

Obituary

W.S.F. ('Bill') Pickering, 29 January 1922 – 23 May 2016

JASO is greatly saddened to learn of the death of the Revd Dr William Stuart Frederick ('Bill') Pickering, General Secretary of the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies since its foundation at his initiative in 1991; throughout its existence the Centre has been based in the School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography or its institutional predecessors in the University of Oxford.

'Bill', as he was affectionately known, was born in Enfield, north London, in 1922, the son of a bank clerk. Later the family moved to Surbiton in Surrey, where Bill attended the local grammar school. In the Second World War he served in the RAF in India, chiefly as a radio mechanic. Immediately after the war he began the process of becoming ordained as a priest in the Church of England, a step he achieved in 1951. This led to his first academic appointment as a Tutor in Theology in King's College, London, from 1953 to 1956. While there he also embarked on a doctorate in sociology (on lay church-goers), which he was awarded in 1958. From then until 1966 he taught sociology at St John's College, Winnipeg, Canada, before transferring to the Department of Sociology at Newcastle-upon-Tyne. He retired from the latter position in 1987.

Originally interested in the sociology of religion generally, with a special focus on the Hutterite communities of Canada, this led Bill to a long-term interest in the life and work of the French sociologist Émile Durkheim and his circle, in which he became a world expert. Although he retired to live in the village of Coton, near Cambridge, where he and his wife had a house, he chose Oxford to set up the Centre for Durkheimian Studies and regularly visited the city for the Centre's termly study days and more occasional conferences; the former in particular were generally held at the Maison Française d'Oxford and were accompanied by very convivial lunches, often provided by Bill and his wife themselves out of their own pocket. Bill was also very active in publishing work of his own and in editing collections of essays on topics of Durkheimian interest, as well as launching the journal, *Durkheimian Studies*, and a press, the Durkheim Press, with his longstanding colleague, Willie Watts Miller.¹ For his work in furthering Anglo-French academic cooperation, he was awarded the prestigious *Palme Académique* by the French government at a ceremony held at the Maison Française d'Oxford. He is survived by his wife Carol and a family of step-children and step-grandchildren.

Bill was kindly and sociable, keenly interested in and sympathetic to others, with a wry sense of humour, but not at all prepared to compromise on academic standards, about which he could be quite direct, as the author of this notice has reason to remember himself. Not only his vast knowledge and understanding of things Durkheimian, but also his own personal presence pervaded the Centre's meetings, and he was intimately associated with all its constantly expanding activities until the very last months of his life; indeed, his level of activity and achievement right through his retirement was truly astounding. In both this sense and personally he will be irreplaceable, as well as greatly missed.

Robert Parkin (editor)²

¹ Both Durkheim Press books and *Durkheimian Studies* are now published under an arrangement with Berghahn Press.

² I acknowledge the help of a more detailed but unpublished memoir produced by Anthony Waterman, of Winnipeg, Canada, on which I have drawn for certain basic facts and dates about Bill's life.