Towards an understanding

Derek Gillard

Mary Warnock: ethics, education and public policy in post-war Britain

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Before I read Philip Graham's book, the only thing I knew about Mary Warnock was that she chaired the committees which produced two major reports – on special educational needs and on human fertilisation and embryology.[1]

Having read the book, I now know that her contributions to public life in Britain were many and varied, and spanned half a century.

As a member of Oxfordshire's education authority she encouraged the development of music teaching in the county. She was head teacher of Oxford High School, a research fellow at Lady Margaret Hall, Mistress of Girton College, Cambridge and a member of the Independent Broadcasting Authority. She chaired an Arts Council working party (on the management and financing of the Royal Opera House) and the Home Office Committee on Animal Experimentation (which considered philosophical issues about the relationship of humans to other species). She served on the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, the Spoliation Advisory Panel (set up to consider claims to ownership of cultural objects seized by the Nazis) and a House of Lords Select Committee on Medical Ethics. As an active member of the Lords, she contributed to debates on, among other things, euthanasia. She wrote countless articles and more than 20 books, and frequently took part in radio and television programmes.

And, as if all that were not enough, she had five children with her husband Geoffrey, who was Principal of Hertford College and later Vice-Chancellor of the University of Oxford.

She remained active until the autumn of 2018 and died of a major stroke in March 2019. She would have died instantly, says Graham, 'thus succeeding in her determination to live her life to the end without being a burden to anyone' (p323).

When it was suggested that I might review this book I was initially doubtful because it seemed to me to be largely about philosophy, a subject in which I have no expertise. I need not have worried. Philip Graham (who is an academic child and adolescent psychiatrist) writes about complex philosophical ideas – logical positivism, existentialism etc. – in language which makes them comprehensible, even to those who, like me, have little knowledge of them.

His credentials for writing Mary Warnock's biography are impressive. He first met her in 1974 when he was appointed a member of the special needs committee, and the two remained friends for the rest of her life. He had access to family papers, and he enjoyed the support and help of family members and many others who knew Mary.

He has successfully combined accounts of Mary's developing ideas with stories illustrating her day-to-day life to produce a text full of interest and humanity. He notes, for example, that among Mary's lasting memories of her time at Oxford were the privations of war: not enough to eat, not enough warmth, unappetising meals in hall and the darkness resulting from the blackout. She enjoyed horse riding, poetry and talking to friends, but seems to have had little interest in boyfriends.

There are amusing anecdotes. For example: on one occasion, an undergraduate who had climbed up a drainpipe, looking, he said, for a friend, came into their bedroom where the Warnocks were asleep. On Mary's account:

> Geoffrey, by threats of the police, got him to give his name and college, and escorted him out of the front door. The next day he sent a large cheque for the college appeal, and an apology. But he was a bright chap, and he also sold his story to one of the tabloids, claiming that he had surprised us in bed discussing the philosopher, Kant. (p133.)

As with all the best biographies, I found myself increasingly drawn to its subject. For all her intellectual ability, Mary had a wry sense of humour and was often self-deprecating. In one of her early diaries, for example, she wrote that she would get married 'if I met anyone who wished to marry me (almost impossible) and, in return, I wished to marry (very unlikely)' (p68).

And, much later: 'When Elaine Murphy first took her seat in the Chamber [the House of Lords], she sat next to Mary who whispered to her "I gather you are a psychogeriatrician". When Elaine admitted she was, Mary responded "Ah well, you'll have plenty of trade here"' (pp318-9).

FORUM readers will find two chapters of particular interest. In Chapter 6, 'What are schools for?', Graham discusses Mary's views on education; and in Chapter 7, 'All change for special education', he gives a detailed account of the work of the special needs committee and assesses the impact of its report. Of Mary's role as chair, he writes:

> Mary Warnock herself should take most of the credit. From the moment I walked into the first meeting in September 1974 … it was clear she was going to be a leader in every sense … She certainly listened to the views of others, but it was she who formulated the key principles and she who achieved consensus when disagreements between committee members threatened to be irreconcilable. She had remarkable energy combined with formidable critical powers of analysis. (p184.)

The book is beautifully presented. It includes a dozen illustrations, a subject index and a comprehensive bibliography. Graham's writing style makes the book an easy and enjoyable read. The text itself is remarkably clean: in 327 pages, I noticed just one typographical error.

I spotted one factual error: Jim Callaghan's 1976 speech on education was given at Ruskin College, not at Nuffield College (p155).

And I take issue with Graham on a couple of points. First, he notes that, as head of Oxford High School, Mary was dismayed by the poor basic skills in English and maths of some of the girls, and that she disapproved of the child-centred approach to teaching in which children learned by a process of discovery. Graham says this was 'the prevailing philosophy in British primary schools at that time' (p148). In fact, the child-centred approach was never as prevalent as its critics – such as the writers of the so-called 'Black Papers' – asserted. In 1978, for example, HMI reported that 'about three quarters of the teachers employed a mainly didactic approach, while less than one in twenty relied mainly on an exploratory approach'.[2]

And second, I would dispute his claim that the 1944 Education Act was 'best known for introducing selection of children at the age of eleven to enter grammar, secondary modern or technical schools' (p172). While this is certainly what happened, the act itself required only that pupils should be offered 'such variety of instruction and training as may be desirable in view of their different ages, abilities, and aptitudes'.[3] This could have been achieved in a comprehensive system: it was Attlee's post-war Labour government which chose to segregate children into different types of school.

But these are minor quibbles about what, in every other respect, is a superb piece of work.

Of his role as Mary's biographer, Graham says:

> It is the task of the biographer to exercise their own imagination in creating a coherent account which, it may be hoped, conveys some truth and insight, based as Mary would have insisted, on evidence rather than opinion … If I have been successful in writing a coherent, truthful account, then, again in Mary's ambitious words, I may have achieved '*understanding*, a quite general insight into how things are, not only from my own standpoint, but absolutely universally'. (p258.)

I believe Philip Graham has done just that. His book is a serious and intellectual biography but also a readable and entertaining one – no mean achievement. It will appeal to various audiences: for those with an interest in philosophy and ethics, it provides a unique insight into the mind of one Britain's most celebrated thinkers; for social historians, it offers an account of the changing role of women in the late 20th century; while educational historians will find the chapter on the work of the special needs committee of particular interest.

But it will also appeal to the general reader because, above all, it as a fascinating story of the life of a remarkable woman.

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Notes

1. *Special Educational Needs. Report of the committee of enquiry into the education of handicapped children and young people*, London, HMSO, 1978; *Report of the committee of enquiry into human fertilisation and embryology*, London, HMSO, 1984.
2. HM Inspectors of Schools, *Primary education in England*, 1978, p27.
3. 1944 Education Act, Section 8(1) (http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/1944-education-act.html)