

Basil Megaw

Basil Richardson Stanley Megaw was born in Belfast on 22nd June, 1913, and died in Stevenage on 22nd August, 2002. He received his schooling in Belfast at Campbell College, and proceeded thence to Peterhouse College, Cambridge, in 1932. There he chose to study for the Archaeology and Anthropology Tripos, in the curriculum which had been devised by Hector Monro Chadwick to realise his vision of the cross-disciplinary study of cultures, including especially those European cultures which had long traditions of literacy to set beside their material remains. This combination of the study of material culture with that of history, language and literature both attracted Megaw and helped to mould the ethnological interests which dominated his research and thinking for the rest of his life.

After graduating BA in 1935, and following the award of a Leaf Fellowship to undertake research in Spain, he took up a post in the Isle of Man, becoming Secretary and Assistant Director of the Manx Museum in 1936. He quickly established himself as an active archaeologist in the Isle of Man, and at the same time began to extend his field excavation experience by working in Scotland with Gordon Childe, in England with Grahame Clark and in Northern Ireland with Estyn Evans, wisely judging that this wider involvement offered the best preparation for a balanced interpretation of the Manx material, and the best way of allowing the richly concentrated Manx evidence to make its contribution to the wider picture. A study visit to Scandinavia in 1938 helped to shape his sense of the direction in which the Manx Museum could be moving, and he soon received the opportunity to put these ideas into effect, being appointed Director and Librarian of the Museum in 1940, when he also became Inspector of Ancient Monuments for the Isle of Man. War service, as a Scientific Officer with the RAF, intervened in 1941; but he resumed his chosen career in 1945, and for the next twelve years brought his widely based, cross-disciplinary approach to bear on the material culture of the island. During this period he was associated with the setting up of the Nautical Museum at Castletown and the Manx Open Air Museum at Cregneash, and with the implementation of the Manx Folk-life Survey (1948).

The theoretical and procedural developments which he introduced in the Isle of Man mirrored similar advances in the fields of ethnology and museum curation in post-war Britain and Europe. More particularly, the foundation in 1951 of the School of Scottish Studies at Edinburgh University, with its ambitious programme of folklore collection and associated linguistic and place-name surveys, provided a close parallel on a larger scale. In 1957 the School was in a position to appoint its first full-time Director, and Megaw filled this position till 1969 — a period which saw the high tide of the School's primary fieldwork activities. His wide-ranging interests in geography, language, history, folklore and archaeology helped in a powerful and benign way to establish the School of Scottish Studies as an internationally acclaimed research institute and paved the way for the modern University subject of Scottish Ethnology. From 1969 onwards he was able to devote more of his time to personal research, as a Senior Lecturer within the School, until his retirement in 1980, and as a Research Fellow from then until his death.

He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries shortly before, and of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland shortly after his arrival in Scotland. He served on the Council of the Scottish Society (1959-62) and as its Vice-President (1974-77). He became a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1966. He was actively involved with many bodies and organisations whose work coincided with aspects of his personal interests and professional expertise. These included the Scottish Regional Group of the Council for British Archaeology, of which he was Vice-President in 1966 and President in 1967. He also served on the Council of the Highland Folk Museum and was a Trustee of the Auchindrain Folk Museum. He published many articles, notes and reports, often homing in on questions where a timely intervention could resolve an unnecessary controversy, re-open a blocked road or suggest an unnoticed area deserving of scholarly attention. As Editor of *Scottish Studies*, the School's academic journal (1964-68), and as a member of the journal's Advisory Board both before and after that period, he enabled *Scottish Studies* to play an important role in establishing the credentials of the School, and of Scottish Ethnology, in the international context.

Basil Megaw was courtly and softly spoken in manner, and there was usually a twinkle in his eye. He was assiduous and genuine in his interest in the work of others, especially younger scholars. The death of his beloved wife Eleanor in 1977 was a severe blow, for she had shared in his scholarly interests since their Cambridge days. However, the activities and achievements of their children and wider family provided an abiding focus for his concern and attention. He continued to live in the family home in Merchiston Gardens and to frequent the School of Scottish Studies, including seminars and conferences, until the end of his long life. He left a generous legacy to the School, which is now being used to fund a series of Fellowships bearing his name — a fitting commemoration of a long and fruitful association with Edinburgh University and Scotland.

William Gillies

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