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Obituary

Professor Margaret J. Osler (27 November 1942–15 September 2010)

FRANK W. STAHNISCH*



Dr Osler, Full Professor in the Department of History and Adjunct Professor in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Calgary (UofC), as well as Adjunct Professor in the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta, died on 15 September 2010. She was sixty-seven years old and for everyone in her vicinity her passing happened all too soon. ‘I wish I could continue to write my books until I’m ninety-five and then suddenly fall out the door of my car’ (MJO, March 2010), she said to a group of colleagues in the university corridors. The tragedy of her death, a leading historian of the scientific revolution and of the relationship of science and religion, is a great loss both to the local community and to the field worldwide. Her erudite and stimulating work counts amongst the best of scholarship in her field, seeing that it had

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evolved and continued to revolve around the works of I. Bernard Cohen and Thomas S. Kuhn. Both had eroded the fundamental assumptions of a history-of-ideas-style historiography of science in the vein of Alexandre Koyré. Moving the picture of the scientific revolution further towards the underlying irrational, metaphysical and even mystical presuppositions that clamp the Renaissance and the early modern period in non-negligible forms, her publications represent a most important step with regard to the bigger picture of the advancement of science. These obituary remarks here are not meant as a biographical article; rather I would like to outline some personal recollections, having been a close colleague of hers at the UofC. Although I knew Maggie personally for only three and a half years, I owe her an incredible amount for her inspiration, intellectual support and many wonderful moments of friendship. The conversations we had here in Calgary will reside among the most satisfying moments of my life as an intellectual *Wahlverwandtschaft* – a profound German word about which she first laughed and then found a Yiddish word that meant the very same thing.

She was a highly productive scholar and an effective teacher. Maggie was born in New York in the same year that the United States entered the Second World War. She attended the private Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania where she received her BA in philosophy in 1963. For her graduate studies she then moved to Indiana University, where she earned her MA in history and philosophy of science in 1966 – during the turmoil of the civil rights era. In the midst of the stimulation offered by the faculty and graduate students at Bloomington, Maggie perfected her historical skills. Amongst many future student generations she would become known for her broad understanding of scientific content and social context. Probably the most decisive period was marked by her PhD work on ‘John Locke and some philosophical problems in the science of Boyle and Newton’ with Sam Westfall. While living in Calgary, she still had a photograph of her mentor at her writing desk and said ‘his stern eyes are continuous sources of stimulation for me and they always remind me to follow the scholarly pursuit’ (MJO, October 2009). At Indiana University, the interest of her research had already turned away from what she saw as ‘pure philosophy of science’. Even when tackling the problem of the scientific revolution, it was striking to see highly dense scholarly volumes lying upon her reading tables, accompanied by a penumbra of newspapers and the obligatory issue of the *New York Review of Books*.

In an almost seamless transition, having received her PhD, Maggie assumed a position in history and philosophy of science at Oregon State University. Quite determined, she drove to the other side of the continent in her car, which was filled with just the necessary boxes of clothes and books. In 1970, she then acquired a continuing position in history at Harvey Mudd College, California, and ever since has had her primary affiliation with departments of history: Wake Forest University, North Carolina (1974–1975) and the UofC, Alberta (1975–2010). Maggie stayed there for thirty-five years, rising through the ranks from assistant to full professor, and also assumed an adjunct professorship in the Philosophy Department (1998) and the Department of History and Classics at the University of Alberta (2002).

Over the many decades of service to the UofC, she taught countless undergraduate students from very diverse fields. She is remembered as a generous preceptor to

undergraduates and also as a demanding supervisor to the graduate students both in her home department and in other university settings. Quite a number of Maggie's supervisees continued at other colleges and became academic teachers in history, philosophy and HPS programmes. Among her most outstanding local contributions count the launch of the History and Philosophy of Science Program and the Program for Science, Technology, and Society. She took great pride in these, and we must hope that the UofC continues their support in the future.

Maggie's research particularly comprised the history of the scientific revolution; magic, science and religion; science in the seventeenth century; and the mechanical philosophy from the seventeenth century to the early nineteenth. In addition to her book *Divine Will and the Mechanical Philosophy: Gassendi and Descartes on Contingency and Necessity in the Created World* (1994), she published as co-editor (with John Hedley Brooke) a themed issue on science in theistic contexts in *Osiris* (2001). As a single editor, she produced *Rethinking the Scientific Revolution* (2000) and recently another monograph with Johns Hopkins University Press: *Reconfiguring the World: Nature, God, and Human Understanding from the Middle Ages to Early Modern Europe* (2010). This book has been printed in Baltimore, MD, the city of her childhood that she had loved so much. While I was visiting with her in the Foothills Hospital during her last weeks she reflected upon this monograph with the words, 'Well, I just arrived there in good time, don't you think, Frank?' (MJO, August 2010).

Amongst her many other distinctions, she received the Science and Religion Course Prize from the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences at the University of Berkeley (1999) and was invited to give the Stillman Drake Lecture of the Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science (1996) and the Richard S. Westfall Lecture at Indiana University (1999). She served as the secretary and a multiple member of council of the History of Science Society as well as on the advisory boards of *Isis*, the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* and *Science and Religion around the World* (editors John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L. Numbers). Maggie joined the History of Science Society early in her career and also became a member of the British Society for the History of Science, the Canadian Society for the History and Philosophy of Science, the International Society for Science and Religion, and the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies. Her numerous scholarly involvements in societies, programmes and institutions throughout North America and Europe demonstrate a deep engagement in the field and a great capacity to make scholarly friends worldwide. Over recent years, she was closely involved with an early modern philosophy group at the Dipartimento di Filosofia dell'Università di Lecce. After her return to Calgary, she continuously talked about the warm and studious atmosphere overseas; in Italy:

They like there what I do, and I really appreciate to be at the Lecce seminars, because faculty members and students are so erudite, have such an impressive love for learning, and the discussions never seem to end. I'm always sad when I have to leave Lecce which has become a new scholarly home for me! (MJO, April 2010)

The foundations of Maggie's thinking were rarely exposed, and some historians of science have self-critically stated that the history of science often appears as a kind of 'prolonged

autobiography'. When explicitly asked, at a dinner in late winter in our home, about how she encountered the topic of science and religion, she wholeheartedly laughed:

Well, maybe it's just a way of working through the debates I had with my parents. They were both very successful professionals – my father a biomedical researcher and my mother a clinical psychologist – and for them nothing else in this world counted more than the metaphysics-free endeavour of the scientific pursuit. As such, psychoanalysis, sociology and religion were stones of immense contention, views that they held, I often found simplistic and flawed! (MJO, January 2010)

In the middle of the many plans that Maggie had was the idea to encourage more international scholars to visit the UofC and see a comprehensive graduate programme emerge in the history and philosophy of science, medicine and technology. In accord with her local colleagues and friends, we hope that some of these plans will rise to life in future decades:

Maggie, we won't forget you: Your deep-rooted knowledge, your cunning wit, harsh but fair criticisms will always stay in our minds where you will continue to have an everlasting place. All of us wish that your dream for an extended and productive work period had come true – giving us the chance to walk an even longer pathway of friendship and academic learning with you! (FWS)