John Mackintosh at School and University in Edinburgh and London

By David Millar

John was at school in Melville College, a small private school, during World War II and until 1946. The pupils sat the Oxford and Cambridge school and higher school certificate examinations, at which John distinguished himself. He played rugby at scrum-half for the first XV and was accepted as an astute and fearless player.

He left in July 1946 and in October entered the University of Edinburgh to study Honours History. The professor of History was Richard Pares who delivered inspiring lectures and enjoyed dining on occasion with his Honours students.

John graduated in June 1950 with first class Honours and spent two post graduate years at Balliol College Oxford. In July 1951 he invited me to spend a week at Balliol with him, during which I visited Oxford Colleges by day and spent stimulating evenings with John and his friends, several being Americans. John graduated in 1952 in Politics, Philosophy and Economics.

He then acquired an M.A. in history at Princeton University, New Jersey, and entered the world of university teaching at the universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Having got to know him at school, we spent three weeks cycling together in July and August in the Highlands of Scotland, staying at youth hostels. We covered large areas of the West Coast and the Grampian Highlands in 1944, 1945, and 1946, sometimes with other school friends for part of the time.

Food was rationed and we had to carry supplies (often heavy tins) from hostel to hostel, cooking breakfast and suppers on ancient coal and wood stoves. But John made it enormous fun and we carried out his father’s advice to “get to know your own country first” which has stood us both in good stead.

One episode stands out as having a vital effect on John’s approach to life. We were at Harlosh on the west coast of Skye in 1946 enjoying the sun and swimming in the Loch when we met a teacher from East London called Thos. Love.

He turned out to be an active Communist and engaged John in lengthy conversations on left wing politics. I listened for a time but got bored and went off down the loch. By the end of the afternoon however Thos. Love had implanted in John the seed which would lead him into left wing politics, which, with the teaching of history, were to constitute his life’s work.

At Edinburgh University in 1946 there existed an active Communist Club, the Socialist Society and a Conservative Association. The Socialists were widely supported but, as communism took over in Central and East Europe in the 1940s and 1950s, the Socialists moved leftwards towards “fellow-travellers”. John rebelled against this and with the collaboration of Alan Thompson (later to become a Labour MP and University Professor) John founded the Labour Club, greatly influenced by the principles on which the Attlee government was based. The club flourished and John led for it in debates in the University Union. He also led in the social field, being a popular contributor to the annual Labour Club pantomime in Old College.

By 1953 John was teaching at Glasgow University and I was working in London. In the late 1950s I had the pleasure of hosting John when he visited London to interview politicians and others in the course of writing his Chef d’oeuvre “The British Cabinet”.

When he was elected to the House of Commons in 1966 for Berwick and East Lothian, we renewed our friendship, and when I became Clerk of the Select Committee on Procedure enjoyed combining judiciously to achieve reforms in the procedure of the House. Thereafter, our chief contact was at the fabled New Year parties which John and Una threw in Edinburgh: the best I have ever been to.

John’s sad and premature death in 1978 left me deeply saddened, but I remember his true friendship, which has brought so much to my life.