

Chapter 2 (1936-1948)

MIXED FORTUNES

Outwardly then, the Society and *The Philosopher* had appeared to be doing rather well. However the year 1936 proved to be one of ill omen. First of all, Ada Sheridan, the Hon. Secretary of the Society from 1922, died. She had been responsible not only for much of the organisation of the Society but *The Philosopher* itself had first appeared under her guidance, and she had remained Editor for a number of years.

The Journal noted that in the early days of the Society people used to say 'The Philosophical Society is Miss Sheridan'. The Rev. W.H.S. Dumphreys was appointed in her place.

More bad news followed at the General Meeting on July 1st. It was reported that the Journal 'because of its high quality and low price continues to run at a loss.' This put the Council in something of a dilemma since they were very much aware of its importance:

The *Philosopher* is accepted and appreciated as the official organ of the Society and is the only point of contact between the Society and the majority of its members, especially of those who lie at a distance. Its maintenance seems therefore to be one of the fundamental responsibilities of the Society

Action had already been taken by endeavouring to keep production costs down, trying to secure more advertising, appealing for subscriptions to be paid on time and even by charging a shilling for tea at the monthly meetings (something it was ruefully agreed would have to remain). Although no decision appears to have been made at this meeting, events in the following year would tell their own story.

Bad luck is said to run in threes and G.K. Chesterton died that year, depriving the Society of a man who embodied much that it stood for. His high profile as well as his active support for the Society in the previous thirteen years would be difficult to replace.

Prospects for the Society had rarely looked bleaker, and perhaps not surprisingly only one issue of *The Philosopher* appeared in 1937 and this contained only sixteen pages. It was said that this was due chiefly to the fact that subscriptions were not coming in regularly. Leadership of the Society was in turmoil. The Rev. Elphinstone Rivers asked council to appoint the Rev. N. Gaskell as Acting Chair. The following year the Rev. Rivers offered his resignation. But, given the difficult

state that the Society found itself in, this was not accepted and so the Rev. Rivers continued in his post, we hope not unhappily.

The parlous state of the Society's finances continued to dominate the agenda and it was reported that the Journal was overdrawn to the sum of £346/17/7 and that it would have to cease publication pro tem. However two issues of *The Philosopher* were published in 1938, albeit only of eight and eleven pages respectively. In these, perhaps not surprisingly, readers were informed that subscriptions would be going up. Other changes included a change of premises for the lecture programme from the Garden Club, which was being renovated, to 148 Piccadilly. Although all the officers of the council were re-elected for that year, the post of President remained vacant.

But 1938 was the year of the Society's silver jubilee and a dinner (price 3/6d.) was held at St. Ermin's Hotel on December 7th. Twenty-seven Fellows, members and guests attended this and listened to speeches by the Rev. N. K. Gaskell, H.A. Godson Bohn, Dr Hartill, Prof. Greenwood and Alan R. Busey.

In the year that Britain would enter the second world war a meeting was held, with the Aristotelian society, with representatives of philosophical societies in order to consider what should be done about the increasing numbers of refugee philosophers. At the meeting held on March 11, were Viscount Samuel, Prof. G.E. Moore, Gilbert Ryle, (who would later wield the knife so cruelly against the Society) Prof. J. Wright, Dr D. T Greenwood and Rev. I. Hartill (representing the Society), Mr S. Hooper (representing the Institute of Philosophy) and Mr A. H. Hannay and Dr C. A. Mace (representing the Aristotelian Society). It was proposed that an organisation be established to assist refugee philosophers and that a council and executive committee be formed. Viscount Samuel would be President and Prof. John MacMurray would be asked to preside as Chairman of the Executive Committee.

Two presentations were made to officers of the Society that year. In March, H.A. Godson Bohn was presented with a silver cigarette box for twenty five years service as Hon. Treasurer. This was followed at the Silver Jubilee Dinner in June by a presentation of a book containing the names of all the Members and Fellows. H.A. Godson Bohn is also reported to have given a speech on the early history of the Society. Sadly this was one of the rare occasions on which the Society did not reprint the speech in a subsequent issue of *The Philosopher*.

Volume XVII number one was the special Silver Jubilee issue and featured photos of the late G.K. Chesterton and Miss Sheridan. Papers were provided by Rev. Hartill on the genius of Milton and by Prof. John Laird on pleasure, happiness and satisfaction. Although a special issue, it was only fifteen pages long. A second of sixteen pages was published later in the year with papers on the public importance of philosophy, belief and determinism and authority in religion.

In total five issues of *The Philosopher* were published in 1939. Clearly the Society had improved its financial position, and that year's balance sheet was reported to stand at £30 credit. Despite the worsening world situation it was hoped to continue

with the publication of the Journal, although it was acknowledged, sadly, that it would not be possible for the lecture programme to continue at the present time.

The fourth issue for 1939 expressed in religious terms the Society's hopes for the future:

In simple faith and hope, with a perfect trust in the Supreme Wisdom of an overruling Providence, that in all things His Will be done, we look to the Rock from whence we were hewn, and wait for the day to break and the shadows flee away.

The final issue of the year printed articles on 'Newton and Royalty', 'Why Study Philosophy?' and 'What is Peace?' Welcome was extended to a new President, the Rev. Isaac Hartill who had been involved with the Society from the first, being elected a Fellow in 1913 and later Vice-President. The Rev. Hartill succeeded G.K. Chesterton and noted in his welcome address that:

I am taking office at a difficult time in our country's history, a time when many societies, if not entirely suspending activities, are at least not functioning in the normal manner. But a time of war sets people to think even more "furiously" than in a time of peace. Questions other than political are raised in the mind, and they are precisely the kinds of questions with which only philosophy and theology can deal. Despite the chequered history of our Society, especially at one period, I have never wavered in my conclusion that ... the Philosophical Society of England is taking its place as one of the leading and most useful societies in the land we love so well.

Four issues of *The Philosopher* appeared in 1940. Despite the war, the length of these issues ranged from nineteen to twenty four pages bolstered (or padded) with regular contributions from the Rev. Hartill who was to keep up the rate of submission of articles throughout the war. Notable events recorded for the Society included the appointment of the President as Dean of the Faculty of Philosophy in the Intercollegiate University. In keeping with the Society's motto, the President also suggested the formation of an 'Intellectual Co-operation Association' in order to instil 'clearer thinking' within Governments around the world.

In Volume XIX (1941) apparently following interest in the Rev. Hartill's paper on clearer thinking, it was suggested that a 'world symposium' be held. It is not known what became of this suggestion, but no further mention is to be found in future issues of *The Philosopher*. Yet this was still a high profile year for the President, of whom it was reported that biographical sketches had appeared in a number of provincial journals and that he was also to be included in the four volume American publication 'Who's Who in Philosophy'.

The President also reported that he had been in correspondence with Prof. Julian Huxley who had suggested that the time had come to give up 'all idea of the personality of God as a power behind and in control of reality.' The Rev Dr Hartill wrote defending the Christian conception of God.

Council sent congratulations to General Smuts, an Hon. Fellow of the Society, on being made Field Marshal, and paid tribute to another Fellow, Henri Bergson.

In the final issue of the year, Christmas greetings were sent to all members and Fellows and it was noted that although the Society was in a 'state of suspended animation, there was no doubt about its animation' with a growing interest in the utility of philosophy. It was hoped that a meeting could be announced as soon as possible to welcome all the new Members and Fellows. The Society continued to be financially viable, with a balance of £105.

In May of the following year, at Mr H.A. Godson-Bohn's house in Kensington, Council met with the Rev. Elphinstone Rivers in the Chair. The Council stood in silence after reading the names of Fellows and Members who had passed on. Votes of thanks were then proposed to the Hon. Treasurer and the President for their work in keeping the Society going. The Hon. Secretary revealed the growth of the society, noted that there were a number of prospective Fellows on the waiting list, and it was reported that the standard of the theses submitted remained high. There followed a motion to ask all Life-Fellows to contribute to a magazine Fund to increase the size of *The Philosopher* in peace-time.

At present, though, no doubt due to the exigencies of the war, 1943 saw a change in the presentation of the Journal. The dark green card cover was replaced by plain paper while the green background was replaced by green type. The size of the journal was severely restricted to an average of twelve pages, although the Society still managed to publish four issues that year. The editor, Dr Greenwood was reported to be still [sheltering? - Ed.] in Canada where he had given 700 lectures to over 17,000 people. Fourteen of these lectures he had given in French, which was 'one of the six languages he spoke fluently'. He hoped to return to Britain soon and resume his role as Editor of *The Philosopher*.

1943 was the thirtieth anniversary of the Society and the President commented on the way in which it was helping to bring about a philosophical renaissance in the country. This theme was continued the next year when it was hoped that the Society could do something to interest young people in philosophy as well as the old. Four issues were again published, each of sixteen pages. Articles tended to be split between the theological and the more generally philosophical, with one or two of the papers submitted looking at more practical aspects of philosophy, notably papers on the 'philosophical physician' and 'education and world reconstruction'.

1945 saw five issues of *The Philosopher* being published. This included an issue entitled 'Special', perhaps an end of war publication. It did contain an article on the psychology of victory, although this referred to the first and not the second world war.

For the first time in a number of years correspondence was included, and one has to admire the Editor for publishing this brief but direct contribution:

Dear Sir

From another address many years ago I wrote and quarrelled with your policy. An occasional journal follows one around but I still think the Society and Journal have gone to the dogs.

(In fact, the letter's author also penned a longer and more thoughtful article in the same issue.) On June 23 1945, the first General Meeting since July 1939 was held. Seven Council members attended, six Fellows and two members. Fifteen apologies were received. Two minutes silence were held for all of those who had passed away since the previous meeting.

The meeting heard that there were now 81 more Fellows than in 1939, and that the last diploma issued was no. 346. The balance of the Society had increased from £33/18/2 at July 5th, 1939 to £177. However it was also noted that paper costs had doubled, labour costs increased by 75% and there was a new purchase tax to pay. It was therefore decided to ask Life Fellows to subscribe to the Journal. A proposal was also put forward to apply for Royal Charter.

The lecture programme resumed that year and talks were given on 'The Red Indians of Canada', 'Philosophical basis of Organisations' and 'The Church in Russia' all of which were printed in subsequent issues of *The Philosopher*.

Volume XXIV (1946) saw a return to the familiar green cover. The first Sheridan lecture, in honour of Miss Ada, was given by Dr Hartill on the theme the 'Great Ingathering of Knowledge'. A reunion luncheon took place later in the year at the Bonnington Hotel, London. Most intriguingly it was reported in *The Philosopher* that the President, the Rev. Dr I. Hartill, gave a speech relating to 'the Philosophical Society in 1739'. How it 'had been revived and was so active now'. Sadly no more is said about this and whether our Society does indeed have its origins this far back or whether this was an unfortunate misprint we simply do not know.

On October, 4th, 1946 an Extraordinary General Meeting was held at which changes were discussed to the Society's Book of Rules. Notably, it was decided that the Society would only recognise degrees from institutions with full University status, that the source of every degree would be stated, that a list of all Fellows with their addresses be published and that a Foreign Secretary would be appointed. In the light of the Society's imminent reconstitution it could be surmised that the quality of the Society's award of fellowship was being increasingly questioned.

In the following year, it was agreed that the Journal would now be edited by an Editorial board in order 'to improve the magazine and improve its circulation'. The Editorial Board would comprise four members, one of whom was a journalist and assistant editor of three other periodicals. Minor changes included a new typeface for the cover and the issuing of a journal date. An Editorial for the expanded Journal, in September 1948, commented that while lots of articles were submitted and that most of them were well written, informative and interesting:

Only a small proportion of them are concerned with philosophy. There has been too great a tendency on the part of authors submitting manuscripts to wander off

into the kindred fields of psychology and theology. Good as they may be, such articles are not appropriate to a specialist journal dealing with philosophy. Since almost any subject can be dealt with from a philosophical standpoint the field is a very wide one, but we must enter it through the gateway of philosophy.

At the General Meeting to be held on October 20, 1948 at St. Ermin's Hotel, London, the Executive Committee proposed that the existing rules be abrogated and that applicants for the Fellowship must in future:

- i) submit a thesis, minimum of 4000 words on a philosophical subject to be approved by two examiners;
- ii) that on the subject being approved, receive guidance as to how to proceed;
- iii) give full references throughout;
- iv) that the thesis be typewritten;
- v) that the thesis must be of a philosophical nature;
- vi) that if a thesis is rejected, detailed advice and encouragement is sent to the applicant
- vii) a full set of rules be sent to each applicant.

Curiously it was also proposed that applicants who re-submitted a thesis and again failed should be sent a year's subscription gratis.

Enthusied by reforming zeal, a proposal was put forward at the AGM to reconstitute the Society. It was decided 'this was necessary in principle'. A constituent committee was set up in order to 'carry out an investigation into the Society's affairs, the drawing up of a new constitution and the formulating of a body of rules which will embody the Executive Committee's recommendations regarding the award of the Fellowship.' The present officers of the Society were asked to carry on until that time. However, all was not well. The Rev. F. Harfitt resigned as Chairman, as he was 'unable to devote sufficient time to the Society' as did the Rev. Dr Hartill, who wrote to Dr A.H. Greenwood, tendering his resignation as President with the wish that his name should not be put forward for re-election. He added:

I should like to express my appreciation and gratitude for the many kindnesses shown to me by the Officers of the Society and by the Fellows and Members, scattered throughout the land and with whom I have been brought into contact and co-operation during my years of happy and I trust useful service. I should like at the same time to express my best wishes for the Society's future.

The report of the Executive Committee was laid before an Extraordinary General Meeting of the Society on December 8th, 1948 and the Society was officially reconstituted.

This then was the end of an era and the first stage of the Society's history. Although we know little for certain about the Society prior to 1913 and have limited material covering the years 1913-23, we do have some knowledge of the Society and its officers after this time. However what we know comes to us from the pages of *The Philosopher* and thus we must remain ignorant about some of the disquiet and concerns expressed in Council during that time. What we do know is the tremendous energy and work that was put into the lecture programme and the journal in the earliest years of the Society. Until the mid-nineteen thirties the history of the Society appears relatively unproblematic and it seems to have got on with its work without major problems. Indeed it would appear to have carried out its central aim of bringing philosophy to the general public in an efficient and at times interesting way. At some point, things began to change and the decade in which the war began was to see a mixed pattern of fortunes. Thus while the years 1934-6 could be seen as the zenith of the Society in terms of its public face, 1937-38 could be seen as its nadir. Why this sudden change of fortune? Yet, maybe the change was not so sudden as all that. Given the level of debt that *The Philosopher* noted in 1937, it is quite probable that financial problems had been mounting for several years. It was perhaps unfortunate that such debts should become crippling precisely at a time when the momentum of the Society's fortunes otherwise appeared to be on the up. The war years were to place even more obstacles in the Society's path, but in a manner corresponding to war time Britain, *The Philosopher* continued its publication and ended the war on a firm footing both financially and in terms of its membership.

However, like many other institutions, the immediate post-war years saw the need for change, particularly with regard to the awarding of the Fellowship. Although the reasons were not dealt with explicitly in the pages of *The Philosopher* it would seem that there was some disquiet about the standard and nature of the theses being submitted, and that this was chiefly responsible for the Philosophical Society of England (Reconstituted) coming into existence in December 1948.