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Commentary on the Burt Affair

In 1965, when Sir Cyril Burt was over 80, a book with the Greek title *Stephanos* was edited by Charlotte Banks and P.L. Broadhurst as a tribute to him. There were more than a dozen papers in the book; each was written by a distinguished writer, each covered a different aspect of his wide range of interests, though not covering them all. The first paper in the *Festschrift* was a short biography and appreciations by C.W. Valentine, Burt's oldest friend, their friendship dating back to the time they were both students under Külpe in Würzburg. He begins by asserting that Burt was one of the half-dozen greatest psychologists this century has produced, then he outlines the unique width and depth of Burt's scholarly activities, his pioneer researches, his publications and editorships; he writes too of the eminent people holding important academic positions in many parts of the world who had been his students. Valentine especially emphasizes Burt's quite exceptional generosity in giving his time, effort, and expertise in helping students, colleagues, and public bodies like the BBC and the British Association for the Advancement of Science.

When Burt died in 1971 the position of eminence established in *Stephanos* was confirmed and enhanced by the tributes in obituary notices and in the memorial service at St. Mary's Church, Primrose Hill. Burt had been knighted in 1946, and in 1971 he was presented by the **American Psychological Society** with the Thorndike Award; this honour had never previously been made to a non-American. However, in spite of these and many more honours, Burt, in his later years, received a great deal of hostile criticism particularly related to his views on the nature of intelligence, the nature-nurture controversy, and educational selection. The criticism followed and was related to the general change in thinking about education which developed in the years towards the end of the last war. In the post-war

reconstruction in England, children at the secondary level were to be categorized into types: academic, technical, or practical and to be segregated in three kinds of school. The government could offer little help in defining or selecting children for the three types of school or of the ways which the schools would teach, and, what they would teach. Burt, not surprisingly, objected strongly on psychological grounds (Burt, 1943), but the system remained more or less in place for about 20 years. (The "more or less" refers to the failure of the "technical" schools to materialize in quantity.)

The tripartite system of schooling aroused considerable opposition, specially from left wing political bodies and sociologists like B. Simon, J.E. Floud, A.H. Halsey, and J.W.B. Douglas. They wished to abandon all kinds of educational selection on the grounds that it was a means of perpetuating an elitist, class-stratified society; upper-class children being favoured by the selection procedures, especially IQ tests and such like, used to place the children in the secondary schools. Brian Simon (1953) even went so far as to suggest that children do not have different levels of intellectual ability and hence they could virtually all be educated together. Burt, it is well known, believed that sooner or later selection would have to be employed because children differed so widely that they could not be effectively taught together at the secondary stage. Arguments about the conflicting views became violent; they became political and the press was involved. Support for Burt came mainly from academics opposed to the government's policy. Their chief concern was over maintaining educational standards if selection were not practised; the vehicle for expressing their views was a series of pamphlets called the *Black Papers* (Cox & Dysn, 1969, 1970). Burt contributed long, characteristically scholarly, well researched papers in two of them. The *Black Papers* were well received by many politicians, and by the more serious newspapers and technical journals. Burt was pressed to write more articles on the topics of the *Black Papers*; it is said he wrote fourteen articles in 1969 (Hearnshaw, 1979) in newspapers, weeklies, and technical journals. These reflected the tense atmosphere of the time with disputants loosely connected with left and right political opinions which were strongly held and exaggeratedly expressed. A somewhat similar atmosphere developed about the same time in America with people like S.J. Gould and L.J. Kamin on one side and A. Jansen and R.I. Hernstein on the other.

In the absence of other stimulants it seems likely that interest in Burt would have waned but in 1977 an article appeared in the British *Sunday Times* by that paper's medical correspondent, Oliver Gillie. It started: "The most sensational charge of scientific fraud in this century is being leveled against the late Sir Cyril Burt, father of British educational psychology. Leading scientists are convinced that Burt published false data and invented crucial

facts to support his controversial theory that intelligence is largely inherited." The main specific charges were that Burt had guessed parental IQs, that he had invented data to support his own genetic theories, that his quoted correlations between sets of twins were bogus, and that two of his named collaborators had probably never existed. The *Sunday Times* article was followed by another, in *The Times*; shortly, the truth of the statements was supported by a number of psychologists and was vehemently denounced by many more. Neither side could establish the truth of Gillie's charges, or of the others which cropped up in the spate of letters to the press and in discussions. It was therefore suggested that until L.S. Hearnshaw, who had been invited to write a biography of Burt, had completed his task, no judgement should be made.

Hearnshaw's biography came out in 1979. In it he found that, in the main charges and in some other respects which he had found himself, Burt was guilty. Such was Burt's stature that news of the findings was widely publicized throughout Britain and many other parts of the world including the United States and Canada. Hearnshaw had written so well, his research of the literature was so extensive, and his arguments so convincing that reviewers of the book almost without exception accepted his judgement. Eventually, J. Tizard and A. and A.D.B. Clarke, who had from the beginning supported the view of Oliver Gillie, were joined by other psychologists like P.E. Vernon, S. Chown, and H.J. Eysenck; further, the Council of the British Psychological Society accepted Hearnshaw's verdict. Hence in ten years Burt's reputation had fallen from the peak of eminence to the gutter.

After the publication of the biography the denigrating writings and broadcasts subsided but there were sequels. References to Burt were generally omitted from text books of educational psychology, some referred to him but commented on his disgrace; in reporting on such topics as twin studies they would append "after deleting the fraudulent data of Burt" or some such phrase. A few people who had been specially antagonistic towards Burt had taped cassettes of a CBS program in the series "60 Minutes" featuring Liam Hudson demeaning Burt. In England tapes of a particularly scurrilous BBC production still seem to exist.

From time to time I received news in Canada from English psychologists and educators that enquiries had been made which seemed to show that Burt had been seriously misrepresented. Because I could not trace relevant work in Canada, Professor Hazel Francis, editor of the *British Journal of Educational Psychology* was approached. She was good enough to send to me a copy of an uncorrected proof of a paper by Ronald Fletcher called the "Doubtful Case of Cyril Burt", published in 1987 in *Social Policy and Administration* (Vol. 21), a British journal not usually read by most educa-

tional psychologists. The editor of the *Journal* prefaced the paper by his own comments that it was concerned with "...investigating the truth of one of the most dramatic controversies in the social sciences in British universities in recent years." He continues: "Here Fletcher raises serious doubts about the validity of the attack on Burt and questions the quality of the evidence produced by his denigrators."

It would seem that from the start Fletcher had been uneasy about the testimony of the detractors. "...[T]he accusers seemed...to be waging a war rather than pursuing an argument; but it was the BBC's television dramatization in 1984 which finally persuaded me that something was seriously at fault." In particular he felt that the attack on Burt was an organized campaign by a small cohesive group determined to destroy Burt as a scientist and to smear him as a person. He noticed that in the film people who knew Burt well were not called upon to offset the evidence of people like Tizard, the Clarkes, and L.J. Kamin. Even A.R. Jensen and R.B. Cattell, old friends of Burt, who appeared in the film in short clips, seemed to be supporting the notion that Burt was a psychopathic fraud. So, Fletcher wrote to them both and both replied protesting that they had been grossly misrepresented by the BBC reporters who went to Berkeley and to Hawaii to interview them, and by the editors of the film. Both psychologists had been assured that the program was to be a balanced, non-judgemental documentary. Both were very angry at the result and Cattell, who only had second-hand reports of the broadcast, complained that he had failed to get a copy of the cassette even after writing twice to the BBC. The comments of Cattell and Jensen provoked Fletcher to investigate further the allegations made against Burt and the people who made them and who reported them.

First Fletcher gave brief but effective outline of Burt's main contributions in the area of the controversy, particularly stressing his major purposes, his methods of work, the sophisticated mathematical tools he devised to identify individual differences through which he could provide appropriate opportunities for all children. One of Burt's main conclusions was that inequality of incomes seemed to be largely, though not entirely, an indirect effect of the wide inequality in innate intelligence. This hypothesis was reached as long ago as the last war; by the end of his life it was opposed by many, and particularly violently by many of the people who were his main accusers. In pursuing his investigation of these accusers Fletcher uses a Socratic method, posing searching, clearly annunciated questions like "Why...did Hearnshaw pay such little attention to the evidence and representations of Burt's supporters?" He then follows by comments and presentation for evidence of any conclusions. With the case of the Clarkes and the two "articles" of theirs which Burt was said to have written with serious adverse

criticisms of Eysenck, Fletcher comments: "Astonishingly, **no such articles existed!**" They were, in fact, not articles but thesis abstracts which, under the written instructions of the editor, were submitted through the department where the thesis was presented. Further, they do not contain a criticism of Eysenck.

In total, there seems little doubt that Fletcher has shown that certain psychologists and the media must explain why it appears they used very disreputable methods in blackening Burt's repute; why they made serious charges without checking the authenticity of the evidence. He showed that some of the charges were untrue, others not proven. He pointed to the need for further detailed enquiry and study of the allegations made against Burt. In two years this need was largely satisfied.

In 1989, Robert B. Joynson, a reputable historian from Nottingham University who also has qualifications in psychology, published a book, *The Burt Affair*. The author explains that he had not known Burt and was not interested in the psychology of individual differences or educational problems; he came to read Hearnshaw's biography because he was enquiring into the origins of intelligence testing. He found that Hearnshaw held that one of Burt's early deceptions concerned the history of the relationship of his own work to that of Charles Spearman. Joynson meticulously checked the early publications germane to the claims of Burt and found that in all four of the items he examined Burt's accounts were correct. He writes: "When I became convinced that Burt had not been guilty of any deliberate historical falsification, it was unthinkable that I should not go on to examine the further allegations against Him" (p.viii). Even at this stage he was of the opinion that "a grave injustice has been done."

Joynson decided to look further for signs of Burt's alleged distortions by reading his *Young Delinquent* (1925) for the Clarkes and Kamin had claimed that Burt had always been a devious, dishonest scientist. Nothing dishonest or devious could be found; it was perhaps old-fashioned, but in the light of the expected readers and the facilities available in 1925 it was altogether admirable. Next he looked at Hearnshaw's assertion that Burt had distorted the history of the development of factor analysis and the identification of general intelligence. It was investigated in minute detail and Joynson concluded that Hearnshaw's "historical accusations were poorly established" and his account of what had happened was in error "not occasionally and incidentally but repeatedly and crucially;" in fact, "Hearnshaw has misunderstood Burt's account."

Burt was quite viciously attacked over his twin studies in which he compared, among other things, the IQ of twins brought up with their own parents and others reared apart. Kamin and others noted that a number of

anomalous values appeared in the tables of correlation coefficients published in many different articles. The number of monozygotic twins reared apart, for example, increased from 15 to 53 but the coefficient remained the same. Joynson tediously examined all the relationships tracing the correlations in dozens of tables by methods too complex to describe here. In the end he concludes: "The invariant correlations do not provide evidence of deliberate manipulation of data on Burt's part. It seems quite likely that the strange values are often copying errors and the enquiry provides fresh grounds for supposing that Burt's most important data are genuine. It should be recalled too that Burt was over eighty years old when he wrote the main papers on twins in 1966.

One of the alleged frauds which was much referred to by the general public after reading the Gillie article, since it added a little spice to a rather mundane story, concerned the case of the two missing assistants. Burt refers to these two ladies who helped him for many years, but now they cannot be found or identified. The Clarkes hold that the women never existed; that both they and the twins data were fabricated by Burt. Joynson points out that they would have been quite old and probably died before Gillie began looking for them in 1976. In any case they were not of any great moment, except as making a good story for a reporter.

There are two chapters of Joynson's book which look at another kind of attack on Burt. Hearnshaw and others had hypothesized that Burt's fall from grace was due to a "psychological disturbance," a marginal "paranoia." He then goes to great lengths to try to show how the condition developed. Joynson argues that the explanation is "little more than an invention and selection of causes and consequences which, if true, would be highly convenient for psychology." But, many people who knew him well did not notice any disturbance; minor eccentricities perhaps, but no more. Similarly, Hearnshaw built up a picture of Burt's dual character; on the one hand cantankerous, belligerent, devious, unscrupulous; on the other courteous, helpful, considerate, honest. Joynson thinks that Hearnshaw used selective reporting to build the image of Burt's character. This could be done by asking the opinion of his friends on the one hand and his detractors on the other – but would the picture mostly reflect the respondents or Burt?

One important aspect of the Burt affair which Joynson discusses is the reaction of the psychological world to it. He wonders why the accusations were received so easily by the President and Council of the **British Psychological Society** and, reluctantly, by such admirers of Burt as Vernon and Jensen. This makes fascinating but not wholly convincing reading. It does not

deal adequately with the other side of the matter. The rehabilitation of Burt inevitably involves the laying of blame for various kinds of misdeeds on the part of the attackers and those who did not find the time, inclinations, or competence to undertake serious study of the evidence of Burt's alleged frauds. I wonder, had I still been a member of the Council of the **British Psychological Society**, whether I should have gone along with the President and accepted the verdict of the biography or whether I should have had the fortitude to do the kind of thing which Fletcher and Joynson did.

The Burt affair evokes theses which are highly selective in the material that is chosen to establish the point of view of the writer. This is probably the crux of the whole Burt affair. All who write about Burt's integrity must display some degree of bias, therefore it is only fair that I should declare my own position.

I became one of Valentine's students just after the last war; I became his assistant editor in 1952 and ultimately for six years, till 1967, I was editor of the *British Journal of Educational Psychology*. Through Valentine I met Burt quite frequently, visiting him quite often, including the time when he was in hospital with a broken leg. I admired him enormously and was very grateful to him for his ever available help in running the Journal. He gave me quite a few books, always graciously inscribed. My last gift has two inscriptions; one says

"A true friend may be reckoned the masterpiece of nature."
Of Friendship, R.W. Emerson

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