

ISSN 1755-9928 (Print)
ISSN 2753-3298 (Online)

Journal of **Scottish Thought**

Editorial

Introduction

Author: Cairns Craig

Volume 6, Issue 1

Pp: iii-iv

2018

Published on: 1st Jan 2018

CC Attribution 4.0

1 4 9 5



ABERDEEN
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Introduction

John Laird was Regius Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Aberdeen from 1922 till 1946, during which time he published fourteen individual books ranging across almost all aspects of philosophy, as can be gathered from some of their titles: *The Idea of the Soul* (1924), *The Idea of Value* (1929), *Morals and Western Religion* (1931), *An Enquiry into Moral Notions* (1935), *Mind and Deity* (1941). He also addressed the history of philosophy in books such as *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature* (1932) and *Theism and Cosmology* (1940), as well as issues of contemporary debate in *Modern Problems in Philosophy* (1928). Even if he was never thought of as one of the leading philosophers of his generation, his career charts many of the key developments of modern philosophy, from the 'new realism' that he took up from G.E. Moore and Bertrand Russell in the aftermath of World War I – his *A Study in Realism* appeared in 1920 – to the consequences of contemporary particle physics for our understanding of determinism and free will, as he explored in his posthumously published *On Human Freedom* which appeared in 1947.

Laird's career was equally symptomatic of the discipline of philosophy in Scotland in the first half of the twentieth century. A first degree from Edinburgh University led him to Cambridge from where he graduated in 1920. He was then appointed as an assistant at St Andrews University before taking up a lectureship at Dalhousie University in Canada. Many Scots philosophers of the late nineteenth century had emigrated to posts in Canada or Australasia and one of them, John Watson, whom Laird met while Watson was giving his Gifford Lectures at the University of Glasgow in the early 1910s, was probably responsible for Laird's appointment at Dalhousie. Unlike Watson, who made his career in Canada and helped shape that nation's emerging culture, Laird only taught for one year in Canada before returning to take up a professorship at Queen's in Belfast – another common route for Scottish academics keen to find a way back to Scotland. George Elder Davie, for instance, spent a decade and a half at Queen's after the Second World War before returning to Edinburgh and among Laird's colleagues was G. Gregory Smith whose *Scottish Literature: Character and Influence* (1919) was first delivered as lectures in Belfast.

Laird's return to Scotland allowed him to become what he described as 'A

Scots Professor' and it was the title that he gave to an autobiography penned in the 1940s, the manuscript of which is with others of his papers in Aberdeen University Library.

This issue of *The Journal of Scottish Thought* publishes Laird's autobiography for the first time. With it, however, we also re-publish Laird's *Recent Philosophy*, a book first written for the 'Home University Library' and published in 1936. In it, Laird does not simply give an account of recent British philosophy but an account of recent philosophy in France, Germany and Italy as well as the United States. It has sometimes been suggested that Aberdeen University in the 1930s was intellectually soporific, content to service communities from the North of Scotland and disengaged from the intellectual mainstream of British, let alone European thought. Laird himself may seem to confirm that view when he notes that one of the advantages of Aberdeen was that in some years he had no Honours students (i.e. those in the third and fourth years of their degrees) and was therefore free to focus on his writing – writing which he treats as never of very great significance. But *Recent Philosophy* reveals an Aberdeen philosopher who has not only mastered a vast range of European philosophies, but has identified those that will go on, after the Second World War, to be central to the development of the discipline – the phenomenology of Husserl, the 'existence' philosophy of Heidegger and the 'new mediævalism' of a revived Thomism. None of these accorded with the kind of 'realism' that Laird had himself espoused in his own early books, a fact which makes his enthusiastic response to them all the more remarkable.

Recent Philosophy was a small book for an audience of the self-educating, but Laird treated his audience to a broad perspective on what was involved in 'recent philosophy', one that must have come as a revelation to most of them. What it testifies to, however, is the on-going engagement of Scottish thinkers with the European heritage that had been central to the philosophical idealism promoted by Scottish philosophers before the First World War and which was to be continued by the likes of John McQuarrie, translator of Heidegger's *Being and Time*, or Thomas Torrance, who did so much to promote the theology of Karl Barth. Laird's work may be only an introduction, but it would be hard to think of anyone else who could have done justice to such a wide range of recent philosophies, giving a very different significance to the term 'A Scots Professor' from what one might have anticipated.

Cairns Craig
University of Aberdeen