

## In memoriam

### Professor Magdalen Vernon 1901-1991



Magdalen Vernon, who died at the age of 90 in Beckenham on 1 December 1991, came from a family deeply involved in medical and educational work. Her father, Horace Middleton Vernon, a physiologist and Fellow of Magdalen College, was well known for his distinguished work with the Industrial Health Research Board and her younger brother, Philip, became Professor of Educational Psychology at the University of London Institute of Education.

Magdalen, always known to her friends and students as Maggie, took an Open Scholarship from Oxford High School to Newnham College, Cambridge in 1920 and on graduating, after a short period with the Industrial Health Research Board, she joined the talented group working alongside Frederic Bartlett at the Cambridge Psychological Laboratory. There she spent from 1927 to 1946 as a member of the medical Research Council's scientific staff.

Starting from the study of eye movements in proof reading, her work quickly expanded into other areas of visual perception. In 1931 she published her monograph, *The Experimental Study of Reading*, which established her reputation as the international expert, and in 1937 came her book *Visual Perception*. This was a remarkable work for its time (published a year before the first edition of Woodworth's *Experimental Psychology*) and it continued in revised versions as an essential handbook for students over a period of 20 years. No one could get a degree in psychology without having read M.D. Vernon! In the meantime her experimental work at Cambridge developed - and included a valuable period of collaboration with Kenneth Craik, as evidenced by their joint papers on dark adaptation.

In 1946 she moved to a lectureship at Reading where Albert Wolters was Professor of Psychology. Her presence greatly enhanced the reputation of the department and it is remarkable how many eminent psychologists took their PhDs under Magdalen Vernon's supervision.

At about the time she moved to Reading, there were rumblings of discontent among psychologists with an experimental orientation. Was The British Psychological Society doing a proper

job in advancing psychology as a science? Did the *British Journal of Psychology* reflect the ideas and interests of the newer generation of experimentalists, who had developed their work during the war years and had seen it applied with great success over the whole range of human behaviour in extreme conditions? In 1946 the dissidents met to found the Experimental Psychology Group, to arrange a programme of scientific meetings and to publish a journal, the *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*. Maggie was one of the 15 founder members of the group, saw it develop into the Experimental Psychology Society and subsequently became its President. However, Maggie had a broad mind and a very wide range of interests so that, after the BPS had put its house into order, it did not take long before she was invited to be President of the BPS, an office which she held from 1958-61.

In the meantime, in 1956, she was appointed Professor of Psychology at Reading, in succession to Carolus Oldfield. This was a period of great expansion. Student numbers increased and the Department moved from London Road to its present location at Earley Gate, Whiteknights, which allowed for a

much wider range of activities.

Within the University she always identified with the interests of younger underprivileged members, often to the discomfiture of the established hierarchy. Students remember her well for their personal encounters with her, her good humoured no-nonsense comments, her searching questions at seminars and the way she had of treating everyone as an equal, whether a first-year student or a Vice-Chancellor. "Don't stand there with your mouth full of teeth. Say something!" She often told us quite emphatically we were wrong. Sometimes we did not like it - but more often than not she was right!

Retirement in 1967 brought relief from Department and University administration and she could now devote her full energies to writing. Within two years she published *Human Motivation*, which deals with both human and animal behaviour and which she described as an introductory text for sixth formers and first-year university students.

She also maintained her research on children's reading and disorders of reading and in 1971 published *Reading and its Difficulties*. This was her last major work, although she continued until quite recently to attend research meetings and engage in discussions with a lively, well-informed interest and a keen appreciation of the speaker's argument.

With her passing go memories of the whole generation which developed scientific psychology in Britain and saw it expand to take its proper place not only in universities, colleges and schools, but in every walk of life, by applying empirical methods to achieve a deeper understanding of human nature.

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