Book Review

Ideas at Work: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey MacKechnie
edited by Frank Litton, Tony Farmar and Frank Scott-Lennon (2006) Dublin: A. & A. Farmar

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Many outside of Ireland would not have heard of Geoffrey MacKechnie. And, as management writing becomes more global and reading lists populated with articles and advice from elsewhere, perhaps fewer students and managers in Ireland may come into contact with him in the future. So, in an age of globalisation do 'local lights' like MacKechnie still matter?

Over the past decade globalisation has greatly affected the world of management scholarship. It is becoming almost universally accepted that schools of business everywhere should strive to be accredited by global bodies imparting best practice; that management academics must be subjected to 'objective' standards that rate publication in the best American journals and conferences more highly than involvement in local or regional fora and communities; and that by their faculty increasing performance in this manner management schools should seek to move up the 'global rankings'.

This globalisation has its advantages. But at the same time it has led to a greater 'sameness' with regard to what business schools offer and the approach they take to teaching and research. It is what

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we might call a 'phase 1' globalisation, of the kind that Theodore Levitt famously described, where local difference is put on the back-burner in the name of cost-reduction, greater efficiency, accountability and certainty.

However, markets and business strategy being as they are has led to a second phase of globalisation. What we might call a post-modern phase where, paradoxically, local embedded difference, and how this might manifest itself in differentiating a product or service, becomes a key component in competing globally.

If management scholarship is linked to the practice of management, then a time where serious thought is given to what particular regional or national approaches to management scholarship might be, and how they might help the businesses in their community compete globally, should be approaching. This is why the Geoffrey MacKechnies of this world may matter a great deal. Their work was embedded in a world where serving and being led by the local management community was a key component of being a management academic. So, who was Geoffrey MacKechnie? What does his work suggest his particular approach to be? And what legacy might this approach provide?

Frank Litton and Frank Scott-Lennon's introductions to *Ideas at Work: Essays in Honour of Geoffrey MacKechnie* impart a great sense of the affection in which MacKechnie was held. Dr Geoffrey MacKechnie taught organisation theory for over thirty years in Trinity College Dublin, and many, if not most, of Ireland's senior managers have been influenced by his teaching, directly or indirectly. He loved scholarship and he respected management practitioners. He enjoyed abstractions and what is nicely referred to throughout the book as the academic privilege of engaging in 'long thought', especially if the results of such long thinking were then communicated in a meaningful way that helped people do things more effectively. He liked working with others to solve problems and change things that needed change, be they in the public sector or business arenas. He always had time to debate any issue with any student or practitioner. He never saw this as a burden; he thrived on it. He believed in a community. He was a gentleman. He respected Ideas and he respected Work.

These characteristics are born out in MacKechnie's writing, and a clever piece of editing places one of MacKechnie's works as the

opening chapter proper. The first thing that strikes is just how unusual his writing is in a modern global context. Here is an intelligent synthesis of complex ideas (the evolution of contingency theory) written in a way that informs an academic audience (about things they probably knew something of but had not really considered in the round) *and* in a way that is useful for students and practitioners.

To use the language of competitive advantage, this chapter nicely conveys MacKechnie's 'differences that could make a difference' in outlining, or beginning a debate about, what a particularly Irish approach to management scholarship might be.

MacKechnie's first point of difference is that he does not suffer from the separation of the academic (who writes for other academics) from the practice of management, which has emerged in recent times, in larger countries in particular. This separation has been to the detriment of management in general. It has made it easier for management academics to disappear into abstractions, and to become spectators rather than members of the management community. And it has left managers seeking good thinking with only the various forms of the 'business press', where the object is to quickly inform and sell rather than long-thinking analysis and debate, to draw upon.

Nor did MacKechnie separate things out into neat academic subdivisions; he defined his area as 'organisation theory' because he believed it to encompass all aspects of management. For him it was meaningless to view the key dimensions of management separately. I wonder what he would have made of a recent innovation in management academe where a new sub-sub discipline has been spun out of strategic management. 'Strategy as practice' takes the view that strategy is what people do rather than the plans they make or the rationality that is ascribed to decision-making, and it examines what people do. I think that MacKechnie would have never believed strategy to be removed from 'what people do' in the first place, and that he would have seen little value in further separating this out from the things that have sprung from this doing. MacKechnie was a systems thinker before it became fashionable to break things into parts and before claiming to be a superior thinker by joining them back together again.

Thirdly, MacKechnie's writing is both wise and simple. MacKechnie quickly establishes a sound and simple basis that the student or manager can then confidently build upon. One senses he is able to do this because he has devoted a great deal of time to thinking about how he could make things easier to synthesize, to connect up and to convey. His summation that management all boils down to the interplay of 'strategy, structure and culture' is one such example. From here one could design a course, develop a new training programme or begin to discuss how a firm should approach a change process. It is exceedingly well thought through, but very simple.

Associated with this is MacKechnie's dry wit. This is particularly unique in management studies, where things have become far more arid and far less witty in recent times. A nice example of the MacKechnie wit is his turn of phrase about strategy. Strategy, he said, was about finding a 'racket'. One suspects this has meant that many thousands of Irish managers have a clear and useful (and distinctive) picture of what strategy about. This is no mean feat, particularly in contrast to many MBA students today who may learn the intricacies of a dozen different schools of thought about strategy, but be stumped by trying to explain what strategy actually means to their future co-workers.

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about MacKechnie's chapter, in the current climate, is that it is 'ego-free'. MacKechnie cleverly and patiently works through and synthesizes the ideas of the leading contingency theorists and places them in evolutionary context. He then seeks to unify this thinking in ways that will be easier to understand and apply. There is no mention of his own work, no suggestion that his complex synthesizing–simplifying tables should be seen as 'MacKechnie's Grid' or some such. Not even a reference to other works that he has produced. His aim was nobler (but far less likely to ring the right bells in terms of the modern measures of academic prowess, citation indexes and the like): to think in order to help others in the community who are busy doing other things. MacKechnie's work is more than self-effacing; his humility and community-mindedness means that the self does not even come into it. It is, if you like, 'pre-Thatcherite'.

Which leads to a sixth aspect that characterises MacKechnie's work: it is critical, but with a small 'c'. In contrast to many of a new

stream of academics who like to travel under the banner of 'Critical Management Studies' and see themselves as other than conventional management scholars, MacKechnie saw *all* academic management thinking as necessarily critical. Long thought should be about a critique that either confirms and consolidates, or finds fault and improves upon, the way things are. He loved ideas too much not to be critical of sloppy or underdone thinking, but he loved practice, or work, too much not to seek to replace what he called into question with better ways of doing things. Unlike many more abstract or specialised thinkers he was also mindful of the political forces that played upon and within organisations. Consequently, he seemed aware of the need to cajole rather than reprimand. Given that it is better to bring people with you, there is little value to be gained by starting the process by shooting them down. The difference with his critical thinking is that it sought to critique in order to construct. MacKechnie saw little value in being critical or deconstructing in and of itself.

A love of connecting good theory to practice; integrating or cutting across artificial academic and functional distinctions; a wise simplicity; a dry but human wit; a humility that put a broader management community, local managers and students before the academic self; and being critical in order to be constructive: this was MacKechnie's racket as a management scholar.

This racket, which is now MacKechnie's legacy, is honoured by the remaining chapters in the book, drawn from a range of authors who worked and studied with MacKechnie.

Louis Brennan's examination of the deconstruction of conventional supply chains (in favour of outsourcing and supply partnering), and more recent evidence that suggests the reconstruction of supply chains, is clearly influenced by MacKechnie's long-thinking and interconnected view of strategy, structure and culture.

Sean Brophy's essay explores further the notion that good theory can be a great help to good managers, by examining how PCP (Personal Construct Psychology), with its focus on both the uniqueness of the way different people see the world *and* the possibility for sociality and indeed communality, may be effectively implemented.

Gemma Donnelly-Cox's long thinking finds fault with two popular theoretical approaches: transaction cost economics and population.

As an advance on these, she advocates a clearer investigation into open systems theories. One clear MacKechnieism here is the desire to simplify, categorise and table the different approaches so that their relative merits can be more easily understood, and so that the most appropriate approach, given the contingent nature of a situation, may be selected and applied.

The 'racket' of Irish publishing is the subject of Tony Farmar's contribution. Books provide unique vessels for capturing long thought. But is there a future for the book? And, more particularly, a future for the Irish book? Farmar argues forcefully that there is and outlines the reasons why (with a particular emphasis on culture), before identifying a strategy and structure for how.

Mary Keating's article critiques, and places in context, particular perceptions of leadership in Ireland, finding, among many other points of interest, that this country is particular in still lauding romantic historical figures and 'men of destiny' rather than 'men of achievement'.

William Kingston's lucid essay is a great piece on how government intervention in markets kills off local innovation and entrepreneurialism. In particular, it traces the last one hundred years of Irish economic history to show how successive misjudgements and compromises, historical quirks and ministerial perks have created a belief in the State's 'superior wisdom' that has held back markets, innovation and organic growth in Ireland.

The state sector is investigated further in Frank Litton's chapter. Litton argues that public sector modernisation is generally carried out without taking account of the broader context (particularly deficient in an age where the twentieth century's nation state is being surpassed by the market state of the twenty-first century) and looks at how the widening gap between old civil service thinking and the emerging reality might be broached.

Andrew McLaughlin's piece explores the connections between MacKechnie and a scholar whom he greatly admired: Henry Mintzberg. Not only is this a clever reflection on MacKechnie, but also an informative synthesis of Mintzberg's thinking, and thus a useful guide to some of the most inventive thinking in management over the past two decades. It also re-emphasises the often-forgotten

importance in our profession of integration and sees Ireland as uniquely placed to deliver on Mintzberg and MacKechnie's views on executive education – if the right choices are made.

'A Present Quarrel', by John Maguire, begins with recollections of MacKechnie as a truly open-minded man who 'delighted in the pure play and creative crash of ideas'. This was borne out in the programmes that MacKechnie helped create at Trinity and to which Maguire contributed. Maguire uses the occasion to then re-present an article on mining rights in order to highlight important questions that have been, somewhat prematurely in his view, sidelined in recent political debates. Its view from the left nicely counterbalances some of the early chapters from the right and illustrates the broad church that MacKechnie inspired.

J.A. Murray's contribution springs directly from discussions between the author and MacKechnie. In addition to linking many of the themes in the book, and showing how the community of scholars in and around Trinity drew inspiration from and were drawn together by MacKechnie's enthusiasm for ideas, this chapter presents a set of new, quite simple but very clever typologies for thinking though different contingent organisational forms by crossing the traditional governance modes – markets and hierarchies – with different categorisations of the newer network organisational forms.

Finally, Mary Lee Rhodes' chapter examines what we (scholars and practitioners) might learn by thinking of organisations as 'complex adaptive systems', with a particular emphasis on public sector management using Ireland's 'housing system' as an interesting illustrative case.

These contributing chapters speak volumes of the impact that Geoffrey MacKechnie had on many of today's leading Irish management thinkers. The result is a diverse collection of essays that will be of interest and of use to anybody involved in management scholarship or concerned with managing better today.

But this book could do something more. It illustrates how reflecting on MacKechnie's 'racket' could stimulate a broader discussion about what might constitute a particularly Irish approach to management scholarship for the future. Determining what the culture of this approach might be, how it should be structured and what

strategy would best support its advancement would truly involve some collective long thinking from Ireland's management community: scholars, managers and government. Such a debate may not result in neat answers, but to paraphrase the last sentences of John Murray's chapter, one thing is for certain, we would be wiser as a result of any debate that involved Geoffrey MacKechnie.