



There is no doubt that F.R. Leavis (1895-1978) was the most influential English critic of his time. A fellow at Downing College, Cambridge from 1936 to 1962, he oversaw the renowned and influential quarterly *Scrutiny* throughout its 21 years of publication. His forthright essays and lectures would make him the *enfant terrible* of both the academic establishment and the mass-culture media in the postwar era. Never a typical academic, he became a public figure, taking literature into top-line news in the Sunday press. Launching the “two cultures” debate over the disparate roles of scientific and literary language, he incited sensation by his ad hominem approach to C.P. Snow, whom he regarded as a portent for the vacuity of British Establishment culture.

Like I.A. Richards and William Empson, Leavis employed close analytical reading as his main critical tool. He perceived language as a living inventory of human values, requiring the ongoing process of critical refinement and reorientation. Did he go too far in criticism? He appeared to legislate taste and prescribe merit tables, creating an elitist canon of valuable works. His “great tradition” – from Jane Austen through Charles Dickens, George Eliot, Henry James and Joseph Conrad to D.H. Lawrence – excluded novelists that

Literary champion of moral revival finally gets his homecoming

Christopher Terry welcomes a re-examination of the work of F.R. Leavis and the legacy of his controversial style of criticism

people enjoyed reading. Similarly, he toppled conventional views of poetry by emphasising a vital “tradition” from John Donne to T.S. Eliot, while demoting Milton and Tennyson. Unconventionally, he championed and partly realised a formative role for literature at the heart of universities.

He saw his influence, along with that of his wife, Q.D. Leavis, spread throughout the English-speaking world. Particularly in Britain, his convictions and close evaluative scrutiny were carried into schools and universities by Leavisite teachers who would change the way

literature was taught. Like Matthew Arnold, the 19th-century English critic, he saw great literature as *moral* exploration at religious depth. But, although like Arnold he was a Greek scholar and linguist, Leavis’ rugged tone lacked Arnold’s gentlemanly poise.

Emerging damaged from the First World War, with its high-flown rhetoric, cynical leadership and exploitation of the masses as cannon fodder, Leavis saw that his generation had been lied to, as Ezra Pound, Rudyard Kipling, Lawrence and Erich Maria Remarque attested. Always the enemy of cant in liter-

ature and criticism, he fought to salvage values for life through literature. “What, ultimately, do men live for? What, ultimately, by?” was his benchmark theme for great literature. His energetic stance on evaluation – asking “This is so, isn’t it?” and expecting the answer, “Yes but...” – carried the discussion of values into

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the public arena, as Jürgen Habermas did in Germany with *Diskursethik*. With immense energy, he toiled all his life for something like moral revival. Not always polite in print – sincere, sometimes angry – he was a forceful innovator and guide.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, his movement fell into crisis as new paradigms and priorities in criticism, and new writers, flourished. It appears that he felt betrayed, and in 1962 he broke bitterly with Downing College and his own team. His guru-like status was embattled. The Establishment felt he had gone too far in his scorn, and his influence waned as identity literature, socio-political issues, structuralism and postmodernism impregnated criticism and teaching. Although his thought went on developing, his judgmental approach was disdained by newer generations. A faded memory to much of the reading public, by the 1980s few students had heard of him.

But things are changing. Ian MacKillop’s 1995 biography, *F.R. Leavis: A Life in Criticism*, made a cogent argument for his greatness. Faber last year reissued three of Leavis’ key works, and this year Routledge published Richard Storer’s *F.R. Leavis*, which examines his ongoing critical significance to literary studies. Later this month, a gathering at Downing College will offer an opportunity to confront the past, to examine a rebellious figure who became a cult, and arguably a tragic victim of his prominence. After nearly half a century, it is a homecoming.

The conference, “Revaluing Leavis”, will refer to the Leavis archive at Downing College and will pose key questions about his legacy. What was Leavis’ best work and why? Was his a revolutionary inversion of values? Did he dictate taste? Can we unite the “difficult” persona, the public figure, the great critic and the charismatic teacher? Was Leavis a victim of the Establishment? What difference did he really make – did he damage or vitalise people, literature or art? Answers will be sought.

Christopher Terry read English at Downing College from 1961 to 1964. His memoir, *The Ogre of Downing Castle Revisited*, was published in 2008 by Libertas Verlag, Germany. ● The conference “Revaluing Leavis” will be held on 28-29 September at Downing College, Cambridge. Contact Dr Chris Joyce, c.joyce@surrey.ac.uk, for details.