

William Newton-Smith (1943–2023)

Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy 1970–2005, Senior Tutor 1978–1981, Praefectus of Holywell Manor 1989–1997, Senior Proctor 1984–1985 and Emeritus Fellow from 2005

Professor Steven Lukes (Emeritus Fellow)



Bill Newton-Smith, Fellow and Tutor in Philosophy from 1970 to 2005, tackled large questions with rigour and precision. He published six books, most notably *The Structure of Time* (1980) (is time absolute or relative? Is it a container of events or composed of them? He rejected both views and advanced instead two new theories, so as to shift the argument to whether time is a theoretical structure or a theoretical framework) and *The Rationality of Science* (1981) (how, as ‘moderate realists’, are

we to account for scientific progress? He here advanced a widened view of rationality that effectively answers the criticisms of such sceptics as Thomas Kuhn and Paul Feyerabend). He also published an introduction to logic, he edited the Blackwell *Companion to the Philosophy of Science* (2000), containing entries by many distinguished contributors and described by one reviewer as ‘delightful and clear’, and he co-edited *Modelling the Mind* (1990), a book on the central question of cognitive science: ‘how do we model the mind?’, deriving from a Balliol-based interdisciplinary seminar, bringing together a distinguished group of philosophers, psychologists, and physiologists. He also edited *Popper in China* (1992), a collection of previously unpublished essays from both the West and China on Karl Popper’s philosophy of science, arguing that Popper’s philosophy had a direct relevance to the wider political context in China.

Bill was Senior Tutor from 1978 to 1981, but his presence, for the first two decades of his time at Balliol, was always felt around the College, from the seminar room to the squash court, from the SCR to Holywell Manor, of which he was Praefectus from 1989 to 1997. (He was also an effective Senior Proctor for the University in 1984–1985.) He was a much-loved and inspiring teacher of graduates and of undergraduates, remembered by one for his ‘humour and

wise thoughts’ and for ‘taking the fear out of logic teaching’. Another writes that he ‘made me feel confident that I could, eventually, make some sense of Russell and Wittgenstein’. He was always fun to be with: Andrew Graham (Master 2001–2011) recalls that when acting as Bursar while Bill was Senior Tutor, ‘I have never had such a good time, certainly not in the administrative field.’ His enthusiasm was infectious.

I loved co-teaching with him, as did other colleagues in different disciplines. I myself learned a great deal in discussions with him – for example, about whether theories can be underdetermined by all actual and possible observations (on which topic he published an article in the *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* in 1978), and about how to think about truth and rationality in relation to ongoing debates in which I was engaged at the time concerning the social sciences, particularly social anthropology, focused on how to understand and explain apparently irrational beliefs. He was thoroughly engaged in these discussions and in others that crossed over into the disciplines of our colleagues, including the scientists. For example, he participated in a series of seminars held in Balliol during the 1980s on the explanation of animal and human behaviour that led to the volume on modelling the mind, which arose from a long-standing collaboration between the philosopher Alan Montefiore (Emeritus Fellow) and the physiologist Denis Noble (Emeritus Fellow). Bill was a key member of our unusually cohesive PPE tutorial team.

Yet his impact on the world was to reach very far beyond the readers of his philosophical writings and the walls of Balliol. In 1979 I drew his attention to a report in the *Times Higher Educational Supplement* of an open letter sent from Prague in the wake of the Charter 77 Petition by an unknown Czech philosopher of indomitable courage and tenacity, Julius Tomin, to four universities: Harvard, Oxford, Cambridge and the Freie Universität Berlin. The letter invited them to send philosophers to join him in teaching philosophy in his flat after the Czech regime’s recent drastic purge of universities. Only Oxford responded and that was because of Bill. He convinced the Philosophy Subfaculty to send philosophers to Czechoslovakia to lecture informal groups in private homes, together with small sums to cover their costs, and a network of such underground seminars soon developed to receive them. For the next eight years there ensued a stream of visiting philosophers from Oxford and beyond, including our colleague Alan Montefiore, Roger Scruton, Thomas Nagel, Charles Taylor (1952), Jacques Derrida and Jürgen Habermas, to address underground seminars, supporting dismissed Czech philosophers and

their students, often smuggling books in and *samizdat* out. This clandestine international network was soon organised by the Jan Hus Foundation, of which Bill was a founding trustee. It was regarded as a 'centre of ideological subversion' by the Czech police. It financed the visits and helped in many other ways, such as supplying photocopiers behind the Iron Curtain.

As one of the visitors in 1980, Bill had begun to address a gathering of some twenty students on the logic of science in Tomin's flat when the doorbell rang, a dozen uniformed policemen entered to check identity documents, and he was arrested by two of them in plain clothes, taken away and interrogated for two hours. They 'repeatedly tried to get me to say false things about Julius', he recalled. His last sight of Tomin was of him being manhandled with blood on his face. Bill was then driven to the snow-covered border with West Germany. The Russian car broke down on the way and Bill helped to fix it, and at one point they lost their way and had to ask for directions.

Other visiting philosophers were detained and deported, including Derrida, and a diplomatic incident was then averted by the intervention of the French President, François Mitterand. Other early visitors to be expelled included Kathy Wilkes and Anthony Kenny (Master 1978–1989). Tomin was employed as a zookeeper and his wife Zdena was one of the three spokespeople of Charter 77. Policemen were regularly stationed outside their apartment. Other former philosophy teachers and intellectuals in Prague, including the former Rector of Charles University, were stoking boilers in the basements of buildings and driving trams. They were under constant surveillance, as were their children at school, who were sometimes barred from further education, and they were subject to regular harassment, detention and interrogation by the security police. Most laid low, holding clandestine seminars; some collaborated and some, like Julius Tomin, actively resisted. The story of these visits is told in Barbara Day's *The Velvet Philosophers* (1999).

Bill's lifelong concern for intellectual freedom probably originated when, while an undergraduate studying mathematics at Queen's University in Ontario, Canada, he travelled to East Germany as part of a United Nations exchange programme to encourage mutual understanding among young people on both sides of the Iron Curtain. He had an East German penfriend whom he visited at Zittau in 1964, and he was deeply shocked by the barbed wire and minefields at the border and by what he learned about the activities of the *Volkspolizei*. The enduring impact of that visit led to the next stage of his academic activism in Eastern Europe and beyond.

This began when Bill encountered George Soros, the billionaire Hungarian-born financier and philanthropist (and the continuing target these days of antisemitic rhetoric in the ascendant right-wing politics in Eastern Europe, especially Hungary). Soros had been financing the Jan Hus Foundation and identified Bill as the person who could take a lead in his educational initiatives in Eastern Europe, which eventually came under the aegis of his Open Society Institute (later Open Society Foundations). Bill invited Soros to give a talk in Balliol about the theory of reflexivity in financial markets in the old Senior Common Room, and I recall a lunch at which the discussion was about Popper's ideas, about which Soros had submitted a thesis at the LSE, and over which Bill and Soros disagreed. A Karl Popper Open Society award would become one of the initiatives set up later. But the major such initiative was the foundation of the Central European University (CEU), in which Bill played a critical role.

The vision of this grand project had been born and nurtured in what seemed like purely idealistic discussions at the Dubrovnik Inter-University Centre, one of the few meeting places for students and faculty from East and West, in whose life Bill played an important role. Bill had also been instrumental in bringing East and Central European students on scholarships to Oxford. What made his role in establishing the CEU critical, according to Shalini Randeria, its current Rector, was that he overcame Soros's uncertainties, strengthening his will to realise that vision. Bill then promptly went on to make it real. He later wrote to a former student: 'From 1990 I was running George Soros's higher education philanthropy including creating for him the Central University of which I was the first rector president. Eventually juggling this activity with teaching at Balliol became a little tiresome and so I resigned a few years early to work full time with him.' The juggling amounted, in effect, to his simultaneously leading two lives, applying to successive Masters for brief periods away.

On Soros's invitation, Bill became the chair of the CEU Executive Committee – the predecessor of the Board – of the CEU, which laid down the foundations of the university. He was thus the *de facto* head of the institution until Alfred Stepan (1958) became the first *de jure* Rector in 1993. He then served as a CEU trustee between 1995 and 2016. As chair he brought all his well-honed Oxford intellectual and energetic skills to chairing, successfully, what was a wide-ranging board marching at high speed into the unknown, to the tune of Soros. It was, indeed, a Balliol-honed project, with Paul Flather (1973), a former student of Bill's at Balliol, appointed by Soros in 1990, serving as the first CEO (secretary-general). Flather vividly describes Bill in this role:

His mind was always working. Even when after a particularly successful CEU Executive Board and Senate meetings, the reward was a meal out in a rather fancy Parisian restaurant, over the courses we would be jotting notes on napkins. Many board meetings under the famous sloping beam of Holywell Manor would start at lunchtime, but not finish until well after midnight, with refreshments magically appearing at regular meetings, Bill, cigar in hand, and George striding about, with me desperately trying to keep up with the notes, admired however late, however stressed, there he was, full of beans, rarin' to go, the next morning.

After the fall of communism, it was a time of optimism about and within the region, an optimism that is now increasingly hard to sustain. The idea of the CEU was that of an independent international university for the wider region that would educate a new cadre of leaders to help to develop democratic practices and institutions after the fall of the Iron Curtain. Soros backed this mission with a cheque for many millions of dollars, and with pressure. Appointing Bill in 1991 he told him: 'I want students here in September.' Bill used all his contacts to find visiting tutors and students, and with the crucial help of Flather, materials and a set of buildings were acquired. The deadline was met and the university opened in the autumn of 1991. Bill had the extraordinary privilege of spending these millions of dollars – sometimes \$200 million a year – promoting academic freedom, scholarship and community. He was trusted throughout and licensed to spend regularly in six and sometimes more figures. His time and energies were spent in engaging with distinguished scholars, and setting salary levels, choosing institutions to be supported, launching new institutions, such as the European University in St Petersburg, and pushing forward new programmes, such as the university libraries initiative, research support programmes and the CEU Press.

Later it was Bill who helped to calm matters after Soros had fallen out with Václav Klaus, the new premier of Czechoslovakia, who said he would close the CEU at once, moving it to Budapest. It took time to persuade him that no university with hundreds of students could close overnight, and a delay of 18 months was secured. The CEU was originally located in three cities – Warsaw, Prague and Budapest. After the Czech and Polish campuses were closed down, it continued and flourished in Budapest, soon securing international recognition, attracting outstanding faculty and some 1,500 students from over 100 countries. However, in the wake of similar hostility to that of Klaus on the part of the autocratic Hungarian premier Viktor Orbán (who had studied at Pembroke College, Oxford, in 1989–1990, on a scholarship funded by Soros), it has now moved to Austria and is located in Vienna. Its links with



Balliol continue: the current Rector is Shalini Randeria, mentioned above, one of the first cohort of women Rhodes Scholars at Oxford, who, though not a Balliol student, lived and worked at Holywell Manor.

On leaving Balliol, Bill went on to found or overhaul numerous universities globally on behalf of Soros's Open Society Foundations, whose board he joined, and the World Bank, in former Soviet Republics, the Middle East and the Global South – from Al-Quds University on the West Bank of Israel to the American University of Central Asia in Kyrgyzstan, as well as in Moscow, Minsk, Kyiv, Bucharest, Bratislava and Pristina, and visiting Albania, Bulgaria and Macedonia – all, as his *Times* obituary notes, 'aimed at spreading the ethos of open academic debate so that when virgin democracies started to become another dictatorship in all but name, there were enough around not to be fooled'.

Bill was married twice, first to the internationally acclaimed novelist Dorris Heffron, then teaching literature at Oxford and the Open University, a pioneer in the genre of young adult fiction and since 2013 chair of the Canadian Writers Union. His second marriage in 1989 was to Nancy Durham, an award-winning Canadian foreign television correspondent, reporting from London for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and for the BBC. In 1994 she became a video journalist covering the break-up of Yugoslavia from all sides in the conflict. Her television work took her across Europe, the former USSR, Africa, Europe, and Iraq. After ending his work for Soros in 2016, Bill and Nancy planted a field of lavender on their farm near Abergavenny in mid Wales, the first to plant lavender in Wales on a field scale. They then

expanded their operations, becoming the only distillers of lavender oil in Wales. Their company Welsh Lavender Ltd produced oil and developed body and face creams sold from their shop in Hay-on-Wye. As he wrote to a former student, Bill was there ‘fully engaged in writing my memoirs’. There are two daughters – one, Apple, a High Court Judge in Toronto, the other, Rain, recently appointed Director-General of the Confederation of British Industry – and seven grandchildren. He suffered from throat cancer to which he finally succumbed at the age of 80.

It was in Wales that he embarked on his last academic venture, becoming the founding chairman of Black Mountain College, based in Talgarth, the first college in the UK dedicated to the study of climate change and sustainability. Its founder, Ben Lawrence, approached him for support. ‘Are we mad?’ Lawrence asked him, to which Bill replied, ‘Yes, but I’ll help you.’ The funding was secured and Black Mountain College admits its first cohort of students this autumn, studying for a BA in sustainable futures.

Lines on Bill Newton-Smith

Alan Montefiore (Emeritus Fellow)

I was myself a member of the small Appointments Committee that unhesitatingly recommended Bill to the College for election to a Tutorial Fellowship in Philosophy well over half a century ago, and for all the ensuing years that we were there together I could not have wished for a better all-round colleague and, quite simply, friend. As a philosopher he had specialist knowledge and abilities in fields in which I have to confess to have always been very much an amateur; as a tutor he was always understandingly supportive of his students; and as a member of the Governing Body he was in many ways very effectively involved in the wider social and administrative affairs of the College. And his interests and very practical commitments extended, of course, well beyond those of the College and of Oxford as such – as indeed they are well recorded in the various obituaries that have already appeared.

Bill was, of course, a good fifteen or so years younger than me, and I would never have expected to find myself outliving him in this way. I shall be far from alone among those who, one way and another, will find themselves very much missing his presence among us.