

SIR ROBERT GRIEVE  
MA(Glas), DLitt(H-W), LLD(Strath), Drhc(Edin), MICE, FRTPI, HonFRIAS, HonFRSGS

Sir Robert Grieve was born in Glasgow on 11th December 1910. The two greatest influences on the young Bob were his mother – ‘a caged tigress’ as he later described her – and his uncle Tom. His uncle took him on ‘enormous walks’ in the countryside beyond the City’s tram termini, where he first saw ‘the hills of the Campsies in the distance, and once far away the bulk of Ben Lomond’. His mother’s ambition that he should ‘get on’ were fulfilled in part as the result of the values he learnt from her and his uncle – a critical and questioning mind, book-loving, and nature-loving. He was rarely able to speak of Tom without being moved to tears.

Bob Grieve was trained and qualified first as a civil engineer in the then Royal College of Technology and then as a planner. Employed by Local Authorities between 1927 and 1944 he later claimed that there was a time when he was one of only two qualified planners in Scotland. Between 1944 and 1946 he was a major influence on the Clyde Valley Regional Plan, especially in developing a planning framework for the overspill of population from Glasgow into new towns, emphasising the need to create viable communities as well as new centres for economic development.

In 1946 he joined a new planning division of the Department of Health in the Scottish Office, firstly in charge of the north region and later of the west region. In 1960 he was appointed Chief Planner in Scotland, at a challenging time when foresight on the economic and demographic problems of Scotland was urgently needed; these needs were provided by Bob Grieve and another exceptional civil servant James McGuinness. The joint Scottish Office/Glasgow City mission to the United States was fruitful in enabling much best practice to be applied in the design of Glasgow’s ring motorway.

In 1964 he moved from the Scottish Office to a chair of Town & Regional Planning. The intention was to create a social-science based postgraduate planning course, independent (at least initially) of Royal Town Planning Institute recognition. His view of urban development fitted easily with work being developed by his close friend the late Professor Donald Robertson in the Department of Social & Economic Research. He followed another great Scottish planner, Patrick Geddes, in practising the principle of breadth in education, with lectures and seminars enhanced by his recitations of Scots poets, especially the modern makars. His monograph *Grieve on Geddes* was published by the Sir Patrick Geddes Memorial Trust in 1991.

He had barely settled in to academic life when, in 1965, he was appointed the first chairman of the Highlands & Islands Development Board. The contrast between his civil service and academic experience and the pro-active role of the Board was best summed up in his own phrase: ‘exchanging the unexceptional sentiment for the terror of action’. Parliamentary opposition to the establishment of the Board had been powerful and protracted, and many influential highlanders were opposed to the Board and its policies for development. Bob Grieve added the role of ambassador to that of development planner. The Board’s first report set itself the most difficult of tasks when it declared that whatever successes it might have in the Eastern and Central Highlands, it must be judged by its ability to hold population in the fragile crofting areas of the Islands and the West.

The three pillars on which development was to be built were the fuller exploitation and processing of natural resources, the encouragement of new industries and the development of tourism. This programme was reinforced by a system of grants and loans to small businesses which had a positive effect on the business birthrate and on employment in the region. Particular difficulties arose in the attempt to create major industrial development in the Moray Firth. The potential of flat land alongside deep water at a time when oil and gas developments in the North Sea were taking shape could not be ignored, and the Board supported such developments. There was much well placed local opposition, some mistakes made by Board members, and two resignations. All of this was a new and painful experience for him, but he resisted some pressure on him to resign, saying at the time: ‘Never resign. Wait to be sacked’. He was able to get the fledgling development agency back on an even keel and to prove its worth before his five year term ended.

In his first year as chairman, he made the establishment of a university of the Highlands & Islands a long term goal. Thirty years on, and with the support of the Secretary of State for Scotland and the Millennium Commission it seems certain that this university will be established, tailored to the needs of its area and drawing upon the benefits of modern technology.

International interest in the experience of this uniquely comprehensive development agency encouraged the British Council and the HIDB to run an annual seminar at Plockton for students from overseas, and especially from Third World countries. Robert Grieve planned and chaired these seminars, adding an international dimension to his already great influence on planners and planning in the UK.

His return to the University of Glasgow in 1970 was a disappointment to him. Although the Department had many strengths, Donald Robertson was busy with other tasks and, tragically, soon died. Some academic colleagues expressed their criticism of HIDB policies, and there was little recognition of his trials or achievements. However, his teaching sessions with students were a joy both to him and to the students, many of whom still treasure their contact with him. As he put it ‘the encounter with lively students was, to me, the greatest of pleasures and rewards’.

In 1974 he was awarded the Gold medal of the RTPI, one of ten such awards in the previous sixty years. Following his retirement from Glasgow University in the same year, he remained active, as Chairman of the Royal Fine Art Commission for Scotland and of the Highlands & Islands Development Consultative Council. He chaired the Constitutional Steering Committee which produced *A Claim of Right for Scotland*, published in June 1988, and on which present policies for a devolved parliament in Scotland are based. He also chaired an enquiry into the housing problems of Glasgow, receiving the Lord Provost of Glasgow’s Award for Outstanding Public Service. He was President of the Scottish Mountaineering Council and Club (he gave mountains and poetry as his two recreations), the Scottish Branch of the RTPI, the Saltire Society and other voluntary bodies.

The universities which honoured him were Heriot-Watt (where he became an Honorary Professor), Strathclyde and Edinburgh. He held Honorary Fellowships of the Royal Incorporation of Architects in Scotland, and the Royal Scottish Geographical Society and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1980.

Despite his enormous range of commitments and interests Bob Grieve was a devoted family man. His wife May had been his greatest support since his apprenticeship days, and her death in 1984 was a terrible blow. He died on 25th October 1995. There are four children, Ann, Elizabeth, Iain and William.

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KENNETH ALEXANDER

