

***A Most Honourable Profession: The graduation speeches of James Scotland***

David Northcroft (Ed.)

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***Reviewer: John Stocks***

The publication of the annual graduation addresses delivered by a college or university principal is an unusual event. But the author of these addresses must be admitted even by his detractors to have been an unusual man. James Scotland was a man of the theatre -- actor, director, playwright and script-writer -- who had distinguished himself in war before entering teaching. After only a short time in schools he became a lecturer in Education at Jordanhill College, and finally, in 1961, Principal of Aberdeen College of Education.

As an actor, he clearly revelled in the ceremony of graduation, which allowed him to pronounce on all matters educational as well as life in general. An eye for a good quotation and a fund of amusing stories helped make his conservative views widely acceptable, though at times his grumbles carried more than a whiff of the Daily Telegraph editorials. Twenty-five years after his death, however, it is the blandness of these opinions that is most striking. Though he can hardly be blamed for encouraging entrants to teaching to take pride in their job, some hint of Shaw's dictum that every profession is a conspiracy against the laity might have provoked some thought among his listeners. Though such a notion was routinely raised for discussion in the Education Department of his college, Scotland would have found it unduly cynical.

The editor of this collection of addresses, David Northcroft, works hard to provide the context in which Scotland was working, and does well to remind us, for example, how the lives of trainee teachers could be affected by the state of the economy and the demands of the International Monetary Fund. Northcroft's attitude to his subject, however, is slightly puzzling. Although readers outwith the North-East will struggle to understand the extent of his admiration of the Principal under whom he worked as a lecturer -- though the sideswipe he takes at Scotland's successor may provide a clue -- Northcroft occasionally leans over backwards to put the case against. Scotland's book *The History of Scottish Education* has serious weaknesses, but to say that some of his academic critics found his views to be 'at the best uncritically naive, at the worst self serving and reactionary' seems unnecessarily harsh.

The truth is that Jimmy Scotland could be exasperating: the multiplicity of his outside

interests led many in his later years to hold that the College of Education had a part-time Principal; and historians of education were baffled by his assiduous digging in the kailyard of local histories for couthy anecdotes for his *History*, while ignoring the small amount of serious work done on the subject. Nor was he above occasional carelessness in matters of fact. Even in these speeches, which Northcroft tells us were carefully polished, he was capable of depicting Moses as bringing the ten commandments from the burning bush rather than Mount Sinai -- an odd slip for a churchman to make. But these were flaws in a man who often seemed larger than life. If there were any who disliked him, they were vastly outnumbered by his friends and admirers, who will welcome this book as a way of bringing back memories of a clever, interesting and versatile man.