

Dr. Andrew Christian Ross at New College

As Head of the School of Divinity (New College) of the University of Edinburgh, I'm privileged to speak about some of Andrew's many contributions to New College and the wider University. There are other colleagues, who have known Andrew far longer than I, and who could speak much more knowledgably about his many years of service, and I'm honoured to speak on their behalf too. It is for me a special honour to be invited to address Andrew's years in New College, because he befriended me from my arrival in 1996, and I had the pleasure of weekly lunches with him most weeks from then onward till his recent illness, occasions when we talked about our lives, our writing projects, issues in the news, theology, David Livingstone, Christianity in various parts of the world, the American civil war, the Jesuits in China, and, of course, very often, his beloved Malawi. As well as a senior colleague, he was my friend, and so my comments about him as a University colleague cannot avoid reflecting somewhat my own experience of him, especially our weekly sessions in the Jolly Judge.

Andrew joined New College in 1966 as the first lecturer appointed in mission-history in the UK. Led by Professor Alec Cheyne, Andrew and other young colleagues, David Wright and Peter Matheson, comprised the "Cheyne gang", and developed in New College an approach to the history of Christianity that emphasized its global dimensions and went beyond the Euro-centric story that had dominated the subject previously. In Andrew, New College had more than a historian of missions; we had a colleague who heartily appreciated the power of Christian faith to fire in various peoples genuinely indigenous forms of Christianity, and he respected that diversity.

He was, of course, a scholar, with a sensitive and detailed knowledge that came through in lectures and in supervision of his numerous PhD students. I had first-hand experience of his expertise in African Christianity several years ago, when a bright young Kenyan presented himself to me seeking to do PhD work that would involve an engagement between NT Christology and ancestor veneration. I had scarcely any knowledge of African religion myself, and Andrew readily agreed to my plea that he co-supervise the student. It was impressive and slightly amusing to see how Andrew was able to correct and guide this Kenyan student into a more sophisticated understanding of his own culture. Many students in New College from Africa, the Orient, and elsewhere sought out Andrew, even after his retirement, to help in supervision of their theses, or simply to give them informal advice. Such was his expertise that he was also asked to examine PhD theses all over the UK.

His own scholarly publications were well received and remain noteworthy. Among them, his 1986 book on John Philip, is regarded as a classic study of a nineteenth-century Scottish missionary's contributions to ending slavery and promoting human dignity in the Cape Colony. His 1996 book on the Blantyre Mission portrayed the contributions of Scottish missionaries in educating and equipping Africans for social and political leadership. After retirement, he produced what many consider the most sensitive biography of Livingstone (published 2002). All through the writing of that book, the conversation in our weekly lunches was often given to what he was finding in previously untapped archival material.

But his expertise went far beyond Africa. His 1994 book on the Jesuits in China in the 16th to 18th centuries, and how they creatively sought to indigenize Christianity in Chinese culture (and were opposed by their own church hierarchy) is highly regarded and won admiration in various circles. I remember how excited and

pleased he was after the appearance of that book to have been invited to contribute to a conference on those early Jesuits in China held in Boston College in the USA.

Andrew was also an inspiring lecturer and public speaker. I doubt that attendance in his courses was a problem, for students made sure that they took in his informative and often passionate lectures. I never heard him lecture in class myself, but I recall the graduation address that he gave in 1998 when he retired, the most inspiring address in my twelve years of Edinburgh University graduation ceremonies. The fire of his passion for justice and his concern that students make their lives matter came through powerfully, and you could see that the students present from various faculties and their families were arrested and moved.

But what also came through in that address, in his class lectures, his thesis supervision, and also in his other roles in the University was his *enjoyment* of students. He loved being around them, and they sensed it and warmed to him. The increasing years between him and them never stood in the way. He related to them easily and with no artificial effort at being “cool”, and they sensed in him a man of integrity and genuine affection whom they respected and trusted.

He also had the trust and respect of his colleagues, demonstrated in their asking him to serve as both Dean of the Faculty of Divinity and Principal of New College for two successive terms 1978-84. Those were difficult years financially for the University, and I remember Andy telling me how stressful it was to face looming budget shortfalls each year, worrying that he might have to make someone redundant, and grateful that he was somehow able annually to make ends meet.

His University contributions went well beyond New College. In the early 70s he was a Faculty representative on the University Court, which gave him first-hand

acquaintance with a young Gordon Brown. But this was only one of many venues in which Andrew conscientiously gave his time to the University of Edinburgh.

In these brief words, I cannot do justice to all that Andrew gave to New College and the University. I can only hope to have illustrated selectively how much he meant to, and will be missed by, all of us who knew him, and how grateful we are that our paths crossed.

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