

H J BLACKHAM

1903-2009



TRANSCRIPT OF A MEMORIAL MEETING

**held on
Monday 8 June 2009
at Conway Hall, London**



The meeting opened to the sound of the second movement of Mozart's Clarinet Quintet

David Pollock

Welcome to this happy occasion, at which we will share memories and thoughts of and about a wonderful man, Harold Blackham, who died at the age of 105 on 23 January.

I am David Pollock, a trustee of the British Humanist Association and current president of the European Humanist Federation.

My first memories of Harold are of his several visits in the early 1960s to the Oxford University Humanist Group when he spoke with the authority and wisdom promised by his noble Roman face, and added coherence to our youthful and abundant enthusiasm. He came down from on high - not just from the Ethical Union headquarters in London but from an intellectual realm beyond our ken.

Barbara Smoker's memories go back further than that.

Barbara Smoker



HAROLD JOHN BLACKHAM - philosopher, writer, educationalist, lecturer, and father of the modern humanist movement - died peacefully on 23rd January at the Brockhampton Court care home, Hereford, two months short of his 106th birthday.

An excellent detailed obituary notice appeared in *The Times* on 29 January. Obviously written at least fifteen years ago (and updated by just the posthumous insertion of HJ's last two book titles), it was unattributed - but my guess is that the author was the late James Hemming. In fact, I cannot think of anyone else who might have written it.

My own (more personal) obituary article on HJ, as Harold chose to be called, was published in the *Independent* on 8th April, as well as the *Ethical Record* and *Free Inquiry* (in America). The one that appeared in the *Guardian* was compiled by Andrew Copson.

HJ was the only brother of four sisters, one of whom likewise lived to be a centenarian. He attended the Edward VI School, Birmingham, leaving at the age of 16 to become a farm labourer in the rural Midlands. It was heavy work, but he loved the horses. (He once told me that his best friend in his whole life had been a horse!) However, he could never stop thinking - especially about religion.

Eventually he gained a place in Birmingham University, to read divinity and history, after which he became master of divinity at Doncaster Grammar School - only to find his Christian faith slipping away. And he felt impelled, he told me, to extend the boundaries of the syllabus to deal with the difficult questions he was wrestling with himself, instead of keeping to the official line.

During this time he undertook voluntary work in the mining community with the humanitarian Christian group Toc H, and also founded a local branch of the League of Nations Union.

In 1932 he saw an advertisement for someone to assist the American ethicist Stanton Coit at the Ethical Church in London - a church without supernatural assumptions. He applied for the position, and was appointed, supplementing his income as a freelance lecturer. In 1935 he succeeded Coit as chairman of the Ethical Union and administrator of the Ethical Church. In the end, however, he was to strip the church of all its quasi-religious emblems, while officiating at non-religious funerals and other ceremonies and filling the role of counsellor. Later he was to co-found the British Association of Counselling.

In 1938 HJ helped organise a conference of the World Union of Freethinkers in this building. At the same time he was chairman of the Friends of Austria, which brought Jewish children from Austria to this country to escape the Nazi persecution.

When war broke out again, HJ joined the London Fire Brigade of the National Fire Service, driving a fire appliance throughout the blitz - notably in the burning London Docks - while continuing to work part-time as a writer and philosophy lecturer as well as chairman of the West London Ethical Society and secretary of the Ethical Union.

Envisaging an international organisation for Humanism, in its modern sense, he organised another conference at Conway Hall of the World Union of Freethinkers, under the title "The Challenge of Humanism" - but, finding little support in that audience for the word Humanism, which he had adopted, he then visited Holland to meet the leader of the Dutch humanists, Jap van Praag, together with whom he set up the International Humanist and Ethical Union. It held its inaugural conference in Amsterdam in 1952, and H J became its first secretary-general. In 1963 he transformed the Ethical Union in this country into the British Humanist Association, serving as its first executive director.

During all these years, he was lecturing part-time at Goldsmith's College and elsewhere, and was writing prolifically. In 1948 he published his memoir of Stanton Coit - which contains no hint of what a difficult boss Coit had been!

In addition to other pamphlets, HJ produced innumerable articles and lecture summaries, as well as a number of books, which will be assessed by later speakers.



When I asked him, some years ago, which of his books he thought best, he named *The Human Tradition*. For myself, though, more important than any particular book or article, is simply his life, his compassion, and his caring fellowship -while his attractive personality enabled him to persuade leading intellectuals to respond to his requests for their time. He often chaired their meetings, and he collaborated, among others, with Julian Huxley, A J Ayer, Gilbert Murray, Jacob Bronowski, and Barbara Wootton.

In 1944 he founded the prestigious quarterly journal *The Plain View*, for which, for two decades, he contrived to obtain scholarly contributions from the foremost thinkers of the day making it (in the opinion of the late Nicolas Walter) probably the most important liberal journal of the twentieth century for perceptive readers, though its circulation remained small. HJ continued to edit it until 1965, when it came to an end with his retirement.

However, the *Journal of Moral Education*, which he also founded, has continued to go from strength to strength, as a highly regarded publication of international influence.

South Place Ethical Society often invited him to be the speaker for its traditional Sunday morning lectures here in Conway Hall, dealing with a wide range of subjects. In 1965 he was elected to its panel of four Appointed Lecturers, who, from the start of the 20th century, had covered between them one or two Sundays a month.

Writing in the *Freethinker* in March 1989, he said that Cardinal Heenan, who was a member of the RC Birth Control Commission, had informed him quarter of a century earlier that the overwhelming majority, including himself, were in favour of sanctioning the Pill and would strongly recommend it.

However, their report came too late. Pope John was already dead, and his successor (Paul VI) was too indecisive a man to grasp the nettle. Hence *Humanae Vitae* and all the human misery



People gather before the meeting

it has caused - though, on the plus side, it has also caused widespread flouting of papal authority by Catholics in the developed world.

During the war, Harold and his first wife, Olga, had adopted a son, Paul, who, with his wife Wenol, now has three sons and two grandchildren. Paul, Wenol, and one of their sons are here this afternoon.

In his seventies, after Olga's death, HJ remarried. With his second wife, Ursula, he then left the London area for the Welsh

Marches, looking out on the lovely Wye Valley - in order, he said, to escape from no fewer than seventeen London committees! However, he went on writing, officiating at funerals, and travelling around the lecture circuit, for another two decades. He also found time to grow fruit and vegetables.

In April last year, at the age of 105, HJ went into a care home - Brockhampton Court, near Hereford. He was a favourite with the staff, who took good care of his needs; so he was quite contented there, occupied with a century of memories.

On breaking free from Catholicism, some sixty years ago, I used to cross London to replace Sunday Mass by a lecture at the Ethical Church whenever the *New Statesman* listings named H J Blackham as the lecturer. He was a charismatic speaker, though not an easy one. I thought he looked very much like John Stuart Mill, with a speaking voice like Lord Louis Mountbatten's. He had a quiet sense of humour and occasionally a witty turn of phrase.

His lectures largely comprised my further education - not only in humanistic philosophy, but also in the English language, for there were always several words to look up in the dictionary when I got home.

Later, when the Ethical Union was preparing to host the 1957 IHEU Conference in Conway Hall, by which time I represented SPES on the Ethical Union Council, I volunteered to do some of the secretarial work for it at Prince of Wales Terrace -- and I have remained active in the movement ever since. Like many others, I regard H J Blackham as the chief mentor of my life.

David Pollock

Now we have the first of our readings from Harold's works. Peter Cave is the chair of the Humanist Philosophers' Group and has recently had published his own book on Humanism.

Peter Cave

read the section on Humanist Commitment from Blackham's introductory chapter to Objections to Humanism:

What do you do? is the last question here, and the first challenge of the impatient inquirer. To be a Christian, says Montaigne, is to be more than ordinarily just, charitable, kind. In practice this may be so, and one might say that in practice to be a humanist is to be more than

ordinarily honest-minded, public-spirited, tolerant. It doesn't sound as nice, but the comparison in practice would probably yield fairly equal marks, and, anyhow, the words would have to be spelled out before comment is profitable. But faith without works is not Christianity, and unbelief without any effort to help shoulder the consequences for mankind is not humanism. If one wakes up from a sense of unlimited dependence to a supposed independence, instead of unlimited interdependence, it is simply to change illusions, for the worse.



Unlimited shared responsibility for creating the conditions for all of a life worthy to be called human, a human providence, is the colossal undertaking to be shouldered by man without God. Men face together the common problems of mankind, the classical evils of ignorance, poverty, and disease, the spectre of insecurity, the characteristic weaknesses of human beings, the population nightmare; on their side they have the arts and sciences and the vast resources of social co-operation. Humanists are simpleminded enough to think that the common sense of the situation calls for an attack on these problems with the aid of these resources, and that this has urgency and priority over the many and important differences which parcel out mankind in races, nations, classes, creeds, and other portions of total humanity. Of course this is simple-minded, but those versed in the history of religions know that only simpletons were ever inspired by simple truths, for everybody else is content to know they won't work.

Without some response to this call, without voluntary enlistment in the human enterprise, without something of a Promethean spirit, there is no humanism worth speaking about, for humanism is more a passion than an intellectual position. People who call themselves humanists, or don't, respond according to their sense of the task and its urgency, according to their capacities and opportunities, according to their willingness to serve, according to their hopes or fears for mankind; some with little more than goodwill, some few, a Diderot, a Condorcet, magnificently, generously, at full stretch, with enthusiasm. Enthusiasm for what? Not a vapid, effusive outpouring; a sure-fingered outreaching after a visible ideal: enthusiasm for a fine quality of living, kindled in the lived life. Matthew Arnold's choice spirits drawn from all classes, generous and humane souls, lovers of man's perfection, who devote themselves to education and the public service are humanists in this profound sense.

Humanism in the stricter sense is justified by its production in every generation of its quota of just men. If one looks round amongst declared humanists living today and takes the liberty of naming Bertrand Russell and Julian Huxley and Barbara Wootton and Jean-Paul Sartre, and looks back at those recently dead and names Gilbert Murray and M. N. Roy and John Dewey, these are not merely the names of men of great gifts and achievements, they are the names of manysided human beings of more than ordinary candour and public spirit who have lived and spent themselves in the human cause. You may find as many faults with them as you like, with their thinking, with their judgements, with their lives: they remain grand exemplars of what it means to be human, and to have one's passions and ends and values illumined by humanist thinking.

David Pollock

Harold's writings were extensive, and Jim Herrick - who like Peter has written a book on Humanism - the publication party for the second edition is tonight and you are all invited - is going to talk about his writings and read some extracts.

Jim Herrick



Harold Blackham was a thinker, activist, and writer. He was also a man of great personal strength and humanity and compassion. This is seen in his books – which it is my task to speak about today.

I think the idea that his writings are difficult is a myth. You don't romp through it like an Agatha Christie - but it is clear and has great depth and luminosity.

His first effort was a Memoir and anthology: *Stanton Coit, (1857-1944)*, about his first patron and leader of the Ethical Movement. It shows how deep are his roots in the ethical movement. Later he produced *Living as a Humanist* (1950) -- a symposium of ideas relating to the move from ethicism to Humanism. Its title is very revealing – like the ancient philosophers, he was always concerned with creating a philosophy of life, a way of living.

His first full-blown work of philosophy was *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (1952), an account of the ideas of the fashionable European existentialist philosophers. The preface made his aim clear: "The purpose of this book is exposition, not criticism nor advocacy."

The figures covered were Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Jaspers, Gabriel Marcel, Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and there was a conclusion titled "A Philosophy of Personal Existence", yet again expressing his concern with living:

'Philosophy' remarks Schopenhauer, 'like the overture to *Don Juan*, begins with a minor chord.' For it is an astonished, meditative, measured preoccupation with the problem of existence perceived in its magnitude: its possible impossibility, Heidegger says; the preferability of non-existence, Schopenhauer says. Antoine Roquentin, hero of Sartre's first novel *La Nauseé*, has no great expectations and therefore does not fall into disillusionment and despair, but he is stunned with astonishment at this life which he finds he has – for no reason, for nothing: there is the oppressive tumid presence of vegetation that spreads itself out excessively, offensively, stupidly, manifesting the amorphous paste of things without rational subordination to the functions it covers; and there is the face of these same things (the chestnut tree, the laurels) smiling as though wanting to say something, seeming like thoughts which had stopped short and lapsed into oblivion and yet retained a queer vestigial quiver of meaning for ever out of reach. What is man to make of this Being which envelops him, and which he is?

This was his most successful book financially, becoming a standard for university students, especially in South America – it was translated into Spanish.

In the same year he published *The Human Tradition* an account of non-religious ideas from the ancient world to the present day. This indicates a further constant theme of his writing – that historical tradition, that humanist tradition, of Western Europe.

Another book in which his contribution reflected this historic theme was a revised edition of J. B. Bury's *History of Freedom of Thought* - he added a 10,000-word Epilogue. He also worked on a revised edition of Julian Huxley's *Religion without Revelation*. He told me he had almost completely rewritten the book. We see in his work on this theme that he was not the kind of freethinker that demolished religion – more one that studied religion but provided an alternative place for the non-religious. He had many contacts with distinguished religious people.



Two Pelican books were in my opinion his best contributions to humanism. They were *Objections to Humanism* (1963) and *Humanism* (1968). They both melded together philosophy and thinking about personal living. *Objections to Humanism* was a symposium in which he contributed the introduction and concluding essay. In Blackham's conclusion on "The Pointlessness of it All", he writes: "*Life as the end of life* in Pater's phrase, experience for its own sake, the finality and sufficiency of human values, this is the citadel of the humanist position." I am impressed that he who believed in life and lived it so fully, could also take on this question of what is the point of life?

As a philosopher he was, like the ancient philosophers, truly concerned with the living of life and not with analytical, abstract philosophy as was the current philosophical vogue. He also suffered from not being an academic philosopher with an academic post.

In my view *Humanism* (1968) is his best book and perhaps the best exposition of humanism. He continues the idea of the point of things in writing about balance:

A human being, it has already been said, should try to maintain a temporal balance in his life, so that each phase of his development is lived and enjoyed for its own sake and at the same time draws on the past and prepares for the future.

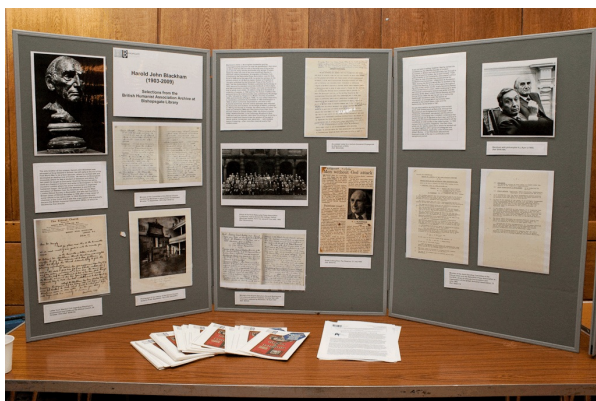
In his very active retirement he wrote *The Fable as History* (1985), which was a literary work dealing with Aesop and Orwell, Aldous Huxley and Thurber. His final work was *The Future of our Past* (1996). I remember talking to him about this massive historic work – his enthusiasm and dedication to expressing his ideas on the humanist tradition amazed me. It starts with Greek life and thought and moves through the whole of history to the modern period.

I am impressed with his intellect and his human compassion. He was not just a writer, as we know. I remember when I was first working for the BHA - someone called into the office in a

state of great distress. At that time the BHA had a counselling group – Harold Blackham was the leader of this group. I rang him up. He rapidly turned up, talked to the fellow, gave him some money and saw him off much happier.

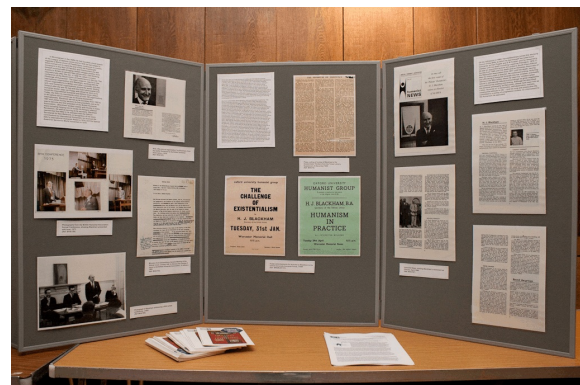
Let Blackham have the last word from the end of his best book – *Humanism*.

But can humanists really and justifiably maintain equanimity in the face not only of probably ultimate annihilation but also of actual human suffering and stupidity and brutality on the present scale? Is there any satisfaction at all to be found in the general behaviour of mankind or in the trends and tendencies that can be discerned? There is no answer to such a question, or no general answer, for there is no general behaviour of mankind. Everybody must balance his own account here. In any such reckoning, the ready money of daily cheerfulness and unalloyed pleasures is not too small to count. One dimension of finality is here and now. On the public fronts, defeatism may sometimes be the part of reason acting as prudence, but who will responsibly say that the time is now? So long as there are better and worse possibilities there is time for action. Today the better and worse are better and worse than they have ever been. That is the summons to humanists and the summons to humanism.



This was provided by Stefan Dickers of the Bishopsgate Institute which curates the archives.

There was an exhibition of material from the BHA archives about Harold Blackham's life and work.



David Pollock

Harold, as we have heard, was a pioneer of Humanism as a lifestance, finding all the existing traditions of rationalism and secularism and the ethical movement too confined. Antony Chapman, who has sent his apologies for today owing to family illness, has sent his recollections of Harold on the board of the Rationalist Press Association:

I joined the Rationalist Press Association board in 1966, by which time Harold had already been on that board for 12 years. He had met Hector Hawton, who ran the RPA at the time, at IHEU meetings in the early 1950s, and Harold joined the RPA board in 1954. The RPA published two of his early works, the biography

of Stanton Coit and *Living as a Humanist*. Harold stayed on the board until 1977, and throughout that period was a staunch supporter of Humanism, and a sane voice during board eruptions. As chairman at the time, I greatly regretted his retirement and the loss of his wise counsel. He was appointed an Honorary Associate of the RPA on his retirement.

Antony mentions IHEU, and Harold was of course one of its founders, along with Jaap van Praag. His international contacts were many, sustained over many years, and among them was Paul Kurtz, who is unable to be with us today but has recorded a reminiscence of Harold from an American viewpoint.

Paul Kurtz

Founder and Chair, Prometheus Books and the Center for Inquiry.



I am pleased to bring greetings from across the Atlantic to honour Harold J Blackham, a man that I first met in the late 1960s at meetings of the International Humanist and Ethical Union. Indeed it was in 1969, forty years ago, that I made a special trip to England to see Harold. I was in the process of founding Prometheus Books and wished to talk to him and Hector Hawton about cooperating with the Rationalist Press Association and Pemberton Books in importing books from British authors. I have remained in contact with Harold Blackham over the years on my many trips to the United Kingdom and to meetings of the International Humanist and Ethical Union and also I visited him at his home. Blackham was one of the great heroes of Humanism in the twentieth century - indeed probably the best known of British humanists worldwide.

There are many famous British humanists - scientists, philosophers and intellectuals - but not a *humanist* humanist *per se* committed to the cause. I appreciate the fact that Harold did so much to create the British Humanist Association, leaving the Ethical Union and its religious focus behind. He was a tireless worker on behalf of organised Humanism and he was devoted to many progressive causes. Especially noteworthy is moral education for children, as an alternative to religious education.

Blackham was not a professional philosopher but he published many books on philosophical themes. Indeed, Prometheus Books was pleased to publish his work *The Future of Our Past* in 1996, in which he explores the roots of European civilisation, beginning with the humanism of Greece, Romanitas and the challenge of Zion. He concluded in his many writings that humanity possesses self awareness as never before to determine the future of our planet and to reshape our genetic heritage. We have a responsibility, he said, to develop one world collectively and individually - the bond of human union supersedes the claims of Hellas, Romanitas and Zion.

In *The Humanist Alternative*, a book that I edited, he provided a definition of Humanism. Humanism, he said, is a concept of man; the notion of human responsibility is the nuclear idea in the definition of Humanism. Man and woman in their own terms rule an end.

Human life is in human hands. Here is the humanist faith - a reasonable faith in intelligent action. This call comes home to everyone's possibilities to respond. Personal life is choice, not obligation, a work of art, not a set task, an offering not a requirement, a creation, not a prize. Abstractly, said Harold Blackham, Humanism is a concept of the human, focussed on a programme of humanity. Concretely, he added, it is my idea of and my commitment to my part in that programme which includes the life that is in my own hands.

A fitting, rather eloquent statement, in the celebration of the life of a great person, Harold J Blackham.

David Pollock

After I came down from Oxford in the mid-60s I joined the Ethical Union Council and its General Purposes Committee when Harold was in charge. The EU changed its name to the British Humanist Association when the short-lived BHA collaboration between the EU and the Rationalist Press Association failed in the trammels of English charity law.

It was at this time of optimism for Humanism that Penguin Books asked him to write his Pelican on *Humanism*, and Richard Norman, another member of our Humanist Philosophers' Group, and this afternoon's third author of his own book on Humanism, is going to read a key passage from it.

Richard Norman

read an extract from chapter 4 of Blackham's 'Humanism'

Although there is no definitive model for humanist living..., there are perhaps characteristic humanist virtues and values, so that the lineaments could be sketched for a moral profile of the humanist....

'Open' is a key word. To the open mind and the open society might well be added the open heart and the open hand. The humanist is more than usually candid: 'This is what I think, this is the evidence I rely on, this is how I mean to apply it: show me where I am wrong.' He is ready to counsel and to be counselled, to accept himself as one among many, each to count as one and no one as more than one. He seeks equality and agreement as the basis of society and of good faith. He identifies himself with others in a common humanity sharing the same ultimate conditions. On that basis he is permissive and tolerant, loath to make an issue of disagreements. Because he is not afraid of pleasure he is not puritanical, but inclined to be gentle and tender and affectionate, to the point of indulgence. He would rather make love than make war – a vast understatement. Having explored and accepted the human and the personal limits of his life, he is active and effective within his scope, and cultivates appreciation and enjoyment of what he has, aspiring to be his own rather than to own and to share rather than to rule. Because he does not feel that life owes him anything, because he himself takes responsibility for it, he is giving and outgoing, and there is also a strain of endurance, long-



suffering, in him. Seeing everywhere and always the causal relations of all things, he is understanding and compassionate; but he sees here also the key to improvement and control, and the foundation of responsibility. He is thus poised between acceptance and aspiration, the real and the ideal. He does not worship and he does not hate.

Perhaps the virtues he characteristically admires and wants to cultivate are candour and generosity, fortitude and fairness, the 'open' virtues sustained by an underlying toughness. He regards truth as a primary value, but in the form of methodically attainable and testable knowledge; so that he does not think of Truth, Beauty and Goodness as absolute values.... The word 'virtue' has lost its virtue and become prim and prudish; indeed, it has for this reason practically passed out of serious usage. But the vital originality in a man for which it once stood remains the supreme humanist value.

Is this identikit delineation of the features of the humanist too flattering? Of course it is.... People with some or many of the characteristics we have delineated are likely to be humanists. Leave it at that without too much naivety.

David Pollock



I recall Harold's gentle but firm insistence on creating a positive Humanism, not just intellectual but practical, as was shown by his important work in non-directive counselling.

He was patient and optimistic, constantly engaging with the leading authorities in religion and (especially) education. It was a positive engagement, not a combative one, based on a justified confidence in his own humanist beliefs but never ruling out the possibility of learning from others. He championed - almost invented - moral education in schools as a project that could be shared by people of good will whatever their beliefs, undercutting the arguments for religious instruction. He did not see it as a timetabled lesson: rather, he realised that young people would inevitably be shaped by their school environment and the way that the school community worked, and advocated that the school should therefore shape that environment and treat its pupils in ways that would provide them with a moral formation. He founded the Campaign for Moral Education and helped initiate the *Journal of Moral Education* and ensured that it found a publisher by persuading the Rationalist Press Association to take it on for its first few years.

I am delighted that we have with us today the current editor of the JME, Monica Taylor.

Monica Taylor*

Harold Blackham, who died on 23rd January 2009 aged 105, was, in his role as Secretary of the Campaign for Moral Education and Chair of the Education Committee of the Social Morality Council (SMC) in the UK, the driving force behind and co-founder of the *Journal of Moral Education* (JME). He was the first Chair of the Editorial Board of *JME*, from its initial publication by the Rationalist Press Association in October 1971 until May 1977, when, at the age of 74,



he also retired from being Chair of the SMC, leaving London for the Wye Valley, Herefordshire. From there he continued to write more books, enjoying gardening, nature and the panoramic countryside view for another 30 years. He, nevertheless, remained actively connected with both the *JME* and SMC (which owned the journal) throughout the 80s, advising on the development of the journal and its publication arrangements, writing and reviewing papers, in 1983 acting as Guest Editor of the first special issue of *JME*, and in 1994 becoming an Honorary Associate.

Harold Blackham's connection with *JME* was only a small part of a much wider national and international web of intellectual and practical connection, a life of thought, writing, action and commitment to many progressive causes, focusing on Humanism. Indeed, he has widely been acknowledged as 'the father of modern humanism' (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/09/obituary-harold-blackman-humanist>), 'architect of the British and international humanist movements' and 'founder of the British Humanist Association' (<http://www.humanism.org.uk/news/view/209>). These obituaries testify to the early influences on Harold Blackham –the family background in Congregationalism and bookselling, study of divinity, ethics and literature at Birmingham University, and a period of teaching– before becoming a freelance lecturer and writer, which continued throughout his life. Through working with Stanton Coit, who after social reform in his native USA had founded a British Union of Ethical Societies, Harold Blackham became chairman of the Union in 1934, and it was this organisation that eventually became the British Humanist Association (BHA), of which he became the first Director, 1963-8. It was under the auspices of the BHA (today a national charity supporting and representing the non-religious in Britain through its educational and secular civic activities) that *JME* was first established. Prior to and immediately after the Second World War, Harold was also working with other Freethinkers internationally, particularly in the USA, India and the Netherlands, to build the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), now a worldwide union of over 100 organisations in 40 nations, which continues to develop Humanism internationally. The IHEU was a point of connection for Harold and Lisa Kuhmerker –in 1974 the first female *JME* Editorial Board member from outside the UK, and from 1976 the founder of the Association for Moral Education in USA and founder and Editor of *Moral Education Forum*. Their communication persisted into the mid-80s, with Lisa writing a glowing review of Harold's book, *The Fable as Literature* (1985, The Athlone Press) in *JME* (15 (3), 243-4).

Harold's intellect and practical wisdom were obvious from being in contact with him, as I was from 1974 for over 20 years, first through his contribution on The Curriculum in Moral Education to an edited collection *Progress and Problems in Moral Education* (NFER, 1975), and then as Editor of *JME*. Andrew Copson's BHA obituary mentions Harold's 'life-long love of the written word' and that fellow humanist, Barbara Smoker in her anthology *Blackham's best* (BHA, 1988) describes his writing as 'driven by a desire to distil and communicate the wisdom of the past', both evident to me as a young editor visiting his completely book-lined flat in Parsons Green, and in Harold's correspondence which parenthetically referred to ancient Greek and 20th century Continental thinkers. Of his many books and multifarious writings published

over 70 years, *Six Existentialist Thinkers* (Routledge, 1952) and *Humanism* (Penguin, 1968), must rank as among the most influential for students of Philosophy and the general public.

In the 1970-80s in the UK, Harold Blackham's long experience of national and international committees and voluntary organisations was brought to bear on a succession of moral education activities which he led from the SMC and of which *JME* was a part. The SMC was comprised of representatives of recognised religious traditions of that time in the UK (principally Anglicans, Catholics, members of the Free Churches and Jews) and Humanists, educational professionals, and members of the wider community. Harold Blackham set up working parties to promote dialogue on contemporary ethical issues (such as drug dependence, broadcasting, the relationship of moral and religious education and the preparation of teachers for moral education), with a view to arriving at agreed statements used as leverage for funding and to change the climate of opinion with government, ecumenical and local education authorities (e.g. *Moral and Religious Education in County Schools*, Methuen, 1970). The SMC's first Moral Education Centre was set up at University of London, Goldsmiths' College, and undertook a survey of moral education in the UK, produced a resource list on moral education (National Book League, 1976) and stimulated conferences and reports (e.g. *Moral Education*,



ULGC, 1978). At this time the aims and teaching of Religious Education, the main curriculum vehicle for moral education, were hotly contested by Humanists (e.g. *Objective, Fair and Balanced*, BHA, 1975; and Blackham's edited *Moral and Religious Education in County Primary Schools*, NFER, 1976). Another dimension of Harold's concern for moral education was manifest in his advocacy for attention to be given to personal development in school, both through pastoral care ('though I don't like the term ... a bit')

and counselling, in line with his co-founding of the British Association for Counselling in 1977 and the publication of his *Education for Personal Autonomy* (Methuen, 1978).

The 1983 *JME* Special Issue, Moral Education, Religious Education and Ethical Theory, of which Harold was Guest Editor, was motivated by ongoing confusion and uncertainty in curriculum theory and UK pedagogical practice. Harold was persuaded to become involved because of his deep intellectual interest in these themes. As he wrote to me, 'Not that I intend anything controversial, rather I would hope to satisfy all reasonable minds. What a hope!' The Special Issue was followed up with a series of meetings in conjunction with local education authority advisers and teachers to establish new baselines for development in moral education, which resulted in A Statement - Relations of ME with RE: the Need for Understanding and Cooperation (*JME* 14(1), 4-8, January, 1985). In the mid-80s Harold and the SMC were the driving forces behind obtaining some government funding for the establishment of a Moral Education Centre focusing on teacher education, at Leicester University under the direction of Derek Wright, with David Ingram. There was also enhanced co-operation with the Moral Education Research and Information Centre at the then St Martin's College, Lancaster, under the direction of Brian Gates, with Mike Cross, and other significant regional work was

supported by the Chief Education Officers in Devon and Cornwall and in Dudley, West Midlands.

Even this glimpse of Harold Blackham's moral education endeavours demonstrates that he enabled a Humanist voice to be heard at a time of domination of a Christian religious perspective, but this was together with the hearing of other religious and educational voices. Harold had intellectual force and showed leadership, but he also worked with others, commanding respect and commitment to the process of engagement. He managed to be patient and reasonably optimistic about moving matters forward, willing to pay attention to detail, always concerned with practical arrangements, yet never losing sight of the wider political and educational picture. It was he who encouraged and supported both an international perspective in the journal and the thematic series of now customary Special Issues. To a beginning editor, almost 50 years his junior, as Chair of the Editorial Board he was an inspiration and guide: informed and informative, balanced but not without opinion, calm and prompt, with a passionate urgency to make progress. He was self-directed and industrious: after his move to Hereford he wrote 'with all there was to do ... I overdid it ... and have had to let up, which I find almost impossible. I resolve every day, and break it, like an addict, which I suppose I am', and years later he observed, 'an inability to relax is my greatest difficulty'. His courteous communications always had a personal touch—comments about his current concerns and endeavours and an evaluation of their progress—and empathic support for one's own. His long life must be seen as one of considerable influence and lasting achievement, primarily in his explanation and promotion of Humanism and in securing its recognition and acknowledgement as a human-centred ethic in a naturalistic world, and in his contribution to several related professional spheres including moral education.



This bust of Harold Blackham by Martyn Wright was commissioned by the BHA in 1972

The passing of Harold Blackham, together with that of James Hemming (in 2008), John Wilson (in 2003) and Derek Wright (in 2006), marks the end of the initial era of British leadership in moral education. Their learning, thinking and experiences led them from their backgrounds and interests in religious sources of morality to seek and promote other secular, rational (including the emotions) and logical approaches to morality and moral education, which linked theory firmly with practice, individual and social needs and the contexts for learning, with recognition of increasing social pluralism. Their visions, drive and endeavours found common expression in founding and sustaining the early years of the *JME* and their ongoing, active commitment to it during at least its first 25 years. With the growth in the field of moral development and education and the interrelated international and academic role of the Journal, scholars around the world who have published in and who read the *JME* have reason to be grateful for their foresight and legacy, and Harold's intellectual, strategic and inclusive leadership.

** This text is that of Monica Taylor's obituary in the JME, on which her contribution was very closely based - see JME 38 (2) 247-50, June 2009.*



David Pollock

It was not just in moral education that Harold linked up with the religious. His was a Humanism capable of - indeed hungry for - constructive encounter with our rival lifescapes. He took part in the IHEU dialogue with the Vatican. More importantly he won respect for Humanism from the religious partners in the Social Morality Council that he more than anyone else created out of the ashes of the collapsed and vice-obsessed Public Morality Council.

Nigel Collins, who played a large part, with Jane Wynne Willson, in creating humanist funerals and other ceremonies, knew Harold later and has some memories to share.

Nigel Collins

Whether in his final years, at a great age, HJB was still ingesting political jargon, I doubt - let's hope he opted to be oblivious of it! Notwithstanding, as it happens, one of the more current examples of the genre, 'ahead of the curve', applied in full measure to him. The first time I met him was at a public meeting, organised by Cotswold Humanists, to debate voluntary euthanasia: already well past eighty and still vigorous in mind and body HJB was hardly a good advert for the cause! The meeting was sparsely attended and what audience there was largely

unreceptive, if not hostile. However, a quarter of a century later, in an ageing society and with the issue, however repackaged, hardly ever out of the news ... and rightly so, it can be seen on that unproductive evening in Gloucestershire, at the head of the local humanists, HJB was indeed 'ahead of the curve'. Albeit less consciously, the same applied to his stance on social rituals.

Happily, the next time I saw him he was unchanged by advancing years. In the spring of 1993,



I accompanied Jim Herrick when he went to interview HJB for an article in *New Humanist* to mark his 90th birthday (this appearing subsequently in the July issue of that year). I should stress my role was not journalistic ... but merely as Jim's driver and human sat. nav. – this though an essential role, as it transpired, as fairly remote Ballingham, in deepest Herefordshire, is not the easiest place to find!

Once there, two memories stand out for me: First, I was impressed that HJB, at 90, greeted us after completing a session in a garden plot effectively situated on the side of a hill, its steepness causing him regularly these days to 'go over', as he cheerfully informed us. Second, once inside the cottage I was immediately aware of the pyramids of books ... stretching from floor level upwards. As all serious bibliophiles recognise, book pyramids are a natural phenomenon occurring when it has become impossible to find any further room on your shelves ... but in such circumstances you still need to know instinctively where to find titles for reference purposes.

That memorable visit coincided with the early days of the BHA's Ceremonies Network, with which I was somewhat involved, and knowing of this, and the significant role Jane Wynne Willson's seminal, practical guide *Funerals Without God* was playing in the process, HJB expressed mild surprise at the progressive establishment of Humanist funerals in wider society. (In his Pelican *Humanism* of 1968 he had posed the question: should ritual be private or public? – and though he presented a balanced argument I think his purely personal view to the end veered to the former ... he was not contemplating a funeral for himself, he said.)

Shortly after our visit, I was pleased to receive in the post from HJB a copy of a paper he had given in the mid-1960's (still then as H.J. Blackham, Ethical Union, London) to the Royal Society: this was published in *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London* (1966) – A Discussion on Ritualization of Behaviour in Animals and Man – organised by Sir Julian Huxley – which, according to HJB's covering letter, 'Huxley had persuaded me to take part in'. The letter continued: 'I referred to funeral customs in my contribution, and mentioned the view I expressed [to you] on Friday [questioning the focus on the corpse and the usefulness of funeral ritual]. . . My reason for sending this transcript to you is simply because of the almost violent protest I encountered in this audience of senior scientists. Many of them at least could not tolerate the idea of not paying respect to the dead in the customary way.'

Of course, back then (in the mid-1960's), neither HJB nor his august Royal Society audience knew of the sea-change to come, starting some quarter of a century later, resulting in a more personalised and meaningful approach to funeral ceremonies generally. Though there were much earlier pioneers on the wider Humanist front, I think the BHA, in producing a new model and funeral celebrants of commitment and quality, can claim much credit for this; though greater enlightenment in crematoria practice (provision of a more neutral environment and additional time for ceremonies) and a newer and more liberal breed of clergy have also played a significant part in the process.

It has been widely acknowledged the most welcome aspect of this previously not-envisioned sea-change has been less emphasis at a funeral on the presence of the corpse, and much more on presenting, in one form or another, a reasonably full, frank and above all honest account of the subject – so, crucially, more a multi-faceted tribute than an idealised eulogy.

This then would seem to meet HJB's two main reservations about funerals as opposed to memorial meetings: In championing the latter in his Royal Society paper he asserts:

Even for the most private person, the unencumbered memorial meeting is the real tribute to the dead and the real admonition to the living, for it helps to redeem the loss in a living image and it asks for a life worth valuing. The concentration and collective contribution of the memorial meeting can raise and reinforce the image of the lost person with the sharpness of finality that survives dispersion. **This should be a harvest ritual rather than a tomb ritual.**



Then, in his slightly later Pelican *Humanism*, he speaks of a memorial meeting

...which recalls to life the dead in the recollections of his friends, so he is not dispersed in unspoken thoughts but is reaffirmed and repossessed in a collective act which establishes the image of his identity and quality with its own power of self-perpetuation in the memories and lives of others. **This is a harvest ritual, not a tomb ritual**, not a process of mourning but of fulfilment, a realization of value not a recognition of pointlessness, of achievement and permanence not of futility and ephemerality.

These far-sighted views, for the time, HJB reiterated and expanded in his contribution, as a Humanist, to a book on religious and cultural attitudes to death commissioned by the Standing Conference on Inter-Faith Dialogue in Education (*Death*, edited John Prickett, pub. Lutterworth Educational 1980). In this context, well-outnumbered by religionists, he nevertheless firmly advocated:

Like the Epicureans, modern humanists should not make much of funeral rites, disposal of the body, attendance on it at the tomb; rather, they should encourage friends and relatives to come together to contribute from their memories and impressions to the creation of a new image of the person they knew, **harvesting what was cultivated and produced in life.**

These phrases of HJB's, employing the imagery of a harvest or harvesting, galvanised me so much as a prospective and then practising Humanist celebrant that, twenty years later I still always include them in the funeral ceremonies I conduct – if not inappropriate because of very early death; and having advocated them and passed them on whenever possible over this time, I can only trust other Humanist celebrants do too.

Though not yet attaining the now surprisingly wide-ranging usage, with variants, of 'to celebrate a human life' (first introduced – let the world not forget! – by Jane Wynne Willson

in the early paragraphs of the very first edition (1989) of *Funerals Without God*), they surely deserves greater prominence.

But how did this strong and expressive imagery enter HJB's consciousness? With the poets of the day who also used them, most notably Edith Sitwell in *Eurydice*,

Love is not changed by Death,
And nothing is lost and all in the end is harvest

a Christian context is usually claimed. As for the Humanist, H.J. Blackham, he had background in farming!

David Pollock

Harold's desk at Prince of Wales Terrace was apparently chaotic, six inches deep in piles of paper, but when challenged he could always locate what he wanted. His thought was similar - his knowledge was so wide that he often seemed to digress from the point in hand but it was not so: he was picking out some relevant point, most likely from the long humanist tradition about which he was so knowledgeable and which he saw coming to life again in his own work.

He saw that tradition as promising great things for the future, and he was right. We have achieved much since his pioneering days but we still stand in need of leaders with comparable wisdom and far-sightedness.

Before we finish, Diana Rookledge has some personal reminiscences of Harold as a person.

Diana Rookledge



In the 1960s I read the *Sunday Times* and as I didn't go to Church I had time to read it all including the back page of small ads. One of these intrigued me. I can't remember exactly what it said – it didn't mention British Humanist Association or Ethical Union – but gave the impression of a group of people discussing and doing things based on the philosophies of Russell, Ayer and others. Just what I wanted! So when my company moved me from Edinburgh to London I pretty soon found myself a member of the British Humanist Association and I met Harold Blackham.

In those days there were a lot of residential weekend conferences attracting up to a hundred participants - mainly organised, I'm sure, by Harold. But Harold kept himself off the stage and out of the limelight and as a personnel manager I very much admired the way he worked to encourage and bring forward the younger members of the movement. Also inspiring was their respect and affection for him.

As well as large weekend conferences Harold also ran smaller residential groups to discuss specific topics in more depth. He knew that I was involved in the women's movement and on a couple of occasions he invited me to contribute a session. I remember one particularly. After I had finished my piece, a very highly educated, very middle class lady, very articulate, made a long contribution about how she had never experienced any of the things I had said women

were experiencing. She had been happy in the home serving her husband and children. I was thinking about how to respond – whether to pull her contribution to pieces or just to smile sweetly and say thank you, when I caught the eye of Harold who was sitting in the back row. He made a funny face and I decided. I said ‘Thank you’! Harold always made opportunities for women and encouraged them to express themselves and not to be afraid to participate.



I soon found myself on the board of the Humanist Housing Association where I met Olga Blackham, a very charming and able lady with many interests, who was always very friendly and encouraging to me. We had some very interesting discussions, particularly about the development of women.

Many years later I was on the board of the British Humanist Association and at one of our meetings we were discussing Harold's 80th birthday which I think we had just learned about because one of the kindred organisations, I think South Place, had put on a grand dinner in his honour. We felt great distress that we had not done anything. But the BHA had literally no money in the bank at that time. Eventually I said that if they didn't mind my kitchen and we kept the numbers down to the Executive and Education Committees and the Bondis, I would do the food.

So one very hot afternoon in early June Harold arrived at my home, having driven from Wales. I

would have been totally exhausted by the journey and the heat, and I insisted he should go for a shower and a rest for a couple of hours. He later emerged looking cool and refreshed and spent the next few hours talking to or being talked at by his hosts.

Next morning at breakfast he said he was going to Richmond on his way home to deliver for sale some paintings of Ursula's which he had in the boot of the car. It was another hot day and I was concerned at him adding perhaps a couple of hours to his journey and said that he was very welcome to come back for another night if he got held up or felt too tired for the long trek back. I don't think he understood the meaning of tired and said he had to get home. I managed not to do the mummish thing and ask him to ring when he got home! But I did ring him the next day to calm my concern. He was fine! I think we were all envious of his 80-year-old energy, and felt very privileged that he had come such a distance to be with us.

I then didn't see Harold for 20 years until the humanist organisations put on a lunch for him along the corridor here to celebrate his hundredth birthday. This time Paul had brought him. He looked just the same, though perhaps a little more detached.

After the formalities I sat beside him and chatted about some of the long gone things he had done. He was still very clear headed and independent, though physically much frailer.

I feel very privileged to have known him and to have done a little work with him. I particularly admired his modesty and his energy at inspiring and promoting younger people to carry on his work. His patience was outstanding!

David Pollock

Harold retired to his house above the river Wye near Hereford many years ago, where he kept studying and writing. When he was 97, he had a damaging stroke, and in its aftermath Age Concern sent him a visitor to help him recuperate. John Hayden's wife Hilda went with him and became a form friend: she continued visiting him after her husband John died. She has written to us that Harold lent her books on Humanism which she found hard-going but persuasive, and as a result she joined the British Humanist Association. She has described him in his last years, giving a picture I can endorse from my one visit to him at Ballingham, where his house was perched high above the river Wye which seemed to sweep round between hills on either side, almost undercutting the valley wall beneath him and giving him a panoramic view of hills, fields, river and woods. Hilda's words will close our meeting:

I shall for ever remember HJ sitting at his window overlooking the Wye and surveying the panoramic view, a tiny figure on his raised cushions. We watched the changing seasons, and he would draw my attention to the flooded fields, or the opening of leaf buds, or the movements of the flocks of sheep, or the swans that migrated about the river according to weather, or the birds gathering for their long journey. There was always something for us to see and enjoy. I shall always remember him with great affection.

The meeting closed with the second movement of Mozart's Oboe Quartet.

