

Obituary

JOHN McSHANE

6 August 1949 – 21 August 1992

Rarely does one find an academic who is both an excellent teacher and a good researcher; who copes easily with current theories, yet also carries out detailed empirical work; who is a lucid explainer of technical matters, and a whizz at computers; who is deeply serious about his research, yet great fun to be with; who is highly industrious, yet always generous with his time and his possessions. John was all of these. His premature death in a boating accident on Lake Garda in Italy this summer was a shock to us all. He will be sadly missed by those who knew him at each stage of his life: as an undergraduate at Trinity College, Dublin (B.A. Psychology, 1st class honours 1974); as a research student at St John's College, Cambridge (Ph.D. 1977); as a lecturer in psychology at St Andrews University (1977–80) and the London School of Economics (1981–8); as a research scientist at Hewlett-Packard (1989–91); as a Senior Lecturer and Reader at Hatfield Polytechnic (from 1991). He deservedly became well-known from his dissertation *Learning to talk* (C.U.P. 1980): he was one of the first to recognize that children do not necessarily realize that words are 'labels' – the 'naming insight' may not occur until well into a child's second year. He wrote numerous articles, and another highly readable and insightful book *Cognitive development* (Blackwell, 1991), in which he argued that developmental change should be modelled as an information processing system, rather than in terms of Piagetian structures. A further book (written with Julie Dockrell) *Children's learning difficulties* (Blackwell) has just appeared. John and John's writing will live on in the memory of those who knew him, and in the minds of current and future students: his work is characterized by lucid exposition, insight and tolerance. When embroiled in academic debates, child language researchers might do well to remember his words 'Explaining [child language] acquisition will require a bold theoretical approach coupled with methodological rigour... It is surely only by marrying the best parts of these approaches that we will achieve an adequate understanding' (1991: 281–2).

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