George Butterworth: a tribute
Scania de Schonen and Sandy Jackson

George was happy to live. He enjoyed many and varied aspects of life and communicated his enjoyment so clearly, that it was always a great pleasure to work or to travel with him. He loved archaeological sites, architecture, painting and sculpture from different cultures and ages. He delighted in landscapes, good food and fine wines. He was interested in human beings and the culture in which they lived and had the capacity to understand and respond to people’s beliefs, needs and modes of expression, even though they came from a culture which was very different from his own. In truth, he behaved like a citizen of the world.

Many will first have encountered George at a conference. He always relished the academic and social stimulation of such events, the more so, perhaps, if they happened to be in some far-flung part of the world. His enjoyment, however, was never of a passive variety. His was always an active role, expressed, not only in the papers he presented, but also in the focused attention he gave to other people’s contributions, the frequency with which he asked an incisive question, the ready engagement with others in discussion or debate – however late the hour. Some will remember discussions between those with a more ‘innate’ approach to cognition and those who emphasised a developing learning approach. Others will recall evening discussions in 1997 at San Felia during the second EURESCO Conference which George organised. Discussions on physical modules, object permanency, language development, neo-connectionist models, etc. were cool, fruitful and constructive – never aggressive.

The same involvement carried over into the organisation of conferences. He was the principal organiser of highly successful conferences for the British Psychological Society Developmental Section, the Infancy meetings and the European Society for Developmental Psychology. Beyond this he was frequently a member of the scientific committees for developmental conferences at British, European and World level. That this was so was a reflection, not only of his own readiness to be involved but also of the recognition by others of his organisational skills, his expertise in the developmental field, his awareness of those whose work was breaking new ground and his apparently limitless ability to find solutions to seemingly intractable problems.

Whatever his enjoyment of the conference scene and his liking for travel, the underlying motivation was always academic. He had a clear recognition that good quality research was not confined within national boundaries and hence, he was ready to work with colleagues in Europe, America, Australia, Japan. Perhaps it was this recognition which led him to become actively involved with the ISSBD in the early eighties. It certainly contributed to an early awareness of the need for some sort of European forum within which academics from different parts of Europe could come to share ideas and develop joint projects. This found expression in the central role he played in the organisation of the first European conferences on Developmental Psychology in Groningen and then in Rome. His experience with these
led to a growing conviction that such conferences were insufficient to meet the requirements of European researchers. As a result and earlier than most, he began to argue for the establishment of some form of European organisation within which the mutual interests of academics from Europe and elsewhere could be expressed. Initially this idea was far from generally accepted. Many were sceptical of the need for such a development, others were strongly opposed. Despite this, George stoutly defended his position and sought to persuade others of its validity. The reward for such perseverance came at the Krakow conference in 1995 when the participants gave virtually unanimous support to the idea of forming the European Society for Developmental Psychology.

George responded with typical enthusiasm and energy. He worked tirelessly to establish a solid foundation for the new Society. He encouraged others to join and work towards the same aim. He negotiated the establishment of Developmental Science as the journal of the Society and became its first editor. He continued to be directly involved in the planning and organisation of the European conferences. In short, he was very much a ‘hands on’ President, active in all aspects of the Society’s life, ever ready to engage in discussion of how it might grow and develop in new directions.

Ultimately, his enduring interest always came back to the realm of ideas. To him, good scientific experiments, brilliant ideas and intellectual discussion were the stuff of life. His was a wide psychological culture. His research on object disappearance, on visual proprioception, on children’s early pointing behaviour as the origins of referential communication was creative, detailed and is extensively cited. He refused to let such work remain narrowly confined. He did not belong to any one school of thought and always remained optimistically critical. His representation of mental development embraced concepts and issues stemming from Janet, Goldstein, Hull, Gibson, Piaget, Wallon, Chomsky, Miller, Neisser, Bruner ... the list could easily be extended. Initially, he was more interested by Piagetian ideas than by the classical Markowian learning models. Through time, however, he became interested in parallel-distributed models of processing and in mixed models relying on symbolic and neo-connectionist concepts. He never totally adopted the idea that cognition emerges only from action, nor did he totally reject it. Similarly, he did not fully accept the notion that cognitive competencies can be innate but was not inclined to deny the existence of pre-organisation. One of his strengths was his understanding of the notion of the epigenesis of cognitive competencies and affective abilities.

In recent years, George developed an interest in the interface between neuroscience and psychology. As soon as he discovered the potential interest of these interfaces, he set about trying to organise discussions so as rapidly to share his enthusiasm with other psychologists and biologists. Here again his interest in new ideas, his readiness to listen carefully to others and to encourage new thoughts, new enterprises was apparent.

George was not averse to power and position, but saw them largely as a means of stimulating interest in science, of encouraging others to pursue academic excellence, of enhancing collaboration between laboratories and of stimulating the circulation of ideas and of people. For him, power provided opportunities to generate scientific ideas, to achieve practical results, to share knowledge and to help young scientists and students from countries in poorer economic circumstances.

His death leaves a huge void within his family, his University, the European Society for Developmental Psychology and the world of Psychology in general. He will be sadly missed by all who worked with him and who shared something of his vision. However, his work and his qualities will live on in a host of ways: through his publications, the vital memories he has left with so many, the European Society and Developmental Science. That this is so is a tribute, not only to his scholarship and vision, but also to the effort which he was ready to put into achieving what he had set out to do.

Brilliant and dynamic people like George are precious, but rare. They are not always comfortable to live with, but they stimulate others and are often the agents of change. They leave their mark and do so so strongly that things can never be quite the same. So it was with George.