BARON ASHBY OF BRANDON
ARCS, DIC, DSc(Lond), MA (Cantab), Kt, FRS

Lord Ashby was a scientist of distinction who applied to the problems of higher education, public concerns over pollution, and the relationships between science and society the same qualities of precise observation, lucid analysis and clear presentation that characterised his early work as a plant physiologist.

Eric Ashby was born in London on the 24th of August 1904, the eldest of a family of three brothers. His father was an excellent amateur naturalist and his maternal grandfather a captain in the merchant navy who had a great interest in literature and an interesting library in which Eric spent many of his holidays. Eric was educated at the City of London School from 1916 to 1923, transferring from the classical side to the science side from the Vth form. He entered Imperial College of Science and Technology, University of London, in 1923 with a Morton Exhibition from school, intending to study chemistry and mathematics, but under the influence of Professor (later Sir) J B Farmer, FRS, transferred to Botany. He graduated ARCS, DIC, BSc(Lond) with first class honours and the Forbes Medal and Prize in 1926. Immediately appointed to a demonstratorship in botany at Imperial College he began work on the growth of *Lemna* (duckweed) under Professor V H Blackman, FRS, growing the plant in a controlled environment in order to study the interaction of growth factors, a line of investigation that remained active and highly productive throughout his career as a plant physiologist. From 1929 to 1931 he worked at the University of Chicago under E J Kraus as a Commonwealth Fund Fellow (now called Harkness Fellow). While there he translated from the German and edited under the title *Environment and Plant Development* the pioneer work of Professor H Lundegårdh in physiological ecology, and also began the systematic study of the physiological differences between parent and hybrid maize plants in order to examine the inheritance of physiological factors. In 1931 before returning to a lectureship at Imperial College he spent some time in the Desert Laboratory at Tucson, Arizona, working on the ecology of desert plants. In the same year he married, in Castle Douglas, Kirkcudbrightshire, Elizabeth Helen Margaret Farries. She was to provide him with a stable and stimulating family environment, as well as initially contributing her skills to his experimental work, his publication of Lundergårdh's work, and publishing jointly with him *German-English Botanical Terminology* in 1938.

An innovative experimenter and prompt publisher of his often controversial but successfully defended findings, Ashby was promoted early, to a Readership in Bristol in 1935 and to the Chair of Botany at Sydney in 1938. He rapidly established himself as one of Australia's leading scientists and with the outbreak of war quickly became involved with many aspects of government science and public affairs. He was for example, Chairman of the Australian National Research Council from 1940 to 1942, and conducted an enquiry for the Australian Prime Minister into the enlistment of scientific resources in war-time in 1942. In the same year he became Director of the Scientific Liaison Bureau in Australia, and in 1943 Counsellor and Chargé d'Affaires at the Australian Legation in Moscow, a post he held until 1945. He returned to the United Kingdom in 1946 as Harrison Professor of Botany at Manchester University. Always interested in making scientific findings widely known to other scientists and the general public, it is not suprising that he was an early contributor to Penguin Books *New Biology* with an article in volume 4, 1948, on Hybrid Vigour. He became well known to a wider audience with his *Scientist in Russia* (Penguin Books, 1947), a fascinating, lively and well-written book based on his personal experiences and enriched by his having learnt Russian during his years in Moscow.

After only three years in Manchester, Ashby was appointed Vice-Chancellor at the Queen's University of Belfast in 1950, a crucial time not just for Queen's, but for British universities in general. The implications for higher education of the 1944 Education Act were being realised, pressures for expansion which were ultimately to lead to the Robbins Report were being felt, and the transition to a peacetime educational system were being realised. Debate as to the nature of university education had been kindled by Truscot's *Red Brick University* (1943) and Moberly's *The Crisis in the University* (1949). Queen's was very much a regional University and the people of Northern Ireland were very receptive to Ashby's public expositions of the problems of their University. He was an outstanding public speaker, a shrewd committee member and a gifted negotiator who was much in demand and quickly became a major public figure in Northern Ireland. Within the University he had an outstanding ability to gauge the opinions of staff and students alike, knowledge of which had often been gathered in conversations as he walked to work in the morning or travelled by public transport. As a scientist, he was a rarity amongst vice-chancellors at that time. Realising the need to be properly informed about education matters he involved himself in education research in the same incisive way he had earlier in his botanical research. At that time and later he recruited a variety of research assistants to help him gather data so that his papers, speeches and lectures on educational matters were exceptionally well-informed, as well as cogently argued. The pressures of university and public affairs led him with much regret to give up his purely scientific research shortly after going to Belfast, although he kept remarkably well-informed on a very wide range of scientific subjects. He continued his interests in promoting the public understanding of science, before the term became popular, most notably in membership of various committees on adult education and in his activities with the British Association, most obviously on the occasion of the Association's visit to Belfast in 1952 and later during his presidency of the Association in 1963. During the 1950s he was a member of numerous public bodies - the government's Advisory Council on Scientific Policy (1950-53), the Advisory Council on Scientific and Industrial Research (1954-60), the Nuffield Provincial Hospitals Trust (1951-59), and the Chairman of the Scientific Grants Committee of DSIR (1955-56), and the Postgraduate Grants Committee of DSIR (1956-60).

After nine years at Queen's Ashby became Master of Clare College, Cambridge, a post which enabled him to continue to demonstrate his skills at university administration, and permitted him even greater involvement in a growing range of public activities in Britain and abroad. The diversity is exemplified by his chairmanship of the Commission for Post-secondary and Higher Education in Nigeria (1959-61), of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution (1970-73), and of the Working Party on Pollution Control in connection with the UN Conference on the Environment, Stockholm, 1972. The results of his substantial research into education in the UK and overseas, and his concerns with education and other matters of public policy, led to the publication of a number of books as well as the texts of individual lectures given at a variety of British, American and other universities and conferences. The books include *Technology and the Academics* (1958), *African Universities and Western Tradition* (1964), *Masters and Scholars* (1970), *Reconciling Man with the Environment* (1978) and with Mary Anderson, *The Politics of Clean Air* (1981). With Mary Anderson he also wrote *Universities: British, Indian, African* (1966), *The Rise of the Student Estate* (1970) and *Portrait of Haldane* (1974). This last dealt with Haldane's work in improving education and promoting the development of the universities. This critical analysis of a public figure, administrator and politician whose path was set in his early years, and continued

during 40 years in politics, by books on philosophy provides (as do many biographies) insights, in this case, into Ashby's own career as a distinguished scientist, teacher, educational administrator as well as critic, and public figure.

Ashby was Knighted in 1956, and created a Life Peer as Baron Ashby of Brandon, Suffolk in 1973; elected FRS in 1963, and Hon FRSE in 1975. He was the recipient of honorary degrees from more than 20 universities, and honorary member and fellow of various learned societies world-wide.

BRUCE PROUDFOOT