

Obituary

Alexander Fenton

26 June 1929 – 9 May 2012

Alexander – ‘Sandy’ – Fenton was a scholar and teacher who has had a profound influence on many areas of Scottish and European studies and museums, not least through the extensive corpus of his written and published work.¹ He was born in Shotts, in Lanarkshire, the son of Alexander Fenton, a souter from the north-east, from Drumblade, and Annie Stronach. The family returned to Drumblade, near Huntly, shortly after Sandy’s birth and moved a few years later to the Smiddy Croft at Pitglassie, in the parish of Auchterless, near Turriff.

Sandy’s primary schooling was at Drumblade, Auchterless, and secondary schooling in Turriff. He graduated from Aberdeen with MA in English in 1951. An aptitude for languages was recognised by his teachers such as Miss Mabel Smith, his French teacher at Turriff, and Dr Clive Barber in Aberdeen, both inspired teachers who kindled a lifetime’s interest in Sandy. He was taught German on a one-to-one basis by Clive Barber, an exceptional and eremitic scholar with a passion for languages. Attending an early Vernacular Buildings conference at the University in 1976, Sandy took me to visit Dr Barber in his small flat in Aberdeen. Barricaded

behind deep piles of books, with the flat in darkness, and working within a narrow shaft of light from a single anglepoise lamp behind his chair, he was writing a grammar of Balinese,



the philological challenge being that this was a language with no evident orthography or any study of its grammar. The only known raw material was a poorly printed translation of St John's Gospel, in the form of a small, frail pamphlet caught in the pool of light, barely preserving the unique expertise and pragmatic Christianity of a late-19th-century missionary in Bali.

Sandy was encouraged by Aberdeen to go on to Cambridge where he completed the Archaeological and Anthropological Tripos in 1953. Studying Old Norse here laid the foundation of a thorough knowledge of the Scandinavian languages. As he did when in Aberdeen, he used the summer vacations to his financial advantage in doing the circuit of games and sports as a highly successful middle-distance runner (winning a Cambridge half-blue), and carried out some gentle archaeological survey work around Pitglassie and in Auchterless parish. He did National Service between 1953 and 1955 and was stationed in Germany, where he learnt to type and happily fraternised with the locals – not generally part of the culture of the British Army On the Rhine – building on his language skills with colloquial German. Sandy's capacity and appetite for European languages and the application of them to cultural studies might be said to have then been honed and given a particular direction while he was Senior Assistant Editor with the *Scottish National Dictionary*. He edited the letters 'K', 'N' and 'O' while working on the *Dictionary* under its Editor – and celebrated lexicographer – David Murison. His great and lasting regard for such a mentor is strikingly recorded:

My first two days are burned in my memory. As I sat beside him, he outlined the whole manner and ways of working of a dictionary. Over the next two years I learnt how to put into practice the concentrated wisdom of these two days. After that came a feeling of competence. What he did, in effect, by precept and example, was to teach me how to use, critically, an enormous range of sources that, through words, pointed also to the

history of things that surround us. He provided an education in the roots of the heritage of Scotland that outvalued any university degree.²

In many a sense, this precept and example was carried forward by Sandy in the education of his own assistants in the National Museum, by which a rapid and essential briefing was followed by an extended process of practical, intellectual and irresistible osmosis; the receptor assimilated not only a full range of Scottish and European cultural knowledge but a quiet confidence, boundless encouragement and the example of a generosity of spirit and deep intent. A curious but potent legacy of the *SND* work with David Murison flowed from bundles of galley proofs of the *Dictionary* which were re-purposed into museum subject categories. These became part of research assistant training in the National Museum; they were cut up and pasted to archive slips, meanwhile offering some rapid reading and a gentle and effective lesson on the applied role of language in cultural studies.

The mapping of language and dialect together with material culture was a constant theme of Sandy's work and output, not only within the ambit of the *Linguistic Atlas of Scotland* but also of the European Linguistic Atlas movement, which had broadened out from words to things in the compilation of 'ethnological' atlases beginning with the *Atlas of Swedish Folk Culture* (1937–9). With an instinct for the importance of the wider fields of European scholarly endeavour and a recognition of their potential for Scotland, Sandy engaged vigorously with the atlas movement in the early 1960s, as soon as he moved from the *Dictionary* to the National Museum. Having trained as a lexicographer (as he always maintained), Sandy rejoiced in the pursuit of the essential meanings of words, with all connotations and for any period, pointing out that meanings change, cognates develop quite different meanings and a piece of equipment for a specific purpose may have a dozen or more different names within the same language area.³

The catalogues and archives of the National Museums bear witness that material objects and their parts might have names in terms other than Standard English and that Sandy and his assistants recorded these as an invariable rule. This relationship between words and things had formed the conceptual base of a linguistic atlas of Rhaeto-Romanic Switzerland and the title of the journal *Wörter und Sachen*, founded in 1909. Sandy moved vigorously into these domains, particularly through his friendship with European scholars such as Professor Axel Steensberg of the University of Copenhagen with whom he founded the international journal *Tools and Tillage* (1968–95). Thereafter, Sandy communicated constantly with a wide circle of European teachers and scholars whose names magisterially and symbolically formed, with his own, the Editorial Board of another groundbreaking international journal, *Ethnologia Europaea*, founded in 1966 by the Swedish ethnologist, Sigurd Erixon (1888–1968).

Sandy Fenton was appointed to a new post in the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1959, as Assistant Keeper tasked with collection, documentation, field-recording, documentary research and display towards the creation of a national open-air museum for Scotland. This was a concept that had been aired inconclusively for a generation or two but had received some definition when government scrutinised Libraries, Museums and Art Galleries in 1951 and recommended the ‘folk museum’ type for Scotland, drawing on wider Scandinavian and European exemplars. The new Assistant Keeper’s domain was to ‘expand the Museum’s activities, particularly in recording and illustrating passing ways of country life and agriculture’, as summarised by the then Keeper, R B K Stevenson, in the Museum’s *Annual Report* (1960) and as embodied in a new National Museum echelon, the Country Life Section.

Research, collection and display formed the *modus operandi* with themed annual exhibitions in the former ‘Museum Gallery’ at 18 Shandwick

Place, beginning in 1960 and following a number of broadly based topics such as ‘Seed Time and Harvest’, ‘Fishing, Fowling and Hunting’ and ‘Peat Cutting and Land Improvement’, and moving to regional foci such as ‘Caithness and the Northern Isles’ and ‘Islands of the North and West’. These exhibitions were seen by Dick Lemon, Secretary of the Royal Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland, and led to a request from the Society’s Directors for similar agricultural history exhibits at the Royal Highland Show at Ingliston. Beginning under canvas in 1965, these displays and topics were unconventional in 20th-century museology but original and imaginative, constructed on objects simply explained and placed in the context of related objects or of a working background, be it landscape or dwelling-house interior. Subjects were ploughs and ploughing, the lives of farm workers, fishing and fowling, rope-making and rope-winders, smithying, joinery, cart-wrighting and wheel-wrighting, basket-making and overland transport, milking and dairying, peat-cutting and many other topics, with the displays ‘speaking’ to an informed Highland Show audience who were the rural communities of Scotland with a deeply imbued knowledge of working the land by hand and with horse-power. Older visitors would scrutinise every detail and match it for accuracy against their own knowledge, and Sandy’s natural and easy way with the public would release an avalanche of further information and additions to the collections. It is worth putting on record that the annual bill to the National Museum, in the early 1970s, for mounting these four-day exhibitions, attracting an average of 5,000–6,000 visitors per day, was in the region of £200, excluding wages and salaries. At this rate, any cost-conscious management could see them as sustainable and a winning formula.

The annual summer exhibitions were highly acclaimed and served to ‘grow’ the collections. Under Sandy’s advocacy and management, the exhibitions prompted planning for a permanent building which was part-funded

through the Scottish Country Life Museums Trust, which he created in 1969. The Scottish Agricultural Museum was completed in 1976 and opened to the public in 1977 with 'Muck: an exhibition on manure for the fields and sanitation in the home', a topic brooking neither fear nor favour and rationalised with 'the theme for this year acknowledges the fundamental importance of a subject rarely or never treated in museums'. An intense but fruitful process of collection and display led ultimately, under Gavin Sprott's direction, to the development of a permanent agricultural and open-air museum for Scotland, 'The Museum of Scottish Country Life', opened at Wester Kittochside, East Kilbride, in 2001.

Sandy began his national museum career with some recently acquired 'rural bygones', the former Museum of Antiquities' 'MP' classification of 'Tools, Implements and Miscellaneous' and the legacy of Sir Arthur Mitchell's 19th-century collecting of the 'neo-archaic'.⁴ He established separate collections for Scottish Country Life within a new and expanded taxonomic framework to make sense of a seemingly amorphous mass of items and proceeded to build a national collection and the material culture for an agricultural history of Scotland. A broad approach to the country as a whole was complemented by a focus on the material culture of different regions and intensive fieldwork, particularly in the south-west, the north-east and the Northern Isles. His 700-page volume, *The Northern Isles: Orkney and Shetland* (1978), is a monument to this methodology. Sandy began the Scottish Ethnological Archive as collateral research tool for the collections, founded on his reading through and abstracting from the Old and New Statistical Accounts and the County Agricultural Reports and seeking out and copying old photographs. These were supplemented by culling information from a range of local newspapers and recording information and memories from contacts at the Highland Show. One or two books were regarded as 'set texts' for

the Country Life Section, for example, Arthur Mitchell's Rhind Lectures of 1876 and 1878, 'The Past in the Present', William Alexander's *Notes and Sketches illustrative of Northern Rural Life in the Eighteenth Century* (1877) and John Firth's *Reminiscences of an Orkney Parish* (1920), texts which offered comparatively detailed insights into pre-improvement Scotland and whose authors were masters of description.

This was history not otherwise available and was compiled by Sandy, in the first instance, from the fundamental evidence of objects and the collections. It was distributed annually at the Royal Highland Show as exhibition leaflets in the form of a simple folded sheet of foolscap. These were topics nowhere else in print and exemplars of material culture or 'ethnological' studies. They were priced at two or three pence, only to lessen the chance of them being discarded to become litter in the Ingliston Showground, but over the early years of the 'Agricultural Museum' they amounted to thousands of words of empirical research and accumulated wisdom which still deserve a place on the shelves of Scottish history. This new historiography was more durably placed in Scottish historical studies with the publication of Sandy's *Scottish Country Life* in 1976. Perhaps the best-known of Sandy's publications, it combines scholarship with readability and has remained in print since then. The overarching theme was the transition in Scottish farming over the last 250 years, from a traditional and mainly subsistence economy to a highly mechanised one, with the detailed description of the traditional or 'pre-improvement' way of life and work and its survival being its particular strength. The book also marked the beginning of a fruitful collaboration between scholar and publisher. John Tuckwell of John Donald Publishers, later Tuckwell Press, was then challenging a prevalent attitude that Scottish publishing could not be sustained from the fruits of Scottish scholarship at the higher levels. Sandy set out the parameters of his field within a credo born of innate and confident wisdom:

A knowledge of Scottish country life amounting to accurate historical insight derives in the end not only from studying the broad patterns and trends that come through official statistics, not only from recording the lives and actions of men like Lord Kames or Sir John Sinclair, not only from plotting on a map the diffusion of James Small's plough or Andrew Meikle's threshing mill, but also from learning about the everyday activities in byre and barn, home and workshop, about small-scale equipment and its techniques of use, and about the unspectacular, indigenous changes that took place in these over a period of time in response to local conditions.⁵

Sandy's copious and energetic published output offers abundant lessons for this process of learning and interpretation. His 'accurate historical insight' is proffered to challenge what might be arbitrary and ultimately inaccurate generalisations about material culture. Once engaged with the National Museum collections, Sandy set out his stall in a paper 'Early and Traditional Cultivating Implements in Scotland' in the *Proceedings*.⁶ He described to me how an earlier paper, in a different learned journal, had prompted him to return to first principles in this subject for a detailed regional study of plough-types, the association between plough-types and field-shapes, and the influence of other cultivating implements on field-shapes to establish a fund of knowledge for interpretation and synthesis, none of which, arguably, was then to hand. He began with Iron Age evidence and the identification of characteristic stones as 'bar shares' for wooden-beam ard ploughs. With the inspiration of first-hand knowledge, he drew a parallel with 'iron sock bars patented by the plough-making firm of Sellars of Huntly in the early 1900s for horse-drawn ploughs, now widely used on tractor ploughs. These are ribbed or notched for a better grip on the frame in which they lie, just as the stone bars are flaked or pecked. In use the tips wear to one side and have then to be turned over so that the sharpest part of the tip is always in closest contact with the land'.⁷

Sandy's precept for the handling of such material culture was to set it in its widest possible context and to engage with scholars worldwide. The pursuit of cultivating implements was followed to an international conference in Belfast whose papers were richly and efficiently edited by Sandy, with Dr Alan Gailey of the Ulster Folk and Transport Museum, in the volume *The Spade in Northern and Atlantic Europe* (1971). Similar volumes on fundamental topics followed, such as *Land Transport in Europe*, co-edited with Jan Podolák and Holger Rasmussen (1973). Recognition of his European linguistic and scholarly reach brought election to membership of the Royal Gustav Adolph Academy, Sweden (1978), the Royal Danish Academy of Sciences and Letters (1978) and the Hungarian Ethnographical Society (1983).

Sandy's study in the company of European and North American scholars of cultures, technologies, beliefs and languages was based on methodologies adapted from archaeology and anthropology but, more significantly perhaps, drew on an intellectual tradition well-rooted in Scotland and customarily disavowed by the 20th-century academic world; this was the study of 'popular antiquities' and forms of antiquarianism located in the research activities and collecting for museums. This in turn was influenced by emerging 'folklife' studies and particularly by the study of a traditional culture of subsistence and self-reliance in Scandinavia. Material culture was scrutinised between everyday practical and symbolic use and more widely assimilated to include buildings and landscape, language and the written word. Demonstrating the 'competence' of material culture studies, he also founded the Scottish Vernacular Buildings Working Group in 1972. 'Ethnology' became a standard term for the study of folk life, representing not so much a discipline as a methodology that had evolved as an academic subject in Scandinavia and Europe. One of the Swedish Nordiska Museet's duties was to provide academic instruction in the University of Stockholm, and Chairs for

comparative folk life research or 'ethnology' were established here and at the Universities of Lund and Uppsala. Sandy's scholarly mission was to harness the dynamic of European Ethnology to Scottish needs and Scottish material culture. It was a matter of pleasure that Professor Gordon Donaldson asked him to introduce Scottish Ethnology into the Edinburgh University Scottish Historical Studies syllabus in 1975. The diversity of subject-matter in Scottish rural life and its dimensionality require a holistic approach and cross-disciplinarity to embrace the full range (including objects) of standard sources in archaeology and museum collections, written and oral evidence, dictionaries and dialect studies, and an emphasis on systematic fieldwork, all of which were so readily put under tribute by Sandy and later summarised appropriately in his 'Essays in Scottish Ethnology' (1985–6).⁸

A further ethnological domain that Sandy has so richly laid before us is food and diet. He described how his visit to Slovakia in 1969 inspired a recognition that food was an extremely important 'handmaiden to ethnological research' and over the subsequent 20 years he co-authored and co-edited five substantial volumes of conference proceedings of European ethnological food research groups. His own food research formed his subject for the 1996–7 Rhind Lectures on 'The Food of the Scots' and, greatly expanded, has now been published as part of the 'Compendium of Scottish Ethnology' (2007).

The Scottish Country Life Museums Trust was early evidence of Sandy's canny ability to raise funds, in this case as a conduit towards the Scottish Agricultural Museum. A newsletter kept an interested public informed about targets and developments and included nuggets of research. With an eye to an agricultural museum 'journal', the newsletter was expanded in 1980 into a multi-page format, *Country Life News*, with articles and reviews. This became the launch-pad for a new journal, *Review of Scottish Culture*, the first number of which was published in 1984. It was designed to fill a

perceived gap in the study of material culture, charting the inward and outward movements of people and cultural influences, recording diverse aspects of a national and regional culture and presenting aspects of Scottish culture in terms of international comparison. The title was suggested by Professor Hermann Pálsson, offering the acronym *ROSC*, a particularly apt Gaelic term for the action of seeing, in other words: vision, perception, understanding, and to what is seen, that is, the written word in prose. *ROSC* Number 24 has recently been published

Sandy succeeded Dr Robert Stevenson as Keeper and Director of the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in 1978 and was co-opted to the Council of the Society as Museum Director *ex officio* and became a Vice-President. He took on the mantle of securing a future for the national collections since plans for a new 'national museum' and expanded premises for the national collections had been shelved by government in 1975. Sandy was an energetic sponsor of the Alwyn Williams Committee, appointed by the Secretary of State for Scotland in 1979 to report on the future of the national museums and galleries. The Committee's report, 'A Heritage for Scotland', was issued in 1981 and the National Heritage (Scotland) Act followed in 1985, transferring responsibility for the Royal Scottish Museum and National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland to a new Board of Trustees. Sandy became Research Director of a new national museum combination and served a further term as Vice-President of the Society from 1985 to 1988. He was elected FRSE in 1985 and appointed CBE in 1986. He was awarded a DLitt for his published work by Edinburgh University and Hon DLitt by Aberdeen in 1989. From 1 October 1990 he took up appointment as the first holder of the Chair of Scottish Ethnology and Director of the School of Scottish Studies in Edinburgh University. Although Sandy had spent most of his working life in the National Museums, this was still, perhaps, his finest hour and the high point of a scholarly trajectory.



Sandy created the European Ethnological Research Centre in 1989 as an independent body but still accommodated in, and supported by, the National Museums. The EERC is mainly concerned with research per se and the publication of research. As Sandy himself presented it: 'its work aims at throwing light on the history of everyday folk'. A vigorous publication programme was initiated and channelled into five different streams, the 'Flashbacks' based on oral history (and drawing on a comparable Norwegian project), 'Sources in Local History' drawing on surviving manuscript sources such as diaries and account books, 'Occasional Books and Papers' looking to international collaboration, and *Review of Scottish Culture* itself and the 'Compendium'. Preparation of the 'Compendium of Scottish Ethnology' became one of Sandy's and the EERC's major projects. It is planned as a 14-volume series on *Scottish Life and Society* built on multi-authored volumes and was launched in 2000.⁹

It is a measure of Sandy's energy after retirement from the Museums that he never really retired and maintained his own lifelong study of the small-scale economies of farms of small and moderate size. In a run of diaries of a Buchan farm between 1923 and 1967, for example, he teased out the detail of everyday life and the round of the seasons. This was published in *Wirlds an' Wark 'e Seasons Roon* (1987), documenting the work of ploughing, seed-time, harvest and grain-processing, livestock husbandry, feeding and produce, and, as ever, with words linked to people, processes and everyday life to demonstrate the importance of language in the study of material culture and in deftly crafted vignettes of conversation. A further book, *A Swedish Field Trip to the Outer Hebrides, 1934*, came from the press shortly before he died.

Highly articulate in English, Sandy was equally articulate in his own Buchan tongue. *Craiters, or twenty Buchan tales* (1995) and *Buchan Words and Ways* (2005) are further

legacies. The richness of his own family inheritance was no doubt put in the wider perspective by his facility with languages and must have contributed silently to other writing enterprises, such as his translation from Danish of Steen Steensen Blicher's *Diary of a Parish Clerk* (1976) and translation into Scots of the poetry of Sándor Weöres of Hungary in *If all the World were a Blackbird* (1985). His friendships went far and wide. As with his European friends, his engagement with friends at home often had a serious intent. He enjoyed for years the fellowship of the 1970 Club, a sodality that emerged from the Council of Europe's consultations on the future of countryside and environment and saw the establishment of the Countryside Commission for Scotland. Sandy went on a series of pleasant and purposeful cruises with the 1970 Club and 'read the landscape' for his fellow members, shaping attitudes towards and defining what is now so topical, that is, the cultural landscape.

Sandy's ability to raise funds to further the cause of Scottish ethnology has been mentioned in terms of the Scottish Country Life Museums Trust and the Scottish Agricultural Museum. The Scotland Inheritance Fund was registered as a charitable body in 1985 and dedicated to the cultural and historical heritage of Scotland. It formed an umbrella for a number of trusts and funds from gifts and legacies and has been used for the support of specific purposes, such as research and publication (in line with the strategy of the EERC) and also for projects such as the restoration of the Bucket Mill at Finzean, Kincardineshire, and to support the wider purposes of the European Ethnological Research Centre. An endowment by Mrs Ruth Ratcliff, and inspired by Sandy's work, has created the high-profile and generous Michaelis-Jena Ratcliff Prize in Ethnology for important contributions to the study of folklore or folklife. The first award was made in March 1991.

Sandy was a scholar and teacher of a highly original stamp, and as linguist, author, poet and athlete has left his mark on all who knew him. In spite of the intellectual heights and reach of his endeavours, we were all encouraged to share in them since the formula – and the best working definition of 'ethnology' – was a compelling one and Sandy's own characterisation of what drove him: 'an interest in folk and their ways of doing and speaking'.

HUGH CHEAPE

- ¹ This has recently been celebrated in Margaret A Mackay et al, *Bibliography, 1955–2009. Alexander Fenton, Professor Emeritus of Scottish Ethnology*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh, European Ethnological Research Centre 2009. I have been helped in my recall of Sandy's career by Gavin Sprott, former colleague in the National Museums, and have included in this text comments made by him.
- ² Alexander Fenton, 'To David Murison', in *ROSC. Review of Scottish Culture* Number 5 (1989), xi.
- ³ His detailed studies of inter alia flails, rope-making equipment and kilns are exemplars of the genre, eg, Alexander Fenton, 'Lexicography and Historical Interpretation', in Barrow, G W S (ed) *The Scottish Tradition*. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press 1974, 243–57.
- ⁴ Arthur Mitchell, *The Past in the Present: What is Civilisation?* Edinburgh 1880, 107.
- ⁵ Alexander Fenton, *Scottish Country Life*. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd 1976, v.
- ⁶ 'Early and Traditional Cultivating Implements in Scotland', in *Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland* 96 (1962–3), 264–317.
- ⁷ *Ibid*, 267.
- ⁸ Alexander Fenton, *The Shape of the Past. Essays in Scottish Ethnology*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: John Donald Publishers Ltd (1985–6).
- ⁹ The launch of Volume 1 of the 'Compendium of Scottish Ethnology' at the Edinburgh Book Festival on 10 August 2013 has now completed the series. See Alexander Fenton and Margaret A Mackay, eds, *Scottish Life and Society: An Introduction to Scottish Ethnology*. Edinburgh: John Donald and the European Ethnological Research Centre 2013, xvi + 592 pages.