



TOM BURNS

Tom Burns

1913–2001

I

TOM BURNS was born in London on the 13 January 1913. He was one of numerous children of a poor family of Irish origins. His early interest in learning seems to have found little support and understanding on the part of family members, except for his mother Hannah and, after her premature death, for an older sister, with whom he was to re-establish contact, several decades later, during a visit to Vancouver, Canada. He complemented his education, which took place in relatively unsupportive school environments, with frequent attendance at local libraries, where he nurtured his lifetime habit of extensive and voracious reading. By the time of his graduation from the University of Bristol in 1933 he had become an outstandingly well-informed and cultured young man.

A formative influence during Tom's early life was his acquaintance with Quaker groups and institutions. Without expressly associating himself with their beliefs and practices, he developed a deep respect for the Quakers, and an abiding commitment to pacifism. Prior to the outbreak of the Second World War he joined a Friends Ambulance Unit operating at the front during the Russian–Finnish war. When Britain entered the war he became a conscientious objector, serving in the army as a medical orderly and ambulance driver.

In 1941, Tom was wounded and taken prisoner by the Germans at Crete. The first entry in the collection of his essays entitled *Description, Explanation and Understanding*, published in 1995, is a cool narrative of

this experience. He was held in Germany as a prisoner of war for several months, until repatriated in 1943 as part of an exchange of wounded prisoners. In the second chapter he reflects on his Stalag experience, which marked him deeply. For years he would remain unwilling to attend films that depicted, however inadequately, prisoner of war camps, for he found himself troubled by the memories they evoked.

Tom's return to civilian life was not unproblematical, as he was deeply disturbed by the threat represented by the V2 attacks on London, where he lived, but his fortunes took a turn for the better when, in August 1944 he met Elizabeth Clark. The couple married on the 28 October in the same year, and by 1958 their family of four daughters (Catherine, Charlotte, Sarah, and Lucy) and one son (John) was complete.

After the end of the war, Tom joined the West Midland Group on Post-war Reconstruction and Planning in the capacity of research assistant, and began to develop and to practise his extraordinary professional gifts as an observer and analyst of social life 'on the ground'. In 1949 he became a research lecturer in the Department of Social Studies at the University of Edinburgh, where he pursued topics beyond those associated with planning. It was in this context that he became closely associated with Erving Goffman, who at the time was researching for his doctorate in the Shetland Islands and using Edinburgh as his academic base. Tom, Goffman, and the anthropologist James Littlejohn would often argue at length over their shared significant intellectual interests, which included a commitment to a mode of research emphasising close observation of natural social settings, whether based on locality or on working tasks.

The essay collection mentioned above elaborates extensively on that commitment in an original and penetrating manner—see in particular his inaugural lecture, 'Sociological explanation'. However, Tom preferred practising sociology rather than debating its nature or justifying its existence. One might say that, throughout his career, he preferred being a practitioner *of* sociology to being an apologist *for* it. While aware of sociology's persistently insecure status and low standing in the academic hierarchy, he refused to be distracted by the recurrent diatribes about the *crisis* of the discipline or the obsessive concern of sociologists and would-be sociologists (especially post-graduate students) with its 'foundational' problems and its epistemological status. Instead he remained committed to the task of advancing the discipline through original and significant scholarly achievements and through a serious commitment to high standards of education and training.

Nor did he share the tendency of other practitioners to associate themselves with this or that sociological school, identified chiefly by reference to one or the other of the discipline's 'founders'. Exegetical themes played a relatively minor role in his writings—except for his 1992 book on Erving Goffman, which, it could be said, resumed a conversation between the author and his subject which had begun in the 1950s, and had occasionally been carried forth into the ensuing decades.

Tom's extensive familiarity with the sociological tradition(s) was expressed in his teaching more than in his writings, where it was, rather than expressly displayed, presupposed or reflected. In any case, he could on occasion be rather iconoclastic in his treatment of 'classical' writers, particularly Max Weber. He certainly felt a deep affinity with this writer and admiration for his monumental contribution, and in a sense sought to emulate him in his own historically oriented research work. However he dissented from some aspects of Weber's seminal treatment of bureaucracy, which other contemporary scholars, according to Burns, accepted and celebrated too uncritically. Tom's own research on the French Revolution, in particular, suggested to him that Weber had overestimated the significance of the Prussian experience as a model for systems of public administration, and by the same token the relevance of juridical knowledge as the form of *savoir* appropriate to organisational structures at large.

Although Tom did not overlook the contribution made to his topics by Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber in his teaching and writing, he did not subscribe to the utterly privileged status which that trio had acquired in the sociological canon. For one thing, he took Georg Simmel quite as seriously, and regretted that the corpus of his sociological writings was not more widely available and put to further use in research.

Furthermore, he found that some of his conceptual concerns, for instance with the notions of 'conduct', 'public order' or 'social organisation' were simply not thematised in the sociological canon. This led on the one hand to his greater reliance on some aspects of anthropological theory, on the other to his sustained engagement with historical materials, as in his last (and alas unfinished) work.

Tom kept himself well informed on contemporary sociological scholarship, both in his assiduous work in the library, and in his personal contacts with scholars on both sides of the Atlantic—and of the Channel. This last point deserves emphasis, for, although on the one hand Burns was aware and respectful of the leading role contemporary American

sociologists were playing in the discipline, and was gratified by the recognition which he was receiving from some of the best of them, he was on the other hand a thoroughly *European* sociologist. Sometime in the 1960s he remarked, how unsatisfactory it was that, as things then stood, a British sociologist would have a good chance to meet a German, French, or Italian sociologist only while sojourning at Harvard.

Before express arrangements to this effect were made by European institutions, he did his best to remedy that condition, and more generally to become acquainted with his European contemporaries or to make use of their work before they became well known among his own compatriots. He never assumed that only sociological writings in English, or already translated into English, were worth reading, and put to use his knowledge of French and German to remedy the ignorance of contributions in those languages common among his peers. Early on in its existence, the European Cultural Foundation (a Dutch institution) recognised and put to use Tom's intense interest in fostering the interaction between British and Continental social scientists.

But his efforts to, let us say, 'Europeanise' British sociology to some degree, were sustained also by his passion for travelling on the Continent, particularly in France and Italy, with Venice a favourite destination. During his repeated stays there (shared with his wife Elizabeth) his appreciation of the city was fostered both by his keen aesthetic sense and his knowledge of its history (he found the work of Frederic Lane particularly inspiring).

It must be said that Tom's views on contemporary sociologists could occasionally be quite dismissive—'he's shot his bolt' was a relatively frequent comment of his, and he sometimes professed himself baffled by the status achieved by some current 'stars'. Furthermore, his professional thinking was grounded also on writings from disciplines other than sociology—chiefly philosophy, which he had studied at Bristol, social anthropology, economics, and (later) history. His formal academic education had not been in sociology since the discipline barely existed in Britain at the time he was an undergraduate, and he had never done post-graduate studies. As already suggested, it had been accompanied and complemented by diverse and extensive reading, as well as by a sustained interest in the arts—chiefly literature, the theatre and music.

Furthermore, Tom's overall intellectual stance expressed a deep commitment to the moral values and the political priorities associated with the British labour tradition. This occasionally diminished his awareness of the significance of other public concerns: for instance, at first he criti-

cised as a retreat from more significant and abiding problems the emphasis that some members of the sociology profession had begun to place on ecological themes in the 1980s, displacing somewhat traditional concerns such as equality and social justice. His early familiarity with and sympathy for the Quaker tradition never ceased to inform his public concerns, and to inspire his rejection of violence as a means of policy. He occasionally described the days when the USA and the USSR seemed about to go to war over Cuba as the darkest in his memory. All this gave a distinctively humane cast to Tom's thinking, his research and his teaching, without ever compromising his commitment to the highest standards of intellectual achievement.

II

Tom always wrote to a high literary standard, which reflected on the one hand his thorough familiarity with British and European literature, and on the other his keen sense for the social and moral significance of the way people express themselves verbally in 'real life'. His accounts of organisational life, whether in electronic firms or at the BBC, devote a great deal of attention to local speech codes, the expressive and ritual aspects of the way in which people address each other in a variety of contexts.

Tom Burns had an excellent ear for the nuances of verbal expression. His favourite data-gathering practice was a series of relatively unstructured interviews, which often came close to being two-way conversations, as is shown by a number of excerpts in his books. Generally the interviews were recorded on tape, but were *not* subsequently transcribed verbatim. Instead, Tom preferred to listen time and again to the tape itself, each time attuning himself to diverse aspects of the speech of his respondents, with special attention to delays, hesitations, rephrasings. In the process, he would constantly refer also to his own field notes.

An example of the many valuable insights he derived from this assiduous, meticulous attention to his field data was his observation that the content of a given verbal interaction between members of an organisation of unequal hierarchical status was often characterised as an order or instruction by the higher-placed member, and as advice by the lower-placed.

In sum, while Tom never described himself as a socio-linguist, his awareness of the speech dimension of interaction was highly sophisticated.

It expressed itself in two significant features of his work. In the first place, it tended to give a truly dialogical structure to the interview process. In 1977, the preface to his book on the BBC justified in the following terms this somewhat unconventional format of Tom's favourite research tool:

How successful the procedure turns out to be depends . . . on how non-threatening and intrinsically interesting the researcher can make his inquiries appear to the people he meets. It amounts, in other words, to a matter of engaging the people interviewed as willing co-operators in his inquiries, of involving them in the furtherance of the study. Hence, the constant need to make clear what I was up to, and what I was making of the information I had gathered so far.

As a result, all the interpretative and explanatory ideas put forward in this book . . . were discussed, developed, or amended during interviews or subsequently in talking to people who were or had been members of the Corporation.

In the second place, as suggested above, his great sensitivity to language may have inspired Tom to pay a great deal of attention to the literary dimension of his own writings, producing texts which are never either laborious or casual, and where the precision of the description and the sophistication of the interpretation are matched by the clarity of the prose.

The essay collection, *Description, Explanation and Understanding*, although it is selective and regrettably leaves out some rather significant publications, still enables the reader to understand why the lonely sociologist from Edinburgh, where he had few if any collaborators associated with the discipline (Goffman himself, in the Shetlands, had been researching toward a doctorate in anthropology), rapidly gained a remarkable standing in the discipline, signalled by the publication of very substantial essays in top journals. To mention only those included in the collection, in 1953 *The American Sociological Review* published 'Friends, Enemies and the Polite Fiction', in 1955 *Human Relations* published 'Cliques and Cabals', in 1961 *The Administrative Science Quarterly* published "'Micro" politics: Mechanisms of Institutional Change'.

It was also in 1961 that Tom's masterpiece, *The Management of Innovation*, was published. This volume—one of the most significant sociology books of the second half of the twentieth century—had formally also another author, G. M. Stalker. However, the circumstances surrounding its genesis, and the content of prefatory materials associated with its later editions and several translations, clearly indicate a discrepancy. G. M. Stalker, who appears never to have pursued an academic career, had been associated with the original research project, and was meant to co-author the book, and to report its results. He had made a valuable contribution

to what one would today call its 'data base' (according to Burns, Stalker was 'a superb interviewer'), but the book that came into existence and found its way to widespread acclaim had been conceived by Tom, and was totally his work.

As was the case with some of the essays that preceded it, *The Management of Innovation* dealt in the first instance with a significant empirical question: how the electronics firms which had operated in Scotland during the war had confronted the threats and opportunities which the return to peace represented for the industry. This was true to some extent everywhere, but perhaps particularly in Scotland. Most of those firms had been established there in the first instance, or had moved their plants from England in order to place them outside the range of German air attack. This as well as the fact that everywhere the electronics industry itself had been developed chiefly as an aspect of the war effort, confronted those firms with a special challenge—would they survive in the post-war environment, and if so, how?

Although the book demonstrates how conversant its author had become, in the course of his research, with a range of situational variables (including the technical nature of the electronics industry and the economic characteristics of its market), its focus was strictly sociological. Tom was chiefly interested in the organisational arrangements made (or not made) in the firms to deal with those variables, to allow or induce the people working in them to cooperate effectively. He was asking himself what effect those arrangements had had, or were having, on each firm's capacity to survive and to thrive.

The arrangements that mattered, his inquiries had determined, were much more complex and subtle than those conveyed by a given firm's organisation chart, or by the conventional distinction between 'line' personnel and 'staff' personnel. They had to do chiefly with the everyday practices of the firm—not just those evident in a plant's workplaces or in the titles assigned to its personnel, but also those suggested by the layout of its cafeteria or the way in which personnel grouped themselves within it and talked (or did not talk) with one another. It was Tom's close and perceptive observation of those practices which suggested some of his most valuable insights.

Let us mention one. In the firms he studied, knowledge and skills vital to the firm's success, especially those of a scientific and technical nature, were often vested in younger employees. To the extent that the firms' reward structure acknowledged this, it would necessarily place on the defensive more senior employees, who in most other industrial firms,

considered themselves the firm's most significant resources and the main custodians of its future, and enjoyed titles and rewards to match. Early on in his inquiry, Tom had become aware of a significant phenomenon that had been relatively ignored in the existent sociological literature on industry. Such literature had emphasised the arrangements made by firms in order to acknowledge, and to reward with career success, the particular achievements of certain employees. It had paid but scant attention, however, to the fact that, by the same token, such arrangements acknowledged and penalised the failures of other employees.

In one of his most important essays, Tom had theorised both aspects of the phenomenon of differential rewards. He had suggested that each expressed itself in the spontaneous formation, within a firm, of two kinds of informal groupings with distinctive patterns of interaction (including, once more, verbal patterns). These were the *cliques*, assembling employees who had experienced, or were realistically anticipating, career success; and the *cabals* constituted by other employees, who instead had experienced, or were realistically anticipating, career failure.

The tensions embodied in this development of opposing internal groupings, and in the resultant 'micropolitical' relations, were intensified in electronic firms. Here, as indicated, the peculiar, irreplaceable contribution made by younger personnel in possession of strategic knowledge and skills had to be somehow validated, but this inevitably placed the more senior personnel under threat.

Firms would in various ways acknowledge and try to remedy and accommodate the tensions. But they could do so only up to a point; the inevitability of the threat persisted, for it reflected a broader phenomenon. A business such as electronics was, so to speak, condemned to innovation by the continually changing nature of its technical base and by the turbulence inherent in its markets. On this account, the organisational patterns appropriate to that business could no longer be those of firms operating in more stable environments, where a relatively high match between the age structure of the employee population and the distribution of the firm's rewards was one aspect among others of a well-established organisational model. Such a model, which Tom chose to label 'mechanical', reflected the presumption that, at any rate among white-collar, technically trained employees, more senior personnel possessed more valuable knowledge and skills than less senior personnel, and should be rewarded accordingly. In suitably organised electronics firms, which had adopted what Tom called an organic organisational model, such a presumption had to be abandoned, or at any rate strongly qualified.

Furthermore, within the organic model it ceased to be the case that the responsibility for monitoring the scientific, technical, and market environment of the firm, and for working out the required productive responses, should be left to its top managers, while the other personnel applied themselves to carrying out dutifully the policies knowledgeably laid down by their superiors. To survive, an electronics firm had to encourage all its technically trained personnel to keep abreast of current developments in electronic technology, of the new range of products they made possible, of the changing demands of potential customers, and of the strategies of competitors at home and abroad.

In other words, within an increasingly significant industry such as electronics, much conventional wisdom—including sociological wisdom—on the appropriate way to construct, to lead, to manage the organisational arrangements of firms, had to be surrendered or at any rate extensively revised and corrected. What made this necessary was, at bottom, the increasingly critical role played in such environments by sophisticated, science-based knowledge. This critical factor was continually being revised, left behind, and added to, and lent itself to intensive and sustained technical applications, both in the nature of the production processes and in the nature of the products themselves. But the organisational implications of that role were multiple and diverse, as the above examples show, and required a profound rethinking of the scope and method of the managerial aspects of industrial reality.

Thus *The Management of Innovation*, in contrasting what it termed the mechanical and the organic models of management, conceptualised a profound change in organisational philosophy which for some time had been at work in industrial practice but which had not been articulated as sharply and insightfully before. It made a distinctive contribution to the thinking of contemporary students (including those operating at the interface between social disciplines and industrial practice, particularly in business schools) on such problems as how to transfer knowledge and technology between firms or between branches of industry, or how to construct organisations capable of learning processes and thus capable of changing themselves. As the *Financial Times* stated on the occasion of a new edition of *The Management of Innovation*, ‘Tom Burns . . . created a string of concepts which have had an increasingly powerful international influence . . . They have improved Western management practices immeasurably . . . and made millionaires of several famous American pundits who embroidered them.’ Furthermore, Tom’s masterpiece bore significantly on a growing range of important and visible aspects of

contemporary society at large, such as the structure of educational and research institutions, and the phenomenon of mass consumption.

His sophisticated awareness of these multiple, ramifying connections made of him not only an outstandingly original scholar of organisations, but also a critical interpreter of a broader notion which, between the 1950s and the 1980s, informed much theorising about contemporary society—the notion of industrial society. (See in particular a review essay on the sociology of industry, published in 1962, and a successful reader, *Industrial Man*, published in 1969.) Another aspect of Tom's characteristic intellectual breadth, as we shall see, was his effort to determine what sense the notion of management itself acquired in contexts as different from industrial ones as hospitals and media organisations.

It is said of Thomas Jefferson that he is chiefly remembered for his two greatest achievements—writing the Declaration of Independence and founding the University of Virginia. Likewise, one could say that Tom's greatest achievements were on the one hand *The Management of Innovation*, and on the other the creation of the sociology department at Edinburgh University. The two were not unconnected, for it was presumably the first that led his University to appoint him Reader in Sociology in the Department of Social Administration and subsequently to put him in charge of establishing a department of that discipline.

Nearly forty years after its inception in 1964, the Edinburgh University Department of Sociology remains one of the strongest in the UK. It preserves the imprint of the inspired leadership of its founder, among other ways in the broad range of subjects it encompasses and in the commitment to supporting both teaching (under- and postgraduate) and research.

In establishing the department and putting it on the map, Tom took due advantage of intellectual and academic circumstances which were, at the time (and alas never again to the same extent) favourable to sociology. Acting promptly and energetically on the resultant commitment of his university to establish the discipline within its new Faculty of Social Sciences, he appointed as lecturers first a person who had already conducted research with him, then—over the subsequent years—a number of people from diverse academic backgrounds. With his collaborators, he embodied in the department's structure a strong commitment to undergraduate teaching—including a highly demanding four-year honours course—where quantitative subjects (such as demography) would be required for the degrees, alongside more conventional ones. Early on, the department undertook to teach for research degrees, availing itself of relatively exten-

sive support from public funding bodies, but even its undergraduate programme acknowledged the vital importance of empirical work as an aspect of the intellectual identity of sociology. A number of methodological subjects were included in the curriculum, and each honours student was required to submit a piece of original empirical research.

Tom was head of department from 1964 to 1978, and from 1965 he also held the sociology chair. Over the years, the department became nationally and internationally known for the advanced research conducted there in a number of fields, ranging from industrial sociology to social stratification, the sociology of science, the sociology of the theatre, and of literature. It was thus, and remains, internally diverse, reflecting once more the breadth of interests characteristic of Tom Burns.

Tom undertook the responsibilities associated with the position of chair and department head in a highly personal style, and they engaged a great deal of his energy. There was nothing authoritarian to the man, but he liked to lead, as he was expected to do both by his senior colleagues in the university and by his junior ones in the department. His leadership thus took the form primarily of working hard at his job, and inducing his associates to see and to subscribe to the rationale for his preferences (concerning the curriculum, the selection of students, the selection of new members, or whatever). It was based on the recognition by his associates in the department (all at least one generation his junior) of the range and depth of his knowledge of the discipline as well as on his high and growing standing in the discipline at home and abroad. He invested considerable effort in securing for them the best working conditions and the best opportunities for professional development. The majority of those appointed to a lectureship at Edinburgh at Tom's initiative are currently holding chairs, or have ended their career while holding chairs, at Edinburgh or elsewhere.

Tom thus generated in his colleagues a strong feeling of commitment to the department, which as a result enjoyed for many years a continuity of composition, a sense of shared purpose, and an absence of internal dissent rather rare at the time among major sociology departments.

There is less information available on how he projected himself to his students. He seemed to be held in awe by them; but perhaps most of them were more aware of his sheer intellectual power and his mastery of whatever subjects he taught (including, in the early years of the department, the First Ordinary course, traditionally taught at Edinburgh by the most senior don) than they were of his intense concern for the students' intellectual and social welfare, and of the highly humane

and respectful way in which he looked after them in his activity as department head.

The committed and most beloved father of his sizeable brood, Burns seemed to take a truly paternal, and thus in no way paternalistic, interest also in his students, beginning with the undergraduates. This was particularly evident in the context of the process whereby the department set examination papers and evaluated the students' performance in them. Furthermore, Tom took pride in their achievements, which were sometimes considerable. A number of students who left Edinburgh with first or advanced degrees went on to distinguished careers in sociology. Some of the students themselves, however, appear to have found him somewhat distant and forbidding, no matter how unjustified this judgement seemed to his departmental colleagues, who were well aware of how he understood, and discharged, his responsibilities to students and who benefited from the same attention to their own intellectual potentialities and requirements.

In the late 1960s, when he had begun to enjoy the eminence he deserved, Tom was asked to play a leading role in a massive effort then undertaken by Penguin Books to enter the academic market. He accepted, and planned and directed the Penguin Sociology series, which became one of the more significant components of that effort. His name figured on the series's masthead at the head of a distinguished editorial board. However the whole series was chiefly a product of his learning and enterprise, plus the keen sense he had been acquiring for the strengths of the discipline as an academic subject while building and directing the Edinburgh sociology department.

The main outcome of his collaboration with Penguin was a remarkable set of Sociology Readers, some of which were very well received both in Britain and in the United States, and went through several reprints. Among these were Tom's own *Industrial Man*, and *Sociology of Literature and Drama*, edited with his wife. Some expressly commissioned books also had a wide readership, demonstrating Tom's knack for identifying significant topics, as well as capable authors and editors (including some who had not previously made their mark). Unfortunately the success of Penguin Sociology was not shared by other components of the project as a whole, which was abandoned after a few years.

A man of considerable energy, Tom Burns, while building and leading the sociology department at Edinburgh, still found it possible to carry out serious research, to publish and to play a highly personal role in fostering the discipline. Early on, the uniquely effective way in which he would

observe and explain the workings of organisations and, if so required, comment insightfully on how they could be improved, had led among other things to his being asked to act, formally or otherwise, as a consultant. Requests to this effect, originating from organisations as diverse as the BBC, the Shell and the British Petroleum corporations or the boards of hospitals, became more and more frequent after the publication of *The Management of Innovation*. Tom treated such requests (to which he could not always accede) chiefly as opportunities to enlarge and deepen his understanding of varieties of organisational experience, and to communicate some aspects of it to people active in, and sometimes in charge of, organisations. His consulting relationship with British Petroleum was particularly protracted, and is said to have made a serious impact on the corporation's organisational policies.

This may be said to reflect Tom's serious respect for what one might call the managerial class. He saw its activities principally as a critical aspect of a concern, shared with other participants in the units they managed—the concern to establish those units and to make them successful as the product and the frame of a sustained, effective collective effort. This does not mean that Tom could not be critical of the ways in which many British businesses were operated, but on the whole the concept of exploitation, like other concepts associated with the Marxian tradition, was not part of his own vocabulary. Perhaps this was because he researched chiefly organisations where the contraposition between 'bosses' on the one hand, and employees working at the coal face on the other, was not as visible and significant as in the favourite research sites of many other sociologists of industry.

Over the years, Tom's other projects were supported from two main sources. The first, particularly significant in the first phase of his research career, was a small set of Quaker foundations which, amongst their other commitments, undertook to support research. A good relationship with Quaker institutions was, as we have seen, a part of Tom's own biography, and greatly assisted his access to their support.

In the latter phase of his career, when Tom had gained national and international recognition as an outstandingly imaginative and productive researcher, public bodies expressly established in the UK to fund social research sought Tom's advice on their policies. They also occasionally supported his own research efforts, particularly on subjects not directly related to his prime interest in industrial organisations—such as the growing significance of life styles in creating collective identities, or the roots and significance of the student movement in the late 1960s.

It might be appropriate at this point to comment on one rather less positive aspect of Tom's distinguished career as a researcher, which was evident particularly in the phase leading up to his retirement. To use a typical Burnisian phrase, *there is a sense in which* the man's sociological imagination, his ability to identify significant but as yet inadequately explored and understood social developments was too good for his own good. This can be explained by constructing the following scenario from a few episodes in Tom's research career.

At any given time, his wide reading, his very diverse academic social contacts, his keen observation of ongoing facts on the ground, his sheer intellectual curiosity, would lead him to identify new themes for research. Once this happened—to summarise the typical sequence—Tom would promptly locate the relevant sources of information and assemble and analyse the existent literature on the phenomenon. He would then engage in sustained reflection and speculation on the causes and effects of it. Next, he would embody the results of the previous process in a research proposal, specifying the main hypotheses and indicating the appropriate research procedure. Typically, the proposal would commit Tom to being the project's principal investigator, though much of the actual research work might have to be conducted, under his guidance, by expressly hired researchers.

Tom would then submit his proposal to an appropriate funding body, typically in the form of a closely argued, elegantly written scholarly paper, complemented by a detailed statement of the project's research schedule, costs, and so on. Now, it happened a few times during Tom's research career that while the body in question deliberated on the proposal, its author's interest in the topic, without disappearing entirely, became less lively and compelling. He had meanwhile identified another theme for research, and was already focusing his intellectual effort on *that* topic.

At this point a positive decision by the body in question might be somewhat less welcome to Tom than one might have anticipated. He might in fact decide to entrust the actual conduct of the inquiry chiefly to the personnel expressly hired for it, playing a less active and involved role than that normally taken by the principal investigator. Later still, at the point where the data had been assembled and a primary analysis conducted by those personnel, Tom would find it psychologically difficult and intellectually unrewarding to take full charge of the final process and to do justice to its findings by writing a full-fledged report, possibly to be published as an essay or a book. In fact, on some occasions where the

scenario described above was realised, Tom's inquiries, including some funded from outside sources, were never fully reported.

The causes of this may lie not just in his intellectual restlessness, but also in the difficulty he sometimes found in co-ordinating his efforts with those of others. Put in another way, this outstanding researcher of organisations was perhaps not at his best in organising research—even his own research, on topics of his own devising. This means that, imposing as it is, the intellectual legacy embodied in Tom's published writings is not as impressive as it might have been, had he been able to give a full account of his numerous research endeavours.

Tom's associates at Edinburgh would sometimes joke that, if you opened certain cupboards in the building (18 Buccleuch Place, where the department was located for most of its history) you would find yourself looking at skeletons. These cupboards contained masses of data assembled by Tom and his collaborators many years before (for the 'Pilton', or 'Housewife's Choice' projects for example), which had never been completely analysed, let alone reported on.

On occasion, this pattern had additional untoward consequences. Tom, as if stung by a sense that he had not fully acquitted himself of his obligations—toward his former collaborators, toward the funding body, toward the intellectual impulse itself which had motivated him to engage in a certain inquiry—would periodically seek to wind up a particular project by an intense bout of intellectual effort. However he did not always find himself able to accomplish this goal. The data had gone too cold, the intellectual processes themselves which had originally presided over the conception of the project had become difficult to reconstruct and to validate, the original methodology no longer seemed appropriate and the former associates involved in the project were no longer able or willing to collaborate.

In a few instances, there was a second consequence; the course of the inquiry itself, or its aftermath, would to an extent damage relations between Tom and his collaborators. A case in point is that of an inquiry into the causes of student unrest in the late 1960s. Here, Tom's creative interest in the subject did indeed bear fruit, in a remarkable essay, 'The Revolt of the Privileged', originally published in 1969 and now available in *Description, Explanation and Understanding*. However, the same essay had been used as a background paper for an application for funding which Tom had submitted to a public funding body and had been duly approved.

The proposal was for research teams to form at two British universities—the University of Edinburgh and a certain English one—and for

each to conduct research, according to an agreed strategy, on the *other* university. The Scottish team was to be led by Tom himself, the other by the Professor of Sociology at the English university. It was a clever and promising scheme, but unfortunately the terms of collaboration and the respective responsibilities had not been sufficiently clarified. As a result, after some research efforts (and some funds) had been expended, the two principals began to disagree over their respective responsibilities, and the project had to be called off. It is impossible to determine what role was played in this story by Tom's inability to remain interested in his own interests, or by the fact that his true vocation (gloriously fulfilled) was that of a lone, hands-on researcher, not of a research organiser. It is difficult to dismiss the impression that both aspects played some role in the outcome.

On the other hand, neither aspect contributed to the serious complications, this time not of Tom's making, which befell a further research undertaking, that came nevertheless to a happy ending. The story is narrated in the preface to Tom's second great book *The BBC: Public Institution and Private World*. It begins in 1960–1, when Tom was invited by the Corporation to speak at two of its recurrent management conferences. The success of those presentations led to his being allowed to spend time at Broadcasting House and at the Television Centre, interviewing some twenty senior members of the staff.

This exercise became something of a pilot to a whole sequence of interviews, carried out in early 1963, and lasting between one and three hours each. It was understood that the outcome of this major research effort would be an extensive study of the Corporation, dealing with how members of staff form their working commitments and their career strategies, and with how these individual involvements merge (or conflict) with the social systems into which the organisation as a whole articulates itself in the pursuit of its institutional mission. It was also understood that no part of that study would be published without the consent (not necessarily the approval) of the Corporation.

Here lay the rub. When in due course Tom submitted to the corporation his 'working report', that consent was denied, for some key people in the Corporation felt that some of the findings were too sensitive, and could be damaging to the Corporation if made public. This was a bitter setback for the author, who knew he had produced a potentially very significant contribution both to his master theme, organisational life, and to the sociology of the media, but was prevented from making it known. As he was to write in 1995, he had been 'good enough to provide a gag for

himself'. Furthermore, as he commented privately, he was also bound by his unwillingness, on moral and political grounds, to do anything that could conceivably damage one of the most important British public institutions.

About ten years after that aborted project, Tom was invited by the then Director General of the BBC to resume his study in order to ascertain what changes had occurred in the aspects of the Corporation's life he had previously studied. This led to a round of about sixty interviews, the collection of other relevant internal materials, and in due course to the completion of a report that encompassed the findings of both studies. Thus the report, and the subsequent book, have what could be called a 'longitudinal' dimension; although their main concern was with matters less subject to change over that period, they also addressed some changes which had occurred between the first and the second inquiry.

There was again some resistance to the publication of the book (not mentioned in the preface) on the part of Corporation officials, on the grounds that some of the findings, previously judged 'too hot', had meanwhile become out of date. (As Tom commented bitterly, 'heads you win, tails I lose'.) Fortunately the resistance was overcome, and in due course the book appeared as a volume in the series *Edinburgh Studies in Sociology*, that Burns had arranged to be published by Macmillan.

The series itself, it must be said, was not a great publishing success, and although the BBC book received considerable acclaim in Britain it was inadequately noticed in the US, where Macmillan had failed to find a partner publisher for an American edition. Understandably, this disappointed the author, who knew that to find the resonance it deserved the book had to appear in such an edition. This possibility was hampered by two considerations. In the first place, by the late 1970s the BBC apparently no longer enjoyed the standing it used to have as the senior broadcasting outfit in the English speaking world. Together with other things European and British, it was thought to have lost appeal as the theme of a book. In the second place—but this is more of an inference—Tom's new book could not be promoted as, so to speak, 'Son of' *The Management of Innovation*, a work which had been very well received by American academic audiences and made a serious impact on managerial circles. It had a different, more ambitious, more complex theme, and the argument it conducted did not lend itself to pragmatic applications.

Tom restated in the following terms what, *qua* organisations, the electronics firms he had studied years before and the BBC had in common:

Organisations . . . are co-operative systems assembled out of the usable attributes of people and are created and maintained to produce goods or services. But they are also places in which the people recruited into them compete for advancement. Thus, members of any business or non-business undertaking are at one and the same time co-operators in a common enterprise and rivals for the tangible rewards of successful competition with one another. The pyramidal hierarchy of rank and authority familiar as representing the 'structure' of an organisation in fact represents both a control system and a career ladder.

The question was, how and to what extent this duality of aspects common to both types of organisation was inflected by their differences, and thus what role the activity specifically intended to reconcile and moderate the resulting dilemmas—the activity of management, would play in each type. With respect to the BBC, this was a particularly complex question, as is suggested by the following considerations. The BBC was a public, non-business organisation, intended to provide services, not to produce a profit. The services intended were multiple (information, education, and entertainment) and not easily reconciled. It hosted a great variety of participants, including a relatively large number identified as 'creative' personnel and/or specialists in particularly sophisticated, demanding, and diverse fields. The environment in which it operated at the time of the research was very different from that in which it had been created: just think of the arrival of television and its continuous technical developments (colour for instance), the unavoidable rivalry with commercial television, the changes which had occurred since the times of Reith in the BBC's relations with the government, parliament, and political parties.

The challenge these changes posed for the organisation as a whole was the main theme of Tom's study. It was not, in his view, adequately met. He was particularly concerned by 'managerialism', that is by the increasingly disproportionate role played in the life of the BBC by its purely organisational aspects and by the related political processes, as against aspects more directly related to the participants' shared efforts to make the organisation do its job. This trend is one that Tom noted with concern also in the health service units he studied in and around Edinburgh after finishing his research on the BBC.

In the second half of the 1970s Tom's health began to be undermined by a condition, probably originating from an illness inadequately treated during the war, which flared up again at unpredictable intervals. Up to that point he had been a very vigorous man, and he resented its occasional debilitating effects. In the early 1980s, two years before the age at which it would become compulsory, he decided to retire with the title of

Emeritus. By this time, he had moved with his wife to a suburb of Edinburgh. The children had all gone their separate ways, but the family remained very close.

This circumstance, together with Tom's apparent decision to distance himself from the academic environment he had so successfully created in the sociology department at Edinburgh, had one important consequence. Over the subsequent years he remained very active and creative as a scholar, but his assiduous frequenting of the Edinburgh University library became almost his only link with academic institutions. (This, one might say, spared him from witnessing at close quarters the onslaught of 'managerialism' on British universities in the 1980s and 1990s.) He was very proud, however, of his election to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1982.

Throughout his remaining years, Tom remained highly committed to a massive and demanding scholarly project, from which he was distracted only for the time necessary for producing his excellent book on Erving Goffman. Regrettably, the project was still unfinished at the time he died, and the conditions in which he left his *Nachlass* make it difficult, for the time being, to describe its content and assess its import. The manuscript is currently in the hands of a prospective editor, an Australian scholar who had never met Burns but had long admired his work, and is working to convert it into publishable form. In the meanwhile, one can at best convey a tentative idea of what, in due course, may turn out to be another Tom Burns masterpiece.

It has been said that most sociologists work at one or another of three different levels: face to face interaction, organised units, and whole societies. Tom had gained his great reputation chiefly through studies located at the second level, though one of the strengths of these studies had been his awareness of the significance of interactions taking place at the first. He had of course discussed some of the societal determinants and effects of organisational life (while describing, for instance, the industrialisation process), but had not analysed societies at great length. In essence, he had been committed primarily to studying contemporary organisations, so that, while he was highly interested in change, the time span envisaged by his researches had perforce been relatively narrow. He gave notice of his intent to challenge the limitations of that commitment in an essay published in 1980: 'Sovereignty, interests and democracy in the modern state', the last reprinted in his essay collection. The title clearly indicates the societal scope and the much enlarged time frame of his thematic concerns; but the essay, while very significant in itself, is in fact a kind of

promissory note, pointing to the massive research project he was to conduct over his last twenty years.

The project's theme was nothing less than the development of the major political and social institutions of Western societies. The study was to be narrative in form, and to begin with classical antiquity. Having taken notice of the recent (re)development within sociology of so-called comparative historical studies, Tom had made a decision to enter (and to challenge) that field. The decision had of course a corollary: the abandonment of the methodology of inquiry, based on extensive interviews and other forms of field work, which Tom had so extensively and successfully employed in his previous studies. The materials for analysis were now to be drawn from his reading of historical (or historical/sociological) literature, and up until the time of his death on 20 June 2001, Tom committed the greater part of his still very considerable intellectual energy to this activity. The other part was devoted to utilising those materials in drafting a book which, in two or three volumes, would take its story through to the twentieth century. The substance of the argument would be analytical; it would explore, this time, the varieties of institutional experience, with special regard to the institutions of public life, and a focus on the emergence of bureaucracy and of the more recent alternatives to it.

The writing process was clearly protracted, intense, and laborious. It produced a number of finished chapter drafts, and others left unfinished and sometimes overlapping. A glimpse at these materials (the editing of which has barely begun) suggests that this posthumous book of Tom's, different as it was from all its predecessors, will show that its author, in the last twenty years of a relatively long and very productive life, could still, as it were, 'stretch his wings', and perform most impressively a large and original scholarly mission.

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