

Book review

Murdo MacDonald, (2020) *Patrick Geddes's intellectual origins*. Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh. £19.99. ISBN 978-1-4744-5408-7

One of the aspects of the 'collateral damage' to our society as a side-effect of the recent pandemic has been that as new books of quality appear, they can quietly slip out of sight almost before they have been noticed. It would be a pity if that practice was to become widespread, and certainly this publication deserves to be noticed. MacDonald's book is a thoughtful study of a very distinctive Scottish character, bringing together many fascinating aspects of the life and personality of Patrick Geddes in a readable and absorbing story. Crucially, although Geddes was a Scot, and much of his reputation is based at home, his interests and his achievements were firmly international in stature and in several countries abroad his work is even more celebrated than it is in Scotland. A student of Huxley, and who also as a young man met Charles Darwin, he went on to influence many students of his own, including, perhaps surprisingly, the polar explorers William Speirs Bruce and Fridtjof Nansen, both of whom led remarkable lives in their own ways.

Geddes, almost uniquely, was an intellectual pioneer in the separate emerging disciplines of ecology, sociology, and town planning, but the spread of his expertise went far beyond even that broad spectrum. Over the duration of his life, he made significant contributions in architecture, botany, literary studies, and an assortment of 'side interests' each of which would normally be regarded as notable achievements in themselves, by any normal standards. (He edited an influential magazine featuring an eclectic mix of art, science, and literature, and is also remembered for turning down an early book proposal of the Irish poet W. B. Yeats.) Patrick Geddes however, almost effortlessly demonstrated his skills as a renaissance man, and paradoxically was a generalist as well as a specialist, which is no small achievement. His love of broad, expansive, inter-disciplinary thinking brought the new ideas of human ecology and social studies to the fore, in ways that are only now beginning to be fully recognised. He lectured in zoology at the University of Edinburgh, then became Professor of Botany at the University of Dundee, and later still was appointed the Professor of Sociology at the University of Bombay, but he was no ivory tower academic. To all his activities he brought a restless intellectual rigor, as well as strong measures of practicality and social worth.

Central to the multi-faceted perspectives of Geddes was his need to apply his searching intellect to generate ideas that would make a positive difference in the real world. Whether it was facilitating social improvements in urban housing, the incorporation of the arts and crafts trades into the design processes of architecture, or his interests in topics relating to the Celtic revival as a focus for national identity, his ideas were always challenging, and were usually several decades ahead of contemporary thinking. He was on familiar terms with many of the great names of the day, in the fields of science, art, or politics, and his intellectual reach was international, but his life-long attention to interdisciplinarity, particularly in new and as yet poorly understood subject areas, did not bring him the rewards that he should have inherited. Like many radical thinkers who champion inter-disciplinarity, his interests took him outwith the constraints of narrow disciplinary limitations and his constant challenging of convention

did not always endear him to mainstream the academic authorities. His working mantra of ‘*sympathy, synthesis, synergy*’ sought to bridge the gaps between science and the arts, between the practical and the aesthetic, and unity of the appreciating of culture and environmental values for their own sake as well as to their joint contribution to civic society. His work in urban planning sat alongside his enthusiasm for gardening as more than just simple landscaping, and MacDonald traces the ways in which Geddes brought together many of the strands which we would now include within the purview of human geography. His great attention to detail brought together the microcosm of ecology with the global perspectives that transcended his immediate environment, and he is often credited as the originator of the directive to ‘*Think global, act local*’ which has become such a catch-phrase of the contemporary green movement. In some of these new subject areas, Geddes literally invented the vocabulary to communicate his own innovative ideas. This book shows an awareness of the role that Geddes had in championing cultural sustainability as well as environmental sustainability, and combining both in his descriptions of ‘place’ as more than just a convenient political boundary. His concept of ‘the valley section’ became a valued tool for looking at the complex inter-relationships between geomorphology, biogeography, and the human interactions with landscape, and is memorably depicted in his creation of a stunning stained-glass window. This window was designed to be displayed on the stairs of the Outlook Tower (now the Camera Obscura at the top of the Royal Mile) which Geddes utilised as an immersive museum to unify and interpret his ideas on the relationships between humans and our environment. From the tower it was possible to encourage visitors to reflect on how the economic geography and the natural ecology of the landscape could be sensitively combined to model regional planning.

In his efforts to bring together a wider vision of town planning, which considered sociology, ecology, economics, arts and crafts, Geddes pioneered a new way to look not only at the physical landscape, but also how to think about regions in terms of their natural features and cultural inheritance rather than through a parochial or nationalistic lens. There is a chapter in the book devoted to the impact of Geddes, and the work of some of his students, in visualising the botanical mapping of Scotland through the novel ecological idea of recording plant communities in relation to their natural environment (published in the *Scottish Geographical Magazine*) and also his influence on the excitingly fresh new style of cartography which was then being produced by the Bartholomew company. (I was delighted to note that my old tutor, (Dr) Sandy Mather at Aberdeen University, “...characterised the period as ‘*the golden age of vegetational mapping in Scotland*’ and attributed it to ‘*a remarkable coincidence of several factors*’, namely the inspirational genius of Geddes and his European connections...’). Perhaps only in hindsight can we effectively detect the quality of the influence that Geddes had in re-shaping the evolution of geography as a discipline. He was conversant with several of the contemporary thinkers in the teaching of geography, and there is evidence in the correspondence of Geddes that the two-way communication of ideas was mutually beneficial.

France and India featured prominently in his work, and both were rewarded by his novel professional interests and attention to details. These were not fly-by-night interests, and

during his own lifetime Geddes was recognised as an ardent Francophile who collaborated with and supported colleagues to extend and publicly celebrate the linkages between Scotland and France in numerous ways. He formed a strong symbiotic relationship with colleagues at the University of Montpellier in the Scots College which he helped establish, as well as taking the lead in coordinating a strong Scottish presentation at the 1900 Paris International Exhibition. The period of his life, when at 60 years of age he travelled to live and work in India, is highlighted in this book, and is rightly recommended as a topic worthy of further scholarship. True to form, Geddes in India collaborated and became friends with Rabindranath Tagore, the first non-European to win the Nobel Prize, who recognised Geddes as both a scientist and as an artist with a shared vision of multidisciplinary approaches to problems. Patrick Geddes was a moralist but also an anarchist, and that made some of the more established individuals and institutions to treat him overly cautiously. I am sure that he would have deplored the narrow utilitarian views of ‘proper knowledge’ now championed by the new right. At the same time he vigorously defended the acquisition of both vocational skills and academic theory.

What is particularly useful in this book is the clarity with which it knits together some of the very disparate aspects of the life and work of Patrick Geddes. Murdo MacDonald’s narrative on the sources of inspiration, motivation, and collegiality that drove Geddes to explore the boundaries of his world in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is exemplary. It treats the relatively esoteric aspects of Geddes’s obsessions with a clarity of analysis and empathy that only brings benefits, and results in our greater appreciation of Geddes the man. The book is well-written and scholarly, without being abstractly theoretical. The influence of Geddes radiated in multiple disciplinary directions, and he motivated his co-workers and students alike to push back the boundaries of contemporary thinking in ways that we are still discovering. The author explains the logic of why Geddes was deeply interested in geography, gardening, and dramatical historical re-enactments through storytelling, (linking human culture to place; the past to the present, with a vision of the future) and weaves the multitudinous strands of his life together with seemingly effortless tact. There are well-referenced endnotes that contribute supplementary details which will surely repay future study for enthusiasts. I thought that I knew about the life of Patrick Geddes, but I discovered in this book some lovely anecdotes that illustrate his personality quirks and his almost casual genius. I have only ever found a few biographies that actually leave the reader with a wish to befriend the subject, but this book is different. This book should be read as much for its insights into turn-of-the-century Scottish society as for the biography, and I am left wishing that I had been acquainted with Patrick Geddes.

Frank Rennie, 11 September 2022

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