

OBITUARY

HERBERT DINGLE, 2 August 1890–4 September 1978

BORN in London and brought up in Devonshire by his widowed mother, Herbert Dingle attended the Plymouth Science, Art and Technical Schools until the age of fourteen. For the next eleven years he worked as a clerk but continued to study in his free time, and in 1915 he gained one of the highly competitive Royal Scholarships and entered the Imperial College of Science and Technology in London. There he graduated in physics in 1918, stayed to do research in spectroscopy, and was soon appointed to the staff. He specialized in the application of spectroscopy to astronomy and became well known through his *Modern astrophysics* (1924) and many papers in scientific journals. He was hon. secretary of the Royal Astronomical Society from 1929–32, vice-president four times, and president from 1951–3. At Imperial College he was appointed professor of natural philosophy in 1937, and during World War II became acting head of the Physics Department when G. P. Thomson was absent on government service.

While establishing a considerable reputation in astrophysics, Dingle became increasingly interested in the philosophy of science and expressed his developing views in lectures and articles and in two books, *Science and human experience* (1931) and *Through science to philosophy* (1937). He believed that science must be a rational scheme of thought based on experience, and rejected the mysticism present in the scientific philosophies of Eddington and others, as well as the view expressed by Bernal, for example, that science is the means of obtaining practical mastery over nature. He was, however, careful to point out that science could never solve ethical problems: his own answers to these owed much to his Quaker faith.

Dingle believed that just as literature thrives only when subject to constant scrutiny by literary critics, so science needs philosophers of science to examine theories and comment on their validity. These philosophers must themselves be scientists, and they need to study the history of science, for they must apply their critical powers to past as well as to present problems. He was well suited to the chair of History and Philosophy of Science at University College London, which he occupied from 1946 until his retirement in 1955. The work of the department had been suspended during the war and Dingle presided over its revival and expansion when it was still unique in Britain. His early experience in Plymouth undoubtedly made him sympathetic to the part-time students, of whom I was one, who formed the majority of the postgraduates in the department. Few of us could have been introduced to the subject if the part-time MSc course had not existed; many now occupy academic posts in Britain and overseas.

The decision to found the British Society for the History of Science was taken at a meeting chaired by Dingle on 22 November 1946. He was one of the first members of its council and served as president from 1955–7. In 1948 he took the initiative in founding the Philosophy of Science Group, which was affiliated to the Society for several years before becoming the independent British Society for the Philosophy of Science. As well as doing much to establish history and philosophy of science as academic disciplines in Britain—and it must be remembered that he regarded the two as complementary—Dingle was active on the international scene, being vice-president of the International Union for the History of Science from 1953–6, and president of the Historical Commission of the International Astronomical Union for several years.

In *The special theory of relativity* (1940) Dingle gave an excellent introductory account of the subject, but in 1957 he detected what he considered to be a fundamental flaw in the so-called 'clock paradox' and this led him to oppose the theory of relativity, and to attempt to develop an alternative theory of time advanced by Einstein's contemporary Walter Ritz. Dingle's controversial views received little public support from physicists or mathematicians, though some told him privately that they had misgivings about relativity. Unfortunately he was refused a platform by some scientific journals that should have encouraged such debates. His own account of this disturbing story is given in his *Science at the crossroads* (1972).

However, Dingle did not allow himself to become obsessed by the controversy. He read very widely throughout his life and after the publication of the Old Testament of *The new English Bible* (1970) he found a number of inaccuracies in the translation of scientific terms. His comments on the abilities of the translators remain unpublished, and his last book was *The mind of Emily Brontë* (1974), a testimony to his love of poetry. As well as being a writer with a fine command of English, he was a brilliant lecturer and a witty conversationalist. I shall never forget that I was instructed, entertained, occasionally irritated, and frequently inspired by Herbert Dingle, at first as an undergraduate at Imperial College and later as a postgraduate student and as a friend.

W. A. SMEATON