

Memories of Eric Wade

by

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Vice-Chancellor, The Open University, 1990-2001

I regret that I cannot be with you for this commemorative event, but I live in faraway Vancouver and have already made two trips to the UK this year to take part in the celebrations of the OU's 50th anniversary.

I am honoured to share some memories of Eric. He was an important figure - as well as a friend - during my decade as the OU's Vice-Chancellor from 1990 to 2001.

Although my relationship with Eric centred on our respective roles as President of the OUAUT and Vice-Chancellor, it extended beyond those functions. One bond was that our paternal grandfathers were both coal miners, his here in the north-east, mine in South Wales. Another was my admiration for his knowledge of German history, discussions of which often leavened our dealings about OU business.

In our many discussions wearing our official hats I particularly appreciated his ability to negotiate settlements for individual AUT members who were, for various reasons, in contention with the University. My earlier experience in Canada had taught me that most academic union leaders find this aspect of their work difficult, making for endless to-ing and fro-ing – and mounting frustration - before reaching agreements acceptable to both parties.

Eric, however, was very good at these bi-directional negotiations. We would have robust discussions about what might constitute a fair deal – usually in the morning because at lunchtime he did a lot of OUAUT business in the cellar bar under Walton Hall! Once we had agreed, however, I don't ever recall Eric being unable to persuade the individual concerned of the reasonableness of the settlement.

I'd come to the OU from Laurentian University in Sudbury, Ontario. Sudbury is Canada's premier mining community and its nickel mines were well-known at that time for hardball industrial relations and frequent strikes. This spirit of combative industrial relations had infected Laurentian University, where I had experienced several strikes by academics and staff.

By contrast, relations between the OU and the OUAUT were much more harmonious. I only remember one strike at Walton Hall. It was a cold day and I wound down the car window for a friendly and jocular chat with Eric as I crossed the picket line. I was particularly pleased to see that the OUAUT group had a brazier going. I guessed that this was only partly to keep them warm, but also there as an archetypal symbol of union picket lines, doubtless familiar to both our grandfathers from disputes in the coal mines in earlier times.

Others, I am sure, will recall the many ways in which Eric advanced the working conditions at the OU, most particularly by giving our tutors greater security as associate lecturers. I simply want to recall my warm memories of a most pleasant and dedicated man, who made a vital contribution to the OU at a time of rapid expansion.

I revere his memory.

Sir John Daniel

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