

Bryan Magee

12 languages

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Bryan Edgar Magee (/məˈɡɪ/; 12 April 1930 – 26 July 2019) was a British philosopher, broadcaster, politician and author, best known for bringing philosophy to a popular audience.

A biography by journalist Mark Naylor is in preparation.^[2]

Early life

Born of working-class parents in Hoxton, London, in 1930, within a few hundred yards of where his paternal grandparents were born, Magee was brought up in a flat above the family clothing shop, where he shared a bed with his elder sister, Joan.^[3] He was close to his father but had a difficult relationship with his abusive and overbearing mother.^{[4][5]} He was evacuated to **Market Harborough** in Leicestershire, during World War II, but when he returned to London, much of Hoxton had been bombed flat. Magee was educated at *Christ's Hospital* school on a *London County Council* scholarship. During this formative period, he developed a keen interest in socialist politics, while during the school holidays he enjoyed listening to political orators at *Speakers' Corner*, Hyde Park, London, as well as regular visits to the theatre and concerts.^{[4][5]}

During his *National Service* he served in the **British Army**, in the *Intelligence Corps*,^[4] seeking possible spies among the refugees crossing the border between Yugoslavia and Austria. After demobilisation he won a scholarship to *Keble College, Oxford*, where he studied History as an undergraduate and then *Philosophy, Politics and Economics* in one year.^[7] His friends at Oxford included *Robin Day*, *William Rees-Mogg*, *Jeremy Thorpe* and *Michael Heseltine*. While at university, Magee was elected president of the *Oxford Union*. He later became an honorary fellow at Keble College.^[8]

At Oxford, Magee had mixed with poets as well as politicians and in 1951 published a volume of verse through the *Fortune Press*. The publisher did not pay its writers and expected them to buy a certain number of copies themselves – a similar deal had been struck with such writers as *Dylan Thomas* and *Philip Larkin* for their first anthologies. The slim volume was dedicated to the memory of *Richard Wagner*, with a quote from Rilke's *Duino Elegies*: ... *das Schöne ist nichts als des Schrecklichen Anfang, den wir noch grade ertragen* ("... beauty is nothing but the beginning of terror, that we are still able to bear").^[9] Magee said later: "I'm rather ashamed of the poems now, although I have written poems since which I haven't published, which I secretly think are rather good. It has always been a dimension of what I do."^[4] (Later he would also publish fiction, including a *spy novel To Live in Danger* in 1960 and then a long work *Facing Death*. The latter, initially composed in the 1960s but not published until 1977, would be shortlisted for an award by *The Yorkshire Post*).^{[10][9][4]}

In 1955 he began a year studying philosophy at *Yale University* on a postgraduate fellowship.^{[11][12]} He had expected to hate America but found that he loved it. His deep admiration of the country's equality of opportunity was expressed in a swift series of books, *Go West, Young Man* (1958), *The New Radicalism* (1963) and *The Democratic Revolution* (1964).^[12]

Politician

Magee returned to Britain with hopes of becoming a **Labour** Member of Parliament (MP). He twice stood unsuccessfully for *Mid Bedfordshire*, at the *1959 general election* and the *1960 by-election*, and instead took a job presenting the *ITV* current affairs television programme *This Week*. He made documentary programmes about subjects of social concern such as prostitution, *sexually transmitted diseases*, abortion and homosexuality (illegal in Britain at the time).^[4] Interviewed in 2003, Magee said:

British society was illiberal in a number of areas that are now taken for granted... <i>Roy Jenkins</i> changed them and he was bitterly opposed by the Tories. But if you were liberal with a small L there was a menu of social change and I believed very strongly in that whole liberal agenda. ^[13]

He was eventually elected MP for *Leyton* at the *February 1974 general election*, but from 1981 found himself out of tune with the Labour Party's direction under *Michael Foot*.^[13] On 22 January 1982 he resigned the Labour whip and in March joined the defection of *centrist* Labour MPs to the newly founded *Social Democratic Party*. He lost his seat at the *1983 general election*.^[13]

Magee returned to writing and broadcasting which, indeed, he had continued during his parliamentary career and would also serve on various boards and committees. He notably resigned as chairman of the *Arts Council* music panel in 1994 in protest at funding cuts.^{[13][14]}

He also returned to scholarship at Oxford, first as a fellow at *Wolfson*, then at *New College*. He also found more time to write classical music reviews and worked as his own compositions. He admitted that, while his own work was "whistleable", it was also "inherently sentimental".^[12]

Interviewed in 2003, Oxford contemporary *William Rees-Mogg* recalled "we never knew which way Bryan would jump. And as his life later demonstrated, there was always a question of whether he was basically at heart an intellectual or someone interested in public life. So it wasn't a surprise that he went into public life, but the intellectual was really the predominant element in his personality and the books seemed to represent the real Bryan more than the political activity did."^[4]

Broadcaster and writer

Interviews with philosophers

Magee's most important influence in popular culture were his efforts to make philosophy accessible to the layman.

In 1970–71 he presented a series for *BBC Radio 3* entitled *Conversations with Philosophers*.^{[15][16][4]} The series took the form of Magee in conversation with a number of contemporary British philosophers, discussing both their own work, and the work of earlier 20th-century British philosophers. The series began with an introductory conversation between Magee and *Anthony Quinton*. Other programmes included discussions on *Bertrand Russell*, *G. E. Moore* and *J. L. Austin*, *Ludwig Wittgenstein*, and the relationship between philosophy and religion, among others. Extracts of each of the conversations were printed in *The Listener* shortly after broadcast.^[17] And extensively revised versions of all the discussions would be made available in the 1971 book *Modern British Philosophy*.^{[15][4]} *Karl Popper* would appear in the series twice and Magee would soon after write an introductory book on his philosophy that was first published in 1973.^[18]

In 1978 Magee presented 15 dialogues with noted philosophers for *BBC Television* in a series called *Men of Ideas*. This was a series that, as noted in *The Daily Telegraph*, "achieved the near-impossible feat of presenting to a mass audience recortide issues of philosophy without compromising intellectual integrity or losing ratings" and "attracted a steady one-million viewers per show."^[8] Following an "Introduction to Philosophy", presented by Magee in discussion with *Isaiah Berlin*, Magee discussed topics like *Marxist philosophy*, the *Frankfurt School*, the ideas of *Noam Chomsky* and modern *Existentialism* in subsequent episodes. During the broadcast run, edited shorter versions of the discussions were published weekly in *The Listener* magazine.^[19] Extensively revised versions of the dialogues within the *Men of Ideas* series (which featured *Iris Murdoch*)^[20] were originally published in a book of the same name^[21] that is now sold under the title *Talking Philosophy*.^[16] DVDs of the series are sold to academic institutions with the title *Contemporary Philosophy*.^[22] Neither this series nor its 1987 'sequel' are available for purchase by home users but most of the episodes are freely available on *Youtube*.^{[23][24]}

Another BBC television series, *The Great Philosophers*, followed in 1987. In this series, Magee discussed the major historical figures of Western philosophy with fifteen contemporary philosophers. The series covered the philosophies of *Plato*, *Aristotle*, and *Descartes*, among others, including a discussion with *Peter Singer* on the philosophy of *Marx* and *Hegel*.^[25] and ending with a discussion with *John Searle* on the philosophy of Wittgenstein.^[26] Extensively revised versions of the dialogues were published in a book of the same name that was published that same year.^[27] Magee's 1998 book *The Story of Thought* (also published as *The Story of Philosophy*) would also cover the history of Western philosophy.^[12]

Between the two series, Magee released the first edition of the work he regarded as closest to his "academic magnum opus": *The Philosophy of Schopenhauer* (first published in 1983, substantially revised and extended, 1997).^{[28][29]} This remains one of the most substantial and wide-ranging treatments of the thinker and assesses in-depth *Schopenhauer's* influence on Wittgenstein, *Wagner* and other creative writers. Magee also addresses Schopenhauer's thoughts on homosexuality and the influence of *Buddhism* on his thought.^[28]

Later work and interest in Wagner

In 1997 Magee's *Confessions of a Philosopher* was published.^{[30][31][32]} This essentially offered an introduction to philosophy in autobiographical form. The book was involved in a libel lawsuit as a result of Magee repeating the rumour that *Ralph Schoenman*, a controversial associate of Bertrand Russell during the philosopher's final decade, had been planted by the *CIA* in an effort to discredit Russell. Schoenman successfully sued Magee for libel in the UK, with the result that the first printing of the British edition of the book was pulped.^[33] A second defamation suit, filed in California against *Random House*, was settled in 2001. The allegations were expunged by settlement, and a new edition was issued and provided to more than 700 academic and public libraries.^[34] In *Confessions of a Philosopher*, Magee charts his own philosophical development in an autobiographical context. He also emphasizes the importance of Schopenhauer's philosophy as a serious attempt to solve philosophical problems. In addition to this, he launches a critique of *analytic philosophy*, particularly in its linguistic form over three chapters, contesting its fundamental principles and lamenting its influence.^[35]

Magee had a particular interest in the life, thought and music of *Richard Wagner* and wrote two notable books on the composer and his world, *Aspects of Wagner* (1968, rev. 1988),^[36] and *The Tristan Chord: Wagner and Philosophy* (2001).^{[37][38]} In *Aspects of Wagner* Magee "outlines the range and depth of Wagner's achievement, and shows how his sensational and erotic music expresses the repressed and highly charged contents of the psyche. He also examines Wagner's detailed stage directions, and the prose works in which he formulated his ideas, and sheds interesting new light on his anti-semitism." The revised edition includes a fresh chapter on "Wagner as Music".^[39]

In 2016, approaching his 86th birthday, Magee had his book *Ultimate Questions* published by *Princeton University*. Writing in *The Independent*, *Julian Baggini* said "Magee doesn't always match his clarity of expression with rigour of argument, sometimes ignoring his own principle that the feeling 'Yes, surely this must be right' is 'not a validation, not even a credential'. But this can be excused. *Plato* and *Aristotle* claimed that philosophy begins with wonder. Magee is proof that for some, the wonder never dies, it only deepens."^[40]

In 2018 Magee, who was then living in one room in a nursing hospital in Oxford, was interviewed by *Jason Cowley* of *New Statesman* and discussed his life and his 2016 book *Ultimate Questions*. Magee said that he believed he lacked originality and, until *Ultimate Questions*, had struggled to make an original contribution to philosophy, saying:

<div><div><div><div><div><div></div></div></div><div><div><div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div><div><div><div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div><div><div><div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div><div><div><div></div></div><div><div></div></div></div></div></div></div> <div>Popper had this originality, Russell had it, and Einstein had it in spades. Einstein created a way of seeing things which transformed the way we see the world and the way we even understand such fundamental things as time and space. And I fundamentally understand that I could never do that, never. I wish I was in that class – not because I want to be a clever chap but because I want to do things that are at a much better level than I've done them.</div>

He explained that he followed the news and politics closely and that he considered the *vote for Brexit* to have been a "historic mistake".^[41]

Personal life

In 1953, Magee was appointed to a teaching job in Sweden and while there met Ingrid Söderlund, a pharmacist in the university laboratory. They married and had one daughter, Gunnela and, in time, three grandchildren. Magee later said:

The marriage broke up pretty quickly and it was a fairly disastrous period of my life. I came back to Oxford as a postgraduate. But since then Sweden has been a part of my life. I go there every year and my daughter visits me. I always assumed that sooner or later I'd get married again but it never quite happened, although I had some very long relationships. And now I don't want to get married again. I like the freedom. ^[4]

His memoir, *Clouds of Glory: A Hoxton Childhood*, won the *J. R. Ackerley Prize for Autobiography* in 2004.

Death

Magee died on 26 July 2019, at the age of 89, at St Luke's Hospital in Headington, Oxford.^[5] He is survived by his Swedish daughter Gunnela and her children and grandchildren.^{[42][3][5]} His funeral took place on 15 August.^{[43][44]}

The last of Magee's books to be published during his lifetime – *Making the Most of It* (2018) – closes.^{[45][43]}

If it could be revealed to me for certain that life is meaningless, and that my lot when I die will be timeless oblivion, and I were then asked: "Knowing these things, would you, if given the choice, still choose to have been born?" my answer would be a shouted "Yes!" I have loved living. Even if the worst-case scenario is the true one, what I have had has been infinitely better than nothing. In spite of what has been wrong with my life, and in spite of what has been wrong with me, I am inexpressibly grateful to have lived. It is terrible and terrifying to have to die, but even the prospect of eternal annihilation is a price worth paying for being alive.

A celebration of his life was held in the chapel of Keble College, Oxford, on 29 October 2019. The event was opened by Sir *Jonathan Phillips*, Warden of Keble College, and was introduced by Magee's executor, the academic, author and editor *Henry Hardy*. It included audio and video clips of Magee, music chosen by him and played by the Amherst Sextet, and addresses by *David Owen* and *Simon Callow*. The music choices were the sextet from Strauss's *Capriccio*, the largo from Elgar's *Serenade for Strings* and the prelude to Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*.^[46] The addresses by Owen and Callow were published together with a notice of Magee's life by Hardy in *The Oldie*.^[47]

Filmography

Television

- Men of Ideas* (BBC, 1978), host^[48]
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