

Professor John Nisbet

Walter Humes

One of Scotland's most distinguished educational researchers, Professor John Nisbet, died on October 5th, 2012, aged 89 years. His contribution to educational studies, not only in Scotland but internationally, was immense. Following a period teaching in a secondary school in Fife and the completion of a Master's degree at Edinburgh University, he was appointed as an Assistant Lecturer in the Education Department at Aberdeen University in 1949, later becoming the holder of the first Chair of Education at the University. He remained at Aberdeen for the rest of his career. The list of his achievements is impressive: Editor of the British Journal of Educational Psychology; Chair of the Scottish Council for Research in Education; first President of the British Educational Research Association; Chair of the Education Research Board of the Social Science Research Council. In addition, he served on many national committees and was awarded an OBE for his services to education. An item on the British Educational Research Association (BERA) website, reporting on his death, said 'The world of educational research has lost one of its greatest champions'. He had been awarded the rare honour of honorary life membership of BERA in 2005.

Professor Nisbet's output, in the form of books, articles and research reports was well known internationally and he was invited to lecture in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. He also collaborated in research programmes in Norway and the Netherlands. Among his projects were studies of the effects of family environment on intelligence, the subject of his PhD thesis. This challenged the generally held view at the time (the early 1950s) that intelligence was fixed and genetically determined. Other areas of research to which he made valuable contributions included learning strategies and thinking skills, the transition to secondary education, and the impact of research on policy and practice. He was also a pioneer in the field of professional training for teachers in higher education, establishing a course for new lecturers at Aberdeen. This met with some initial resistance, with old-guard academics sometimes defending bad lectures on the grounds that they forced students to think things through for themselves. Nowadays all universities make provision for the initial training and subsequent staff development of lecturers. Professor Nisbet's interest in higher education as a research field was also evident in his involvement in the setting up of the Society for Research in Higher Education, an organisation which still flourishes.

In methodological terms, his work was primarily empirical and psychological in approach - he always thought of himself, first and foremost, as an educational psychologist - but he took a keen interest in other styles of investigation and emphasised the importance of collaborative networks and institutional support for research. In an affectionate obituary in the publication *Research Intelligence*, Professor Patricia Broadfoot paid tribute to the support she had received from Professor Nisbet in getting started on the educational research ladder. She also drew attention to the importance of organisations such as BERA in providing opportunities for researchers to share interests and ideas, meet at conferences and report their findings in journals. Professor Nisbet was one of those who made it possible for this to happen. Some of his later articles (in *Scottish Educational Review* and elsewhere) reflect on the changing nature of educational research, as it has had to respond to funding pressures and demands for various forms of accountability. Although he had always sought to work constructively with government agencies, he came to acknowledge that the trust he had placed in them had not always led to the outcomes he had hoped for. Policy decisions are not only influenced by evidence and rational argument: they are often driven as much by political expediency and bureaucratic self-interest.

Professor Nisbet remained active long after his retirement, supervising PhD students, contributing to seminars, mentoring new members of staff, editing a series of Aberdeen University Education Research Papers, and in 2005 writing *Thirty Years On*, his account of the development of the Scottish Educational Research Association (SERA), from its founding in 1975. This gives a fascinating insight into the practical challenges of setting up a new body, as well as the tensions that sometimes arise between researchers and government officials. His account deals with such issues as defining the role of the new body, establishing priorities, drawing up a code of research practice and defending academic freedom. He pays particular tribute to the 'spirit' of SERA, its sense of community, reflected in the many hours of voluntary effort which members devote to the work of the organisation.

Outside education, he was a keen golfer, climber and orienteer, regularly winning competitive events in the last of these. Although well into his eighties and with declining health, he always made a point of attending the lecture series named after his elder brother, the late Professor Stanley Nisbet of Glasgow University. Both men were greatly admired and respected by students, colleagues and researchers across Scotland and beyond, not only for their professional achievements but also for their personal qualities of kindness and modesty. Together they helped to shape the character and direction of educational studies in Scotland in the period after the Second World War, training many of those who went on to occupy senior posts within the educational system, whether in teaching, research or administration. That kind of influence is difficult to measure, but individuals who have experienced its benefits remain conscious of how much they owe to those who have encouraged them to think deeply about the principles and values which should guide their professional actions.

Professor Nisbet's funeral included a tribute from Emeritus Professor Noel Entwistle of Edinburgh University, who had worked with him on a number of projects: the two co-authored a book on *Educational Research Methods* in 1970, an early example of a subject that has attracted the attention of many subsequent writers. SERA was represented at the funeral by the current President, Dr George Head, and by two former Presidents, Dr Fran Payne and Dr Margaret Kirkwood.