

Ian MacKillop

Ian MacKillop, who has died suddenly of heart disease, was one of the most prominent of that second generation of the pupils of F R Leavis which carried its great teacher's ardour and convictions into its teaching, writing and culture-making. Indeed, two of MacKillop's closest friends remained the novelist, Howard Jacobson, and the playwright, Simon Gray, and so heretical a trinity serves as a timely reminder of to what rich and varied use the Leavisian inheritance may be put.

Ian MacKillop was born on 18 April 1939, only son of a Bank of England official who died young, and a mother to whom he remained exasperatedly devoted until her death in her nineties in 2001. He was educated at Dulwich College, where he formed a lifelong (and unLeavisian) attachment to the works of Dulwich's great literary alumnus, P G Wodehouse, and to the great tradition of English detective fiction of which, in the old green Penguin format, he retained a prodigious collection.

In 1957 he went up to Downing College Cambridge, to read English Literature, to fall under Leavis's unforgettable charisma but to delight also in the making of his own heterodox taste and gargantuan appetite for narratives in any and every genre as well as for the then licentious pleasures of too many hours spent in the cinema and theatre.

No doubt this quite terrific zest for human peculiarity impaired his degree result, but it equipped him to be a rare teacher. He hovered around Cambridge for a while after graduation, teaching dour RAF recruits and, at the Bell school, beautiful young Swedes and Danes, before taking his doctoral inquiries off to Leicester and then to his first academic appointment at Keele. During this time and for long afterwards, he edited pretty well single-handedly the cheerful and indomitable literary journal *Delta*, gradually allying to its gleeful and caustic guerrilla warfare against the academic establishment a striking assortment of the work of many now distinguished poets.

In 1968 he was appointed by William Empson (about whom he cherished a collection of outrageous anecdotes) to a lectureship in the English department at Sheffield, where he remained until his death, only two months away from taking up a Fellowship at Harvard

during which he was to complete the Penguin *Life and Letters of John Keats*. He published an arresting range of essays - on Truffaut, on children's fiction, on Kingsley Amis - but it was not until 1986, after a year as Visiting Professor at the University of Southern California, that he published his first book, his history *The British Ethical Societies*, that worthy conglomeration of pious and public-spirited philanthropists who gathered for their secular worship in the late 19th century at Conway Hall.

He followed this with his *magnum opus*, his 500-page biography of F R Leavis - published in 1995. Shrewd, even-handed, revisionist, wonderfully detailed and of exemplary scholarship, it displayed its subject firmly to posterity and its author at his judicious and respectable best.

But Ian MacKillop had a no less unrespectable and irreverent best, a keen zest for startling his audience, disconcerting his peers, even dismaying his admirers. *Free Spirits* (2000) proved his ironic essay in postmodernism - a study of the free-loving trio who provided the historical actuality out of which Henri Pierre Roché wrote his novel *Jules et Jim*, and out of which, in his turn, Truffaut made his grim, exquisite movie.

Free Spirits catches MacKillop on both sides of his two selves: the first, grave, correct, straight-faced, scholarly; the second, macabre, full of tearing high spirits, mocking, radically improper.

These qualities were all inscribed deep in his everyday and pedagogic conduct. He took an intense delight in the old-fashioned rituals of London theatre-going, winding up a visit to the matinée with tea at Fortnum's. When damage to his heart became apparent, he gloried in gallows humour about the danger, and feasted in his kitchen on cheeseburgers and chips. Twice married and thereafter pledged to his longstanding partner, Rosie Ford, promoted first to a Readership (1996) and then to his personal Chair (2001) only latish in his career, endlessly dutiful to his department and students, raucous in his opposition to the deathly new managerialism of universities, he remained a gentle and generous father, a boisterous enthusiast of dreadful films and worse TV (*Ally Beal* a particular favourite), and - wickedly exploiting his marked resemblance to John le Mesurier - an incomparable impostor in the role of the Professor-as-Old-Buffer. He had a gift for lifelong friendship, and his lifelong friends loved him accordingly, and miss him acutely.

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