

David Hector Monro (1911–2001)

Hector Monro — he never used ‘David’ — was born in Whangarei, a small provincial town in New Zealand’s far North, and is still, so far as is known, the only philosopher to have such an origin. He came of a cultivated and book-loving family that was always poor on account of the father’s ill-health; it is entirely characteristic of him that Hector showed not the slightest bitterness or resentment over those straitened circumstances. Indeed, although a genuine philosopher, he constantly found cheerfulness breaking in on him, and his habitual good humour was among the most endearing facets of his personality.

Although born in Whangarei, Hector was raised and educated in Auckland, where a scholarship to Auckland Grammar — the premier high school in the city — ensured a proper start in life. His journey into academic philosophy was by no means a usual one: having to earn a living from an early age, and aspiring to make that living as a writer, he first worked for a law firm, then joined the *New Zealand Herald* as a cadet journalist. As was then not at all uncommon, he undertook concurrent university studies as an evening student, where for some time Philosophy ranked second to English in his own scale of priorities. His BA was in both of these, but philosophy dominated in the MA he took in 1935.

As the Depression took hold, Hector lost his job as a journalist, dismissed from the leading newspaper in the country for being ‘too bookish’, which tells us something of the cultural condition of New Zealand in the 1930s. This calamity was the first of two to strike in his early life, as recounted in his memoir, *Fortunate Catastrophes*. After a period of struggle, keeping going on part-time teaching work in English at the Elam School of Art, all seemed to be settling down. He obtained a post in the Auckland City Library, as a cadet being groomed to become Chief Librarian, and married fellow librarian Joyce Grey.

Then came the second disruption: the Second World War. Hector was a pacifist, not from religious conviction, but as part of an idealistic humanitarian socialism. With quiet moral courage he refused his call-up, endured the tribunals, and spent the war years in the prisons and internment camps established for conscientious objectors, or defaulters. His memoir provides a vivid account of this period, with wry passages pointing out that the tribunals would not accept refusal to serve as a genuinely conscientious objection unless based on long-standing membership of certain pacifist religious congregations, yet insisted on internment for defaulters on the grounds that otherwise they might work to spread their insincerely held views among the people.

During this ordeal he was able, for the most part, to maintain good spirits. He got himself assigned cookhouse duties, which meant early rising, but also the end of tasks in the early afternoon. This enabled him to work at writing his first book. Its title: *Argument of Laughter*. Its theme: the theory of humour. What do people find funny, and why? Cheerfulness breaking in again.

At war’s end, after a stint as a labourer at a gas works in Wellington, Hector secured a post at the University of Otago Library in Dunedin. A vacancy arose

in the Philosophy Department, and largely on the strength of the manuscript of the laughter book, he was appointed. So at the age of 35 his academic career was launched at last. In 1954 he came to Australia, to a Senior Lectureship at the University of Sydney, and in 1961 became Foundation Professor at Monash University, a post he held until becoming Professor Emeritus in 1977. Almost a Foundation Fellow of this Academy, he was elected in 1969, and served on the Council in 1973–75. So, as he put it, the first catastrophe turned out well in the end, as it led away from journalism into librarianship. The second led away from librarianship into philosophy.

As a philosopher, Hector's central concerns were always with moral philosophy, and it is as an historian of ideas in this field that he made major contributions, with *Godwin's Moral Philosophy* in 1953, his edited work *A Guide to the British Moralists* in 1972, and *The Ambivalence of Bernard Mandeville* in 1975. These works gave their subjects a new lease of life as not mere curiosities but writers of enduring value.

He was not only an historian, however. In ethical theory, his *Empiricism and Ethics* (1967) presents his proposals for resolving the vexed issue, celebrated since the work of Hume, of how matters of discoverable fact can sustain or discredit moral assertions. And in applied ethics, *Ethics and the Environment* (1980) is an early expression of Hector's long-held, but at that time unusual view that the scope of moral concern needed to be broadened beyond exclusively human interests. The keen bushwalker of 1930 can be heard clearly after fifty years.

Having received his philosophical education in New Zealand in the 1930s, Hector was never captured by the fashions of mid-century philosophy. In particular, he was able to cast a sceptical eye on the enthusiasm for the linguistic turn, with its conviction that language contains myriad ways of expressing nonsense (and its sub-text that the extravagances of high-falutin' metaphysics might well be examples of language syntactically correct but semantically pathological.) In this vein, M. C. Beardsley had suggested in his *Aesthetics* (p. 143) that the phrases 'participial biped'; 'a man in the key of A flat', and 'consanguinity drinks procrastination' were clearly nonsensical and 'incapable of being explicated'. By way of response, Hector, who had always had a literary bent, published this poem in *Analysis* (April 1973, p. 167):

At family reunions
(Weddings, funerals,
The joint junketings of Christ and Saturn)
Blood is so much thinner than whisky and water
That consanguinity drinks procrastination,
Postponing the ineluctable anacoluthon
In the polished Jamesian discourse of Uncle Fred
(That prosy participial biped)
When he and Uncle Arthur

(Literal, inarticulate,
A man transposed wholly into the key of A flat)
Discover
That there are impediments to the marriages of mind
Certainly more than kin, as certainly less than kind.

Keeping his hand in as a writer of light verse, he published a cycle, *The Sonneteer's History of Philosophy*, treating the major figures of Western philosophy from Thales to Wittgenstein (*Philosophy* 55, 1980). On p.367 Descartes is accorded two sonnets; the first, celebrating the *Cogito*, gets a deft pacifist twist:

Rene' Descartes, a mercenary warrior,
Seated one afternoon upon the stove,
A place, he found, where inspiration throve,
Dug deep into his consciousness to quarry a
Proof of his own existence; life is sorrier
If mankind is unable to remove
Those nagging doubts that will arise to prove
That we are, in a word, phantasmagoria.
And if you say: 'No doubts like these alarm me,
I've never felt that life is Kafkaesque,
That I, and all about me, are grotesque,
A farce with neither humour nor cohesion',
It's clear that you, unlike the first Cartesian,
Have never been a soldier in the army.

In the second, expressing his deep affection for animals, he places in an unfavourable light Descartes' hypothesis that non-human animals are automata.

Hector contributed to philosophy in other ways also. For a time he edited the premier antipodean journal in academic philosophy, the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*.

He led, with characteristic good humour, a campaign in Victoria against a then overly- restrictive censorship. At Monash he established a department with high morale, and exercised a wide influence in its Faculty of Arts. As a colleague, his only fault seems to have been a deep unwillingness to award anyone a failing grade. Friendly and totally without pomposity, he was a quite unusually loveable philosopher.

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