

DOROTHY EMMET

Energetic philosopher who tackled ethics, religion and metaphysics

DOROTHY EMMET was an agelessly active, perceptive, acute and sympathetic philosopher, friend and citizen. Her first book, published in 1932, when she was 28, concerned the philosophy of A.N.Whitehead, with whom she had worked from 1928 to 30, and of whom she later became the best and most balanced interpreter. Her last book, *Outward Forms, Inner Springs: a Study in Social and Religious Philosophy*, was published in 1998, when she was 94, a fact that no one could possibly infer from reading it. Her many other books and papers covered topics ranging from metaphysics in general and causation in particular, to ethics, religion and society, all of them as clear and balanced as they are engaging.

Dorothy Mary Emmet was born in London and grew up in the village of West Hendred, near Wantage, where her father was the vicar until he moved the family to Oxford on becoming Dean of University College. In her wonderful book *Philosophers and Friends* she describes how, until she was nearly 14, she and other children near by were taught not at school but by a governess - and by her father, who 'above all, made us interested in discussing ideas'.

In 1923, after schooldays in Brighton which 'though patchy, were not unrewarding', she went up to Oxford, where she took Firsts in classics and philosophy. Of the philosophers who taught her there, she was most impressed by R.G.Collingwood and by her tutor (and the Master of Balliol) A.D.Lindsay. No wonder: her account of his audiences hearing 'a man who took a philosophical stance and drew on the resources of a rich mind to talk about moral and political questions in ways which affected how many of them would go on thinking of them' can serve equally as a description of conversing with Emmet herself.

Dorothy Emmet's first job was prompted by a speech given by R.H.Tawney in support of the miners in the 1926 General Strike, which she said gave her the nearest thing she ever had to a conversion experience, and led to her lifelong concern with politics. In the Rhondda valley - with its 80 per cent unemployment rate - she gave WEA classes based on Plato's *Republic* to audiences that included her later friend and Speaker of the House of Commons, George Thomas.

This experience, however, took Dorothy Emmet not into politics, but further into philosophy, initially through her reading of Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* (1926). This, by means of a Commonwealth Fellowship (later known as a Harkness), took her in 1928 from the Rhondda to Cambridge Massachusetts, where she not only worked with Whitehead but became a friend of his family.

By this time Whitehead was being regarded as a guru by some American followers. Emmet disapproved of this, and thought that his earlier work deserved more attention than they gave it. She did, however, take from him the conception of nature as composed of processes, which she developed in her book *The Passage of Nature* (1992).

Soon after returning to Britain, Emmet became a lecturer in philosophy at what is now Newcastle University, before moving to Manchester University in 1938. She stayed there until her retirement in 1966, having become professor and head of department in 1946. Among the distinguished philosophers whom she attracted to the department were her graduate student Alasdair Macintyre and her colleague Arthur Prior.

Those were, as she said, good days for the Manchester department. And not only for the philosophers, but also for the social anthropologists, notably Max Gluckman, with whom she established a formidable intellectual alliance, leading to her books *Function, Purpose and Powers* (1958) and *Rules, Roles and Relations* (1966).

When she retired she moved to Cambridge to live with Richard Braithwaite and his wife Margaret Masterman, friends and fellow-members of the Epiphany philosophers, a group concerned with the nature of religious and other extra-ordinary experiences. Made a Fellow of Lucy Cavendish College in 1967, she was active too in both college and university life.

Her achievements were recognised by an honorary fellowship at her Oxford college, Lady Margaret Hall, and by honorary degrees from Glasgow, Leicester and the Open University.

She continued writing and publishing, but those who knew her valued her even more for her capacity to inspire people and her unpossessive intellectual friendship.

Dorothy Emmet, philosopher, was born on September 29, 1904. She died on September 20 aged 95.