

Biographer of the French intellectual Left

David Macey, 1949–2011

David Macey died from complications of lung cancer on 7 October. He embodied the paradox of being a fine public intellectual while remaining an intensely private person. He was one of the best intellectual historians of his generation and added appreciably to scholarly knowledge, yet did his most significant work as a freelance writer outside the confines of the conventional academy. To an editor concerned with making serious work accessible to as wide an audience as possible, David was a rare find. He was one of the most brilliant writers with whom I had the privilege of working, and a consistently decent human being. I published all four of his full-length books and each of them increased the sum of intelligence in the world and its stock of clear, elegant prose. He also wrote a dictionary of critical theory for Penguin and a considerable number of essays and reviews, many of them in this journal, and was a prolific and elegant translator, his final tally of translations amounting to some sixty books. Spending most of his life outside literary London, and the antithesis of the pushy networker, David deserved to be far more celebrated than he was. He was never asked to review for journals like the *London Review of Books*, whose coverage of French culture would have been much improved by his writing.

David was born in Sunderland in 1949 and grew up in Houghton-le-Spring, the son of a miner who went down the pit aged 14. His mother was unable to take up the place she was offered at grammar school because the family could not afford to send her. David never lost his awareness of what can be crushed out of people by policies imposed in the interests of those who do well out of the free market. He retained a deep affection for his family and for the landscape of the north-east, and an abiding interest in its mining history. A brilliant student, he went to Durham Johnson Grammar School and won a place at UCL, where he read French (1967–71) and wrote a Ph.D. on Paul Nizan, the dissident Communist intellectual. David met Margaret Attack while they were students at London and they were together for the rest of his life. In the 1970s, David was interested in the attempts to link Marxism and psychoanalysis, and was involved in various left-wing theoretical circles. He became suspicious of most forms of political orthodoxy, but remained to the end a highly critical, independent radical.

From 1974 David taught part-time at North London Polytechnic, UCL and City University, but when Margaret was offered a permanent post in Leeds in 1981 David left university teaching behind and became a full-time translator and writer. Margaret became head of the School of Humanities at Sunderland in 1989, and there they adopted a family group of three children. In 1993 they returned to Leeds.

The academy's loss was the general reader's gain. If a publishing relationship can resemble a tense marriage, ours seemed doomed before it even began. I had met David briefly in the Verso office when he delivered a translation to Francis Mulhern, and remember what seemed like a nearly silent transaction. I met him again in Brixton in

1980. He was a close friend and comrade of John Taylor and his partner Elaine Capizzi, and the three of them formed the entire membership of the British Timor Solidarity Campaign. They did painstaking work and kept up a stream of bulletins on the grim situation of the Timorese people under Indonesian occupation and on the military resistance led against hopeless odds by Fretilin. When I was introduced to David in John and Elaine's house, I tried to make the usual political small talk of the day and found myself floundering. David's was an extremely quiet seriousness, and his way of not suffering fools was to become even quieter. He had a very low-pitched voice that one had to strain to hear at the best of times, and I interpreted his inaudible monosyllabic responses to my callow observations on international politics as a definitive rejection. I thought he was one of those murmurous English intellectuals incapable of conversation outside the common room.

Little did I know how impatient David was with the limitations of the common room and of academic fashions. A few years later I had become, after the usual series of purges and crises at *New Left Review*, the last person standing at Verso and was made the imprint's editor. I discovered that I liked commissioning books, and after reading David's marvellously lucid essays in *Radical Philosophy* I suggested that he write a book about Lacan, then a massive and inscrutable presence in the literary and philosophical landscape. In 1988 we published *Lacan in Contexts*, an exceptionally sharp deconstruction of the master's thought that deflated certain of its assumptions with a dry, measured wit. This was not an overheated, disillusioned polemic but a careful account of what Lacan may be taken to mean and how he formed his allusive, punning style. The book was also very good on the afterlife of the work, especially on the almost hysterical reverence for Lacanian thought in British film and literary studies during the 1970s and 1980s.

I learned from the book, which can be one of the great pleasures of working as an editor, and I always learned from David. He would send me his work in progress, draft chapters and sometimes even fragments of chapters, but fragments that were so beautifully composed, so finished, that it was like receiving a book in serial form. He had a way of rendering the most complex ideas in notoriously opaque fields of thought accessible to the lay reader. He was a profoundly democratic writer, in that sense. I looked forward eagerly to the next batch of pages, which would be accompanied by a note in David's tiny handwriting telling me that he had been delayed by the need to translate yet another book for Polity, and gradually a beautifully finished book would emerge from these absorbing vignettes.

The sheer volume of translation work that he was forced to do often made me wonder what he might have achieved if he had decided to pursue a more conventional academic career. He managed for all that to write more significant books than many professors. His second book was his biography of Foucault, *The Lives of Michel Foucault*, which was published in 1993 and earned the accolade of adoption by Gallimard, a company that is usually very resistant to the work of British intellectuals unless they are of extreme and established eminence. Gregory Elliott had suggested Foucault as a subject for David, and I was very happy to encourage the idea. It is a magisterial life, and its superb balance of respect and critical distance won it enormous praise. Its temperate and adult tone was too much for some of Foucault's more feverish acolytes – there is a quality in postwar French thought that reduces some commentators



to a state of fandom – and one or two trivializers in London chose to vent their spleen on it. But it will outlive many other books in its field.

David's life of Fanon, which was published at Granta in 2000, and is being republished in an expanded edition by Verso in March, is one of the best reflections on France and Algeria, on the intricacies of Fanon's anti-imperialism and of post-colonial thought. David navigated the minefields of the latter with consummate tact and good sense. Fanon emerges from the book as a complex and very human figure, and once again David managed to cut away the mythological carapace that had grown up around a celebrated intellectual. As Adam Shatz wrote in the *New York Times* on its American publication, Macey's 'prodigiously researched, absorbing book is the best, the most intellectually rigorous and the most judicious' treatment of the life yet published. It rescued Fanon from his reputation as merely an apostle of violence and his later fate as an icon of 'postcolonial' literary criticism, obsessed with identity and sexuality, and took seriously Fanon's professional work as a psychiatrist. David treated the Martiniquan Fanon's wilder predictions and claims about the Algerian revolution, and Arab realities, with due scepticism. A French translation was finally published by Éditions La Découverte in October 2011, to wide acclaim. In November it was announced that it had won the Fetkan prize for biography.

In the course of working on these luminous books, I had many opportunities to regret my earlier reaction to the quiet man I first met in John Taylor's house. David sometimes stayed in my house in London, or we would have dinner in town, and I visited David and Margaret when they were living in Sunderland and Leeds and spent many hours talking about books with this kind, shyly brilliant man who seemed to have read everything and was always so incisive and careful in his judgements. He was generous with my young children, and I think he really loved children. It gave me pleasure when he approved of other books I was publishing, since his praise was worth having. We discovered a shared passion for jazz. And we were always talking about new projects. He had an idea for a book about Paris and the memory of German occupation that would never be written, though I suspect there may be some of those wonderful fragments lurking among his papers.

David and Margaret discovered that they could not have children of their own. Their typically generous and momentous decision to adopt three young children at once had an enormous impact on all their lives. The final book that we published together was the most surprising of them all, a deeply personal account of his and Margaret's experience of adoption. He wrote it under a pseudonym, for obvious reasons, and this made it difficult for him to do the kinds of publicity that authors normally do; it was published under a certain veil of secrecy. Yet the book had a great impact on reviewers and readers, and is a moving, disturbing and unforgettable book. David wished to warn others about how irresponsible adoption agencies can be in not telling prospective parents of what their children have gone through before they enter their new lives, and how old damage can explode in the new family with devastating results. His account of how he and Margaret and the children overcame these difficulties is inspiring, and though it is harrowing to read it does not have a single note of false sentimentality. I could only guess at how arduous the experience must have been to live through.

The work will endure. On the day I told the people at Faber that one of our authors had died, one of my younger colleagues, an artist, looked shocked and pulled from her bag a copy of David's *Dictionary of Critical Theory*, which she had been using as a guide to the more impenetrable theoretical writing around her craft.

I will remember that unmistakable soft voice on the phone, his wry almost silent chuckle when he was talking about some intellectual fashion, his incredible learning. He was honest and straight and had a modesty that was really admirable. I was very lucky to know him.

Neil Belton

To say that David Macey was one of this journal's most stalwart contributors is to understate the case. For over twenty-five years, from the early 1980s to the end of the first decade of the new century, he contributed more copy, more regularly, than any other writer. Arriving on the scene in 1983, with his article 'Fragments of an Analysis: Lacan in Context' (*RP* 35), he soon started reviewing. In all, he delivered sixty reviews of near a hundred books, including one extraordinary stretch – a run of thirty-six issues from *RP* 53 to 88 – in which the journal appeared only three times in nine years without a review by David.

To grasp the full significance of his contribution, one has to remember two things: collectively produced, self-published journals rely on the commitment and unpaid intellectual labour of their contributors; reviewers with the requisite knowledge of particular areas of left intellectual life who are consistently probing and critical, while avoiding self-aggrandizement, are rare beasts – especially those willing to produce copy with such regularity. David used his supply of review copies to keep up to date on the anglophone coverage of postwar French intellectual life; and he gave *RP* readers the added benefit of a knowledge generally more extensive than that of the authors he was reviewing. Invariably wry commentary followed. His first review (of Stuart Schneiderman's *Jacques Lacan: An Intellectual Hero*, published by Harvard University Press, in *RP* 40) established the double movement that would become characteristic of his coverage. First, he welcomed 'the thought of the book' and the opportunity promised by its author being 'reputedly the only American to have gone through a training analysis with Lacan'. But soon various things 'begin to irritate', not least factual errors. And the author ends up being described as sounding like 'the archetypal American tourist in Paris – lost, in love and uncomprehending'. The book is not recommended. We are left with the feeling of having learned a good deal more about the state of the Lacan literature at the time than we would have about Lacan, had we read the book.

As the 1980s turned into the 1990s, the initial deflationary humour was more frequently accompanied by a political edge. And when the intellectual and political legacies of the sixties' generation became a larger issue, as its central figures started to die, David contributed decisive obituaries (Debord, Canguilhem, Deleuze, Lyotard, Bourdieu, Derrida, Baudrillard) and sourced and translated others. In *RP* 125 (May/June 2004), he wrote a Commentary, 'The Hijab and the Republic: Headscarves in France', that reflected his abiding concern with the contradictions of France's revolutionary republican and colonial legacies. This interest in the still formative significance of Algeria for French intellectual life led, first, to his biography of Fanon, and subsequently to a focus on the use of torture. David reviewed the belated translation of Henri Alleg's 1958 *The Question* in *RP* 146 (Nov/Dec 2007) and the collection *On Torture* in *RP* 157 (Sept/Oct 2009). By then he had been speaking for some time about contributing an article on the topic.

Translation was David's bread and butter, and we used him often. Most notably, he took on the heroic task of rendering into English the formidably multilingual entries on 'Subject', 'Gegenstand/Objekt', 'Object' and 'Res' from the *Vocabulaire Européen des Philosophies*, published in *RPs* 138 (Sept/Oct 2006) and 139 (Nov/Dec 2006). He came down to London for two days for the seminar on the *Vocabulaire* held by the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP) that summer, at which he was, as always in person, reticent, serious, humorous and extremely acute. It is a combination of attributes increasingly in short supply. *RP* will miss him.

Peter Osborne

