of phonetic minutiae for their own sake, particularly when presented by means of the more arcane or fussy symbols; rather, the underlying phonological systems and structures were what mattered. And in the matter of presentation he applied this same passion for symmetry, elegance and clarity of line to everything from the symbol on the page or a weekly lecture handout through to the quality of his own written prose.

These same qualities I would take to have typified his running of his department as a whole. He said once that all administration carried out by university academics should be 'inefficient within a margin of tolerance', since any academic who was outstandingly good at administration was in the wrong job. In fact he ran his department very well, with a touch of benevolent despotism and a strong grasp of the pragmatics of university government, as its rapid development and sound reputation bore witness. From the late sixties the department amalgamated with the Linguistics Department and moved from Chambers Street to a new site in George Square.

Abercrombie had clearly enjoyed the family atmosphere of the University College department as he had experienced it as a young man, and sought to provide its counterpart in his own department. This atmosphere extended from the Phonetics Laboratory, which was where the coffee-making equipment was

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stored, and where a good deal of impromptu discussion and teaching went on, to his home, where all staff and postgraduate students were welcome at regular Sunday morning parties. To these he invited not only members of his and other departments, but also visiting academics, family members, neighbours and other members of the wider Edinburgh community. A good deal of phonetics was talked on these occasions, too, in which most could take part, as the wives of several staff members had attended the Ordinary Course and his own wife Mary was an authority on the nineteenth-century spelling-reformer and designer of shorthand Isaac Pitman. In 1980, Abercrombie retired from his Edinburgh post, but did not withdraw from academic life. For the session immediately fol-

lowing he lectured at the University of Glasgow, and when finally in retirement he went on producing new published work and was always available to give advice or comment when called upon. With his wife's help he remained a gracious and considerate host even after a stroke and the onset of other illnesses; and his home remained a place where former colleagues and students – who had all long ago become his friends – could count upon an enthusiastic welcome. In 1991 he was elected to the British Academy, and his last book, *Fifty Years in Phonetics*, appeared. His study of the work of the seventeenth-century English phonetician William Holder was never

quite completed to his satisfaction, but has now been put into publishable form. He died in Edinburgh on July 4th 1992 at the age of 82.