professor michael nicholson

Michael Beverley Nicholson,
economist and scholar of
international relations:
born Beverley, Yorkshire
21 December 1933;
Professor of International Relations,
University of Kent at Canterbury
1990-93,
Professor of International Relations,
Sussex University 1993-2001;
married 1958 Christine Love
(died 1998);
one son, two daughters;
died Brighton, East Sussex
4 October 2001.

When, last month, the European Consortium of Political Research awarded to Michael Nicholson the first Lewis Fry Richardson Award for Lifetime Achievement, he was already very ill; he died on 4 October. The date of the award, 11 September 2001, would have appeared to Nicholson to be oddly significant, as he had worked all his life on conflicts and wars, and on the possibility of peaceful resolution of disputes. From his first book, *Conflict Analysis* (1971), through his classic monograph, *Rationality and the Analysis of International Conflict* (1992), to his more recent writings on international relations, he made wonderful use of his skills and expertise as a social scientist to explore how conflicts can be avoided or defused, without resorting to violence and bloodshed.

The events of 11 September would have depressed him (as would the developments that followed), but, despite his great belief in the power of rationality, he would not have been altogether surprised by them. He had written about the limited use of reasoning and communication both in practical lives and in the theory of rational choice. Indeed, in a joint paper published earlier this year, Nicholson discussed the limitations from which the widely used instrumental view of rationality suffered.

Choosing the format of a self- deprecating illustration (a style of reasoning that used to be more common in England than it is now), he argued, '*Given a belief that I shall go to Paradise if I kill the enemies of England, the act of killing can be construed as rational when otherwise it would not be.*' He went on to discuss other ways of seeing rationality, and how their relevance can be made more widely appreciated and pursued, and how rationality can be used to promote peace rather than war. Nicholson's ideas were becoming even more relevant to the contemporary world just as he was physically leaving us.

He was born in Yorkshire in 1933, son of Ernest and Irene Nicholson, and educated at Beverley Grammar School. I first met him in the autumn of 1953 shortly after we had both arrived as undergraduates at Trinity College, Cambridge, to do Economics. I came to know him very well only in my second year. By then, not only had he established himself as a brilliant student, but also his long-run interests (including rationality and conflict resolution) were already beginning to take shape. He was particularly interested in rational decision-making under uncertainty – a subject in which he would, later on, do his PhD thesis and publish his earliest papers.

Apart from his warmth and kindness as a friend, I was struck by his combination of extraordinary intelligence, healthy scepticism of received doctrines, and humane commitment to use his professional training to make a positive difference to the world. I got a clearer idea of the origin of that commitment when I went with him to his home, in Beverley, near York, and met his parents. It was wonderful to hear the unalloyed voice of Christian humanism

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(aside from discovering how delicious Yorkshire pudding can be).

Nicholson absorbed and developed that humanism, shorn of religion (he remained an atheist throughout his adult life). Indeed, over the years he came to contrast reliance on reason with dependence on religious faith. '*Once something is confined to being an Act of God*,' he wrote five years ago, '*then there is nothing much one can do about it except pray*.'

'*As I am sceptical of the power of prayer,*' he went on to say, '*I put my hopes for some improvement in the human condition on the rigorous development of social scientific theory, and its testing by statistical methods, as a means of illuminating and hence perhaps influencing the future of society.*'

That exacting programme summarises Nicholson's basic commitment rather better than any other description I can provide.

After Cambridge, he went to teach at Manchester University and then abroad – to Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Carnegie Institute of Technology (now called Carnegie-Mellon University) and the University of Stockholm. On his return to England, he took up a post at Lancaster University, and then one at University College London, before becoming in 1970 the Director of the Richardson Institute for Conflict and Peace Research, based in London and later in Lancaster. This was an excellent fit, given his strong commitment to this area of research. Aside from developing a fine institution, Nicholson also published several of his major works during his 12 years at the institute.

Then he went abroad again, to the University of Texas at Austin, to Carleton University in Canada, to the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS) in Holland, and to Yale University. In 1990, he became Professor of International Relations at the University of Kent at Canterbury, and finally joined Sussex University as its Professor of International Relations in 1993, and remained attached to that university until his death.

Nicholson married Christine Love in 1958. Christine, who too was a brilliant student, did English and Philosophy at Bristol University, and then did a master's degree on Kantian philosophy at Cambridge. She became involved in adult education and had a long academic career at the City Lit in London, until 1996; she died two years later. Although not particularly homebound, she was fascinated by the idea, against the current, of being a housewife, perhaps a '*philosopher-housewife*'. In the author description that went with one of her papers in Philosophy, she insisted on being described, rather spectacularly, simply as '*a Housewife*'. (Michael wrote in his obituarial note on her that, '*though 'housewife' was never much of a theme for Christine in practice*', she '*bought many books on the subject*'.) Christine and Michael had a wonderfully close and intellectually interactive married life.

Having known Michael Nicholson closely from his undergraduate days, I am struck by the extent to which he managed to combine his intellectual discipline with his moral and political commitments. His was a life dedicated to humanity, but also lit by intelligence and guided by analysis. He remained actively engaged in his work till his death. In a joint paper with Karin Fierke (with whom he developed a personal relationship after Christine's death), published this year, he outlined an ambitious programme of integrating the formal demands of rationality with '*the larger argument about rules, language and context*'.

A poet from Nicholson's college, John Dryden, has talked about the man who '*trudged along unknowing what he sought, / And whistled as he went, for want of thought*'. Michael Nicholson's life is a lasting invitation to stop whistling and start thinking. eps

Amartya Sen

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