

Editorial: Anthony Quinton (1925–2010)

The Royal Institute of Philosophy is extremely fortunate to have had Lord Quinton as its President from 1991 until he stepped down in 2004. There are Presidents and Presidents, but no one would doubt that Tony Quinton filled the role with great distinction and commitment during an eventful period in the Institute's history. His was a benign presence, presiding over our affairs with charm, generosity and, where needed, with business-like efficiency too. It is with great sadness that we have to record his death on June 19th, 2010.

Anthony (Tony) Quinton was one of the most important philosophers of his generation. His early article 'Spaces and Times' (1962) was and is a significant contribution to the topic. Three subsequent books *The Nature of Things* (1973 – an extended analysis of the notion of substance, very much in the spirit of its predecessor of the same title), *Utilitarian Ethics* (1973) and *The Politics of Imperfection: The Religious and Secular Traditions of Conservative Thought from Hooker to Oakeshott* (1978) are all, rightly, highly regarded in their different and respective fields. Aside from these works, Quinton produced a stream of philosophical articles and studies, notable for their clarity and encyclopaedic range.

However, because of Tony Quinton's public persona and commanding personality, and perhaps because of his forthrightly conservative political views, his philosophical work has not always received the attention it merits. It is certainly arguable he was as close to Hume as any of his contemporaries were, not just in his philosophical and political outlook – Quinton was a very secular conservative – but even more in his style and wit, in his immense extra-philosophical knowledge and in his delight in the company of his fellows (and theirs in his). This extra-philosophic knowledge extended not just to matters of history and high culture, as one would expect, but also to popular films and their starlets, and American television detective series – the portly Canon being a particular favourite – long before these things began to command academic attention, and far more entertainingly. In *Who's Who*, with characteristic and self-deprecating humour, Quinton listed as one of his recreations as 'sedentary pursuits'.

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As to the style: Quinton wrote an article for *Philosophy* entitled 'The Trouble With Kant' (Vol. 72, January 1997, pp. 5–18) and he called a collection of his papers '*From Wodehouse to Wittgenstein*' (1998), from which it might be inferred, correctly, that he disliked both Kant and Wittgenstein. While he criticized their doctrines with some precision (particularly Kant's views on space), what seemed to get under Quinton's skin as much as the doctrines they espoused – as it might have with Hume – is that both these great Germanophones manifestly lacked what he once referred to as 'the decencies of logical explicitness'. This was a fault Quinton found in many contemporary philosophers outside the Anglo-American tradition (and some within it), and for him it *was* a matter of decency.

The public persona is well known: Fellow of All Souls and of New College, Oxford, President of Trinity, Oxford (1978–87), Life Peer (1982), Chairman of the British Library (1985–90 – during which time he oversaw with grace and aplomb the difficult move into the initially much-criticised new building, which has actually proved to be a great success with readers and users), as well as many other roles, including, as already mentioned, President of the Royal Institute of Philosophy for fourteen years. He was the Chairman of Round Britain Quiz for many years and a prolific reviewer of books, particularly for *The Sunday Telegraph*. He was justly famous for his extraordinary after dinner speeches, often impromptu, in which trenchant and witty paragraphs of which Evelyn Waugh or P.G. Wodehouse might well have been proud, seemed to roll effortlessly from his tongue. Those who knew him would also attest to his many acts of kindness, which went way beyond any call of duty, and which seemed to flow from nothing other than a desire to increase the happiness of those around him.

What was less well-known is his horrific experience as a boy of 15 in 1940. Quinton and his mother were sailing to apparent safety with a Canadian grandmother, when their ship was blown up by a German U-boat in the mid-Atlantic. Quinton managed to swim on the high seas and eventually scramble on to a lifeboat, where his mother also was. For 20 hours they drifted before rescue, during which time the young Quinton was deputed to tip overboard the bodies of those who died (15 of the original 23 on board). This story is recounted in *Before We Met*, a book he and Marcelle, his wife of 58 years, published in 2008 about their lives before they met each other (at Keith Joseph's wedding). Marcelle, as a half Polish Jewish refugee from Berlin who managed to make her way through Switzerland and France before eventually securing a passage to New York, has an equally graphic story to tell. Quinton always

maintained that he was not psychologically scarred by his shipwreck (or by his time as a navigator in Bomber Command in the latter stages of the war), in which case there must have been an extraordinary stoicism beneath the always unruffled and elegant exterior. We saw something of this stoicism in Quinton's later years when he was clearly in bad health, but carried on as he always had regardless.

It would be easy to use of Tony Quinton the cliché that we will not see his like again. It would be more true to say that we had not seen his like before, and that in his own unique and unforgettable way he enhanced the lives of so many of those fortunate enough to meet him, philosophically and otherwise. The Royal Institute of Philosophy was indeed blessed to have him as both a long-standing friend and as its President.