

MAGNUS MAGNUSSON

Personal Appreciations supplied by

Roger Crofts

And

David Breeze

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To the majority of people Magnus Magnusson was a TV personality best known for his role over a quarter of century as the interrogator on Mastermind. But to those of us who had the privilege to work with him, as I did for the best part of a decade – I as Chief Executive, and he as Chairman of Scottish Natural Heritage – he was a much more ken-speckled man: if that can be said of an Icelander. He was erudite, personable, and an achiever; as well as being a writer, broadcaster, speaker, translator, and historian; he was a leader and innovator. It is no understatement to say that he was a highly gifted, charismatic man of many parts who graced public life and the media in Scotland, in Britain as a whole, and also in his native Iceland.

Many know his catch phrase - 'I've started so I'll finish', but few realise the extent to which this represented the man himself. He always completed the task he had set for himself, irrespective of how many different roles he was playing at any one time: and they were often many and varied. In the early days of his Chairmanship of Scottish Natural Heritage he was at the same time chairman of the Cairngorms Working Party and writing books and presenting Mastermind. He was a hard task master, especially on himself. Many are the times that fax and latterly emails would be received from him in the early hours of the morning demanding a speedy response. I can certainly testify to this, as can many colleagues. And it worked. You could not say no to him because the work meant everything. You were inspired by his drive and tenacity and also by his no nonsense approach. Nothing would get in the way of achieving the job in hand, not even what others would regard as insurmountable obstacles.

Anyone who met him warmed to him. His opening line was often: 'Just call me Magnus'. It showed that he had no airs and graces and immediately put one at ease. He made many friends as he visited all parts of Scotland on his various roles. Schools openings, tree plantings, public lectures, seminars, informal talks were all part of his 'get down to the people' approach. The schedule necessary to allow him to undertake all of these engagements, which he so much enjoyed, would have broken a lesser man, such was his stamina and his care for people. And he was always meticulously prepared: researching the information himself and relying on those whom he trusted, writing and rewriting what he was to say: he was a veritable wordsmith and also a tyrant for ensuring that the grammar was correct, as I know to my cost. And he made sure that he met and talked to everyone: not for him just speaking to those in highest positions.

In debate he was no pushover. He consulted thoroughly, he assiduously absorbed the background material provided, he made up his mind, and he held by the conclusions he reached. No one could accuse Magnus of ducking issues. He held many and various public appointments and in none was he ever the cipher of politicians, or for that matter of bureaucrats. That was certainly the case as Chairman of SNH, and that approach did so much to benefit the natural heritage and Scotland's communities. He did force politicians to stand up and listen even when he was critical of their line or arguing against their decision. As a result he was widely regarded, held somewhat in awe and often won the day. He frequently had government ministers agreeing absolutely with him, much to the chagrin of their civil servants, because he had mastered his brief and argued it cogently and fairly, and obviously convincingly. He raised the profile of the environment, and through his influence and tireless work raised the financial support made available to it.

He was a good judge of whom he could trust and work with. A common phrase was 'I like the cut of his jib'; this was a high compliment. To others about whose views he was at best sceptical he would say 'you may well be right', and so disarmed them without agreeing or disagreeing.

I had the privilege of being introduced to Iceland by Magnus. It was then that I appreciated many new facets of this many faceted friend. He was a scholar in his own country. Many years after completing his first translation of the Icelandic Sagas, he reflected that a better job could be done and so he set out on a re-translation: a very substantial task which, of course, he finished. But it was not just in the written word of the sagas that he excelled; he related this to the landscape of the place right down to the detailed knowledge of the names of features in the landscape (of which there are many in Iceland) and how they related to a particular saga, Njals Saga set in southern Iceland being his particular favourite. His knowledge of the history of his country was legendary. I recall on my first visit with him being overwhelmed by his oration at the Löberg rock (the site of the annual gathering of the nation's leaders at the Althingi - the Icelandic parliament).

We were on that occasion accompanied by the wonderful President of Iceland Vigdis Finnbogadóttir: it was like being at one of the original ceremonies one millennium before, such was the power of his rendition, the magic of the location and the stature of my companions. The recent work, written by daughter Sally, *Dreaming of Iceland*, describing a tour to the family sites around the country with her father, captured his knowledge of and passion for his native country.

In the environment field he opened up new approaches and challenged outmoded ideas. Sometimes this was to the grave discomfort of those who held them, but he always wished to move ideas forward and ensure that people were accepted as part of nature and not separate from it. He was the exemplary Chairman of Scottish Natural. He was appointed to oversee the restructuring of government agencies and in so doing to bring together the dissident voices of the conservation movement. He had previously been President of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and his appointment to SNH was a shock to many who did not immediately identify with him. But his appointment was an astute one by the Ministers of the day and, while he did not always agree with them, they respected his determination, his creativity and his commitment. He and I toured the country, meeting each one of the staff of the new body and asking about their aspiration for themselves and the new organisation. He took real trouble to listen, he cared about the discussions we had, and he rightly expected action when it was needed. His achievements in that period on the environmental front were many. For example, he oversaw the completion of an inspiring and visionary report on the Cairngorms agreed by all of the participants, which given their disparate views was a major step forward. He brokered the early agreements on access with farmers and landowners which led to the Access Concordat and eventually to the right to roam legislation. And, practical man that he was, he guided the Paths for All concept into practice.

He received many Honorary Degrees and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1980. In 1989 he was awarded an honorary Knighthood.

I hope we have the great good fortune in the future to hear his eloquent speeches from his tapes, read his erudite translations, leaf through the reports of committees and bodies he chaired, walk the paths he helped to create, visit the sites where he opened new facilities, as well as relive the 'black chair' moments of Mastermind.

Roger Crofts

David Breeze

I first met Magnus in 1974. he was already so famous that BBC Scotland had given him 6 television programmes to do with as he pleased. He chose to devote one to the Antonine Wall - as, he said, because he crossed it every day and wanted to know more about it. He invited me to be his guide on the programme. We met for lunch and Magnus asked for a reading list. When we next met, the reading list was digested and he had already planned the half-hour programme. I was mightily impressed by his professionalism, both as a TV presenter and academic.

The next time our paths crossed was in a different forum. Magnus was invited to become chairman of the Ancient Monuments Board for Scotland. He brought his intellectual rigour into play here and decided that each year the Board should consider a particular theme. This worked very well, the discussions at the meetings having a focus in the annual tour and a more directed report at the end of the year.

Magnus used his name to help the Board in a variety of ways. He proposed the publication of a booklet to celebrate the anniversary of the passing of the first Ancient Monuments Act in 1882: the result was not only *Echoes in Stone*, edited by Magnus of course, but a TV programme of the same name, presented by Magnus.

Running the Ancient Monuments Board tour also shone a different light on Magnus. When we met the public in our perambulations, they parted in awe in front of the great man: it was like travelling with royalty. Furthermore, his name would gain us access to places that were difficult even for the officials of Historic Scotland. His votes of thanks at the end of the tours were a joy to listen to. I remember one very clearly, to the south-west of Scotland where we had seen a lot of mottes: his final speech was sprinkled with references to bon mots and many other plays upon the word.

When he retired from the Board he moved on to chair the newly established Scottish Natural Heritage. I met him at a lecture shortly after and he explained his approach. The Board had been asked to state who its clients were as part of the preamble to their first Corporate Plan. This was straightforward, said Magnus, we decided that we only have one client, Scotland's natural heritage.

His support for archaeology continued of course. He twice presented the awards at the British Archaeology Awards ceremony. On the second occasion, he was not at all fazed when I, as chairman, forgot to ask him to speak at the end of the ceremony in spite of the fact that I knew that he had a polished speech prepared!

Indeed, his fame never seemed to impress Magnus: he was always the same cheerful self, never pompous, always enquiring about people - and listening to their answers. He will be missed by many.

David Breeze

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