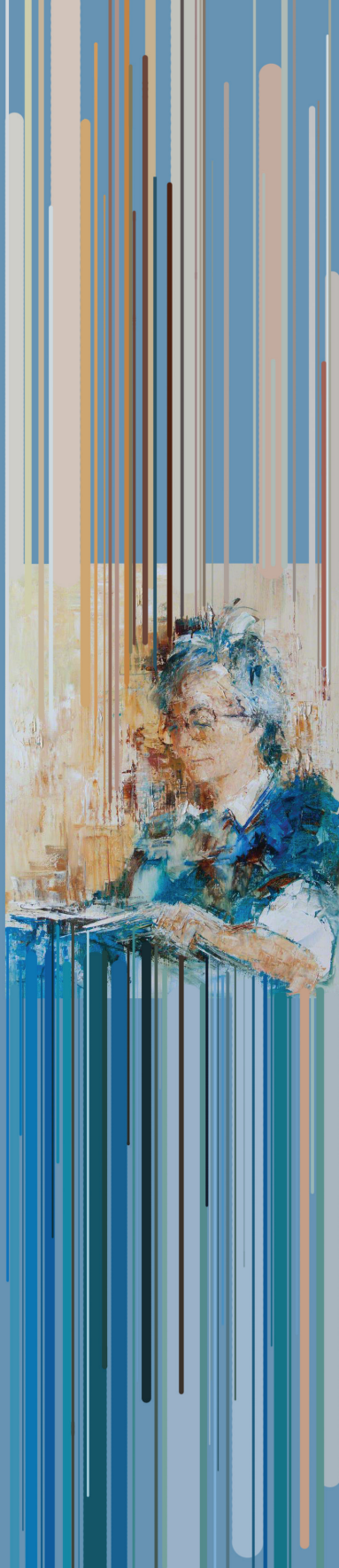


MARY WARNOCK

Ethics, Education
and Public Policy
in Post-War
Britain

PHILIP GRAHAM





<https://www.openbookpublishers.com>

© 2021 Philip Graham



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International license (CC BY-NC 4.0). This license allows you to share, copy, distribute and transmit the work for non-commercial purposes, providing attribution is made to the author (but not in any way that suggests that he endorses you or your use of the work). Attribution should include the following information:

Philip Graham, *Mary Warnock: Ethics, Education and Public Policy in Post-War Britain*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0278>

Copyright and permissions for the reuse of many of the images included in this publication differ from the above. This information is provided in the captions and in the list of illustrations.

In order to access detailed and updated information on the license, please visit <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0278#copyright>. Further details about CC BY-NC licenses are available at <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

All external links were active at the time of publication unless otherwise stated and have been archived via the Internet Archive Wayback Machine at <https://archive.org/web>

Digital material and resources associated with this volume are available at <https://doi.org/10.11647/OBP.0278#resources>

Every effort has been made to identify and contact copyright holders and any omission or error will be corrected if notification is made to the publisher.

ISBN Paperback: 9781800643383

ISBN Hardback: 9781800643390

ISBN Digital (PDF): 9781800643406

ISBN Digital ebook (epub): 9781800643413

ISBN Digital ebook (mobi): 9781800643420

ISBN XML: 9781800643437

DOI: 10.11647/OBP.0278

Cover image: © Barbara Robinson. Photo credit: Girton College, University of Cambridge, <https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/mary-warnock-195224>

Cover design by Anna Gatti.

5. Fitting It All In¹

In 1986 and 1987, journalist Valerie Grove interviewed twenty women who, she claimed, ‘had it all’—marriage, motherhood and career. The first interview in the resulting book *The Compleat Woman* (1988)² was with Mary Warnock, who was selected for this position because it was her name that was most familiar to the general public.³ So, there was a sense in which Mary not only ‘had it all’ but had achieved some degree of fame as well. How had she done all this?

There was almost exactly a year between her marriage in August 1949 and the birth of her first child, Kathleen or Kitty, in July 1950. As things turned out, whether by luck or good management, Felix, the second child, was the only one of Mary’s five children not born in the Long Vacation, the university summer holiday which lasted from mid-June to early October. Childbearing interfered little with Mary’s academic life.

The year from her marriage to the birth of her first child could have been one of settling down to married life. But Mary didn’t settle down. She explains her immediate feeling of restlessness (which she distinguishes sharply from discontent or unhappiness), on the grounds that she had ‘so short a time, no more than three years, of mixed sexual and intellectual excitement, that [...] I was prone to hanker for such excitement to come again.’⁴ Restlessness may have been a feature of Mary’s internal life, but, from the start, she had a powerfully affectionate, solid relationship with Geoffrey. With remarkable frankness, in her unpublished autobiography, she described how their sex life was ‘a marvellous revelation. On our very first night after our wedding, our predominant feeling was of relief, that this was now legitimate, and no one could properly interrupt us.’⁵ She continued to ‘be astonished that we could have this vast and, it seemed, infinite pleasure whenever we liked, though increasing demands both of work and of children made our ways more conventional as time went on.’⁶

The strongest reason for this close relationship lay, Mary felt, in their shared professional subject. She described their talk as 'drifting between philosophy and gossip, as academic conversations tend to.'⁷ Their colleagues were a source of constant amusement and they shared private jokes about the way their married friends talked to each other, mockingly imitating their 'My dears' and 'Darlings' in their own conversation. It is notable that, in nearly every phase of her life, Mary had a different woman friend with whom she could gossip and laugh, but Geoffrey was her paramount soul mate throughout, in addition to his role as a sounding board for her philosophical ideas.

A 'pattern of talk and entertaining each other'⁸ began early on and continued throughout their married life. Mary always admired what she saw as Geoffrey's high intelligence, judgement, rationality, sense of humour and air of detachment, all, in her eyes, typical Wykehamist traits that she had appreciated in her older brother, Duncan.⁹ Mary was, of course, not alone in her admiration for her husband. Although he was seen by his colleagues as austere in manner, there was universal acknowledgement of his professional and political wisdom as well as his skill as an administrator. This was reflected in the various senior positions to which he was later appointed.

Geoffrey had little social ambition and cared less than Mary what people thought about him. As a Yorkshireman with an interest, unfashionable among the Oxford academic elite, in playing cricket and golf¹⁰ (and indeed in boxing though as a spectator rather than a participant), he always felt and was content to be an outsider in relation to Oxford's smart set who regarded these sporting interests as beneath them. Mary, in contrast, wanted to be accepted by the wider world and was always interested in extending her social circle. While she admired the poetry Geoffrey wrote and published, she noted that it consisted in 'a melancholy analysis of things as they were, viewed from the outside.' She wrote 'I was frightened by this pervading melancholy, and by his lack of social ambition. I was far less prepared to allow people to take me or leave me alone.'¹¹

Mary shared Geoffrey's love of golf, and both loved country walks. Differences in their political and religious opinions were not in themselves creative of tension. Mary remained an unorthodox Christian throughout her life, disbelieving in God and the miracles, but wedded

to the Anglican liturgy and sacred music to a degree that made church attendance an important spiritual experience for her. Geoffrey's atheism meant he found it difficult when his duties obliged him to attend college chapel services. Politically, both were initially strong supporters of the Labour government that took office in 1945, but their views diverged when, in the 1960s, Labour's educational policy began to drive through the abolition of grammar schools and their replacement by a comprehensive system. Geoffrey remained centre-left in his politics while Mary stopped supporting the Labour Party in 1965. Later, they were united in their opposition to Conservative and particularly Mrs. Thatcher's policies towards the universities.

Further testimony to the strength of her marriage comes from the letters Geoffrey wrote to Mary between 1950 and 1967 when he spent three periods, lasting four or five months each, as a guest lecturer in different US universities.¹² (Her letters to him have not been preserved.) His letters are chatty, recounting what he has been doing. There is a great deal about his students, classes, seminars, lectures—whether people are 'any good,' whether his own output is good, where he has got to in the course he is teaching. He often responds to news she has sent about Oxford University affairs and there is much gossip about people in their social circle in Oxford, or people he was meeting in the United States. They shared attitudes to people, which friends were dreary, which 'impossible' (but, despite the sometimes sharp judgements in this private correspondence, both in practice went out of their way to help people with problems). On each of his trips to the United States he seems to have had a very sociable time. He reports being pursued by women: though he describes them as 'crazy' this didn't seem to stop him having drinks or dinners with them. In return, he jokes about the men she would find attractive—'You would love him, though he's not huge and ugly'. (Mary's taste in men was a family joke.) He asks regularly after or refers to the children, especially in the letters he wrote in 1966, when Kitty had just started at a new school, James had started as a boarder at Winchester, and Mary had to find a new nanny for the five-year-old Maria. He is also concerned about his mother, who seems to have objected to his going away on this occasion and he worries about how she and Mary get on without him as a buffer. In this set of letters, Mary has just started as the headmistress of Oxford High School. She

must have said to him she felt she had 'found her destiny'—he refers to this several times. He frequently urges her not to work too hard and makes suggestions about how she should deal with difficult school staff. He also jokes about her 'carrying on becoming famous'—it was another family joke, that what she wanted above all was fame or, even better, power. Thus, the letters reveal a rich private code of attitudes, words, jokes and nicknames, a strong intimate relationship with many shared interests and acquaintances. They also reveal Geoffrey to be a supportive husband, though occasionally mildly mocking of his wife's ambition, as well as a concerned and involved father.

The one area of life in which they markedly differed, and which might have tested their mutual tolerance, was household cleanliness and neatness. Geoffrey is quoted by Valerie Grove, in *The Compleat Woman* interview: 'Mary has a little study which is a pigsty, and I have a study which is neat and tidy. In shared quarters, I am constantly picking things off the floor. But I don't mind doing that.'¹³ So even here they achieved a satisfactory *modus vivendi*. Although Mary was always there to cook and look after the house, she was never at all interested in things being spotlessly clean. Geoffrey used to follow her around doing such things as wiping the sink after washing up, and 'all those little things which are so easily overlooked,' a phrase he used in mockery, though without malice. The children do not recall their parents having actual rows but were in no doubt that many of their mother's habits must have been exasperating for their father.

Thirty years after the event, Mary wrote an affectionate account of their first 'terrible quarrel.' It appears in an article written for a series entitled 'My honeymoon in...' for a women's magazine (possibly *Woman's Weekly*, although the back issues do not survive). Following their wedding Mary and Geoffrey were both keen to get on with their new lives in Oxford, he as a young fellow of Magdalen and she at St. Hugh's, but

my mother had the perfectly erroneous idea that I could not live without holidays (in fact, after childhood, I have nearly always begun counting the days after about twenty-four hours of a holiday). She therefore bought, on our behalf, a vast number of tickets for the Edinburgh Festival. [...] we were by far the youngest people at the festival, or so it seemed. There was no Fringe in those days, and the visitors were stately and, some of them, distinguished. One day in Prince's Street, Geoffrey said

‘Look, there’s Louis MacNeice’. I did look and walked straight into the largest man I have ever seen. It was the great Italian singer Paolo Silveri, who was singing in the Festival opera. We went four times to the opera, twice to *Così fan Tutte*, and twice to Verdi’s *Un Ballo in Maschera*. All these performances were superb; but the last was spoiled for me by our having had a terrible quarrel, about whether or not we should change into evening dress for the performance, as was then the normal custom. I was for it, Geoffrey against. I had a wonderful long stripey skirt, newly made by my mother’s dressmaker out of Italian silk, and I knew with complete certainty that if I did not wear it that night, I would never wear it again. Equally I knew that the disagreement which arose (Geoffrey’s correct point being that it was deluging with rain, and the skirt would be ruined) spelled the final and irrevocable end of our marriage. However, by the morning, it was clear that that wasn’t so [...].¹⁴

Having survived their honeymoon, the Warnocks returned to Oxford and began to look around for their first house. They were both on low salaries. University lecturers at that time earned relatively little compared to other middle-class people, based on the assumption that dons would be bachelors, live in university lodgings and have all their meals provided. Fortunately, Geoffrey’s father, James, a retired general practitioner, was able to offer them an interest-free loan to buy a small house in Summertown, a mixed residential district in North Oxford, where they moved from their college rooms in January 1950.¹⁵ Initially they had unrealistically high standards. Mary, recalling these days with astonishment, wrote that they thought they had to clean the whole house every day and that she had to serve two cooked meals a day as well as afternoon tea.¹⁶ These assumptions were derived from their own pre-war childhoods, when they both had servants to clean and cook for them. It rapidly became apparent that such a lifestyle could not be sustained when both members of the couple had full-time jobs and there were no servants.

A month before the first baby, Kitty was born in July 1950, Emily Coleman (Nan) came to stay and help. It was she who, twenty-five years earlier had been responsible for bringing up Mary and her sister Stephana for the first six or seven years of their lives. Now her arrival would be a mixed blessing although Mary was undoubtedly very grateful for her help. She had firm and settled views about everything to do with babies, derived from bringing up babies in wealthy households. She insisted on expenditure the Warnocks, on their low salaries, could

not really afford. Mary was 'appalled at the expense of buying two prams, dozens of muslin and towelling nappies, summer vests, winter vests and innumerable other items.' Further, Nan expected Mary to join her in endless sewing and knitting of the children's clothes. Thus, Mary was unwillingly trapped by her demanding nanny into a level of domesticity for which she did not have the time, the inclination, nor particular skills.¹⁷

University term began when Kitty was less than two months old, Nan returned to her home with Mary's sister, Grizel, in London, and Mary had to juggle Hoovering and breast-feeding on the one hand and tutorials with her students on the other. For spare time reading, she was absorbed in the world of women's magazines, especially a weekly that appeared in small book form called *Housewife*,¹⁸ in the hope of equalling Nan's skills in baby care. There were times when she thought of giving up academic life to devote herself to the children, but Geoffrey would not hear of this. According to Mary,

Geoffrey never doubted for a moment that I should carry on with the job when we began having children. After Kitty was born, I used to get into despair every now and then and say I couldn't manage, and should I give up my job. But Geoffrey's reaction always was: 'Don't be an idiot. Let's spend more money getting more help.'

Felix was born eighteen months after Kitty in January 1952, followed by James in August 1953 and Stephana or Fanny in July 1956. The youngest, Grizel Maria (after Mary's sister) but very soon nicknamed Boz, was born after a five-year gap in July 1961. Despite, on her own account, being sick all the time and permanently exhausted especially when there were other small children around, Mary worked throughout her pregnancies. Childbirth was no problem for her; indeed she recalled 'I do so love the moment of giving birth to a new child, this new person, to whom you can attach a new name, it's something for ever, to have fixed a name and possibly a character for the rest of their lives.'¹⁹ When Mary was asked by Valerie Grove why she had *five* children, she replied

By the time you've got one, the argument for having more is very strong indeed. Geoffrey thought that was enough—he very reasonably thought that three was a decent family, and more than he'd come from (two), and it was really all we could manage, and he increasingly disliked the commotion the children caused. But I was by then addicted to the idea of four and desperate to have another.'²⁰

Mary wrote elsewhere that she believed the middle child of three would always be disadvantaged, and, from her own experience she felt a large family was part of the natural order.

The Warnocks were able to afford a live-in nanny and after some bad initial experiences Mary found three in succession who each stayed four years. The last in particular was dearly loved by the family. She became pregnant before her wedding, and, Mary reported, 'she came to me to confess and I astonished her by saying "How wonderful."' ²¹ Mary's youngest child, Maria, was growing up by now, and this nanny was followed by a series of less full-time au pairs, sometimes students and sixth formers who had accommodation free in exchange for looking after her. Maria remembers all these women with fondness.

With Nan around, Mary had no need of child-rearing manuals. The best-selling baby book ever, *Baby and Child Care* by American paediatrician Benjamin Spock, had appeared in 1946 ²² but Nan would not have been impressed by Spock's *laissez-faire* approach—nor would Geoffrey or Mary herself. With the help of the nannies and a regular cleaner and gardener, Mary ran an orderly household with regular meal-, bath- and bed-times for the children, a sleep in the afternoons when they were young, good meals, regular sheet-changing days and plenty of planning and respect for the nanny's day off. As the children grew up, twice-daily music practice would be expected and there were family outings on Sundays for country walks, blackberrying or watching Geoffrey play cricket, according to the season. At home, the children's lives were kept fairly separate from the adults, even on holidays, with their own playroom (as far away from the adults' sitting room as possible), separate evening meals (though Mary presided over these), and an expectation that adults should not be disturbed in the evenings. 'The children,' Mary reported, 'always thought that coffee was called "peace" because after lunch we'd say now the grownups want some peace and they would have to go upstairs for half an hour while we had our coffee.' ²³ A downside to this orderliness was that friends sometimes took advantage of it, dumping their children into the care of the Warnock's nanny when they wanted some child-free time. Mary always said she did not mind, but the nannies did.

This regime, modelled on her own childhood, was already old-fashioned by the 1950s. No doubt it enabled Mary to get more work done herself, but she justified it in part by her wish to protect Geoffrey from

disturbance. The children recollect Mary as constantly concerned that the children would disturb him and highly protective of him in this respect. He was not, he admitted himself, 'a great fancier of young children [...]' I'm a fanatically neat and tidy person,' he said.²⁴ According to Maria he 'very rarely lost his temper, but when he did it was terrifying—he would go white and silent—no shouting and screaming, just ominous and horrible silence.'²⁵



Fig. 4 Mary with baby Fanny (1957), provided by the Warnock family, CC BY-NC.

Like her own mother, Mary was not particularly cuddly but was, as her mother had been to her, extremely supportive to her children. Within the framework of order and discipline, she had her own ideas of child development. 'I think,' she later said of children generally, 'their personalities are developed very early in life.'²⁶ Felix, her second-born, confirms this was the way his mother had perceived her children. 'I think we were all a bit type-cast,' he said. 'Kitty was the independent one. I was good at games, but stupid. James was the clever one. Fanny was sensitive and the most needy. Boz, as the youngest was inevitably cast as the clown.'²⁷ Mary's views on the significance of the individuality of children's personalities were, as it happened, ahead of her time. In the

1950s, two American psychiatrists, Alex Thomas and Stella Chess, and a psychologist, Herb Birch, were collecting evidence on the way children differed from each other from shortly after birth, such differences persisting at least into their teens. In *Your Child is a Person*, published in 1965,²⁸ they advised parents to tailor the upbringing of their children to their personalities, an approach Mary had discovered for herself.

The only way her children could really irritate her was by saying they were bored. She could not bear the thought of her children not being able to amuse themselves. When they were young, as we have seen, there were certain rules that had to be obeyed. The children had to have a sleep in the afternoons and were not allowed to disturb the adults after seven p.m. This separation or compartmentalisation between her roles as wife, as mother and as an academic is surely one of the reasons for her degree of success in all her roles.

The children's school careers were not as straightforward as Mary would have liked. Kitty recollects not being a very happy child, either at school or at home. She tried to be good and work hard as she was expected to but often without much enjoyment. She attended the Oxford High School until she was sixteen when her mother was appointed the school's headmistress. At this point, Mary asked her to move to another school as, according to Kitty, she could not bear the thought of her daughter mocking her when she was taking assembly. Kitty was happy to leave the High School and chose to go to Prior's Field, the boarding school her mother had attended and of which she was now a governor. She went on to study English at St. Hugh's, trained as a teacher, and worked for a while in a Palestinian university. While there, she wrote a book about the lives of Palestinian women in the Occupied Territories. Mary saw Kitty as 'independent and bolshie even as a tiny baby.' Mary always felt she had given Kitty 'the hardest deal of all being the eldest of them, shoved out of the cot for the next one.'²⁹

Felix was happy at the Dragon School, the private preparatory school near the Warnocks' home in Oxford. He excelled at cricket and rugby, being captain in all the sports. He won a music scholarship to Winchester College but there he was not happy. The only things he enjoyed were games and music and he left early with poor O and A levels. After re-taking A levels at Oxford Technical College and with private music tuition at home, he went on to a degree course at the Royal College of

Music and a career first as an orchestral musician and then in orchestra management, neither of which were roles for which his mother had cast him earlier on. He told his mother later that what he liked most about his childhood was supper. Why was this, she asked? 'Because I never listened to the book you were reading, it was just that nobody could speak to you, so you didn't have to think about anything at all.'³⁰

James, seen as the 'clever one' by Mary, was able to read the headlines of *The Daily Mirror* (a rather surprising newspaper for the Warnocks to take alongside the more predictable *Times*) by the age of three. Like his brother, James started off at the Dragon School where his poor performance in sport disappointed his father, though not his mother. He won a scholarship to Winchester, but then things started to go wrong for him. For reasons that are not clear, he did very little work, his termly reports got worse and worse and he found himself active only in activities that were at best non-curricular and often against the rules. Finally, at the age of fifteen, just a few weeks before he was due to take his A levels, he was summarily expelled in a brutal manner, being dumped at the railway station by his housemaster who had phoned his parents beforehand to tell them he was on his way home. Mary later recalled that it was because he smoked cannabis but, according to James, it was other misdemeanours that got him into such trouble. Mary and Geoffrey were remarkably supportive to James during this episode. Mary's former high opinion of the school had already been shaken by the way it had treated Felix, and now she blamed the college rather than James. Geoffrey wrote a stiff letter to the school, also blaming the staff for what had happened. James did his A levels in Oxford and then took more in different subjects at a grammar school in Thame, not far from Oxford. He went on to the University of East Anglia and a career in the civil service and local government.³¹

Fanny, early on designated as the 'sensitive and needy one,' sadly fulfilled Mary's expectations. As a young child, she suffered from night terrors, waking terrified in the night and needing to be comforted before she could go back to sleep. Although James was nearer in age to Felix, he was closer to Fanny with whom he recalls playing imaginative games, involving songs and playlets and performances. Fanny grew out of night terrors, but they were replaced by an anxious personality with occasional episodes of extraordinary tantrums, during which she seemed to lose

track entirely of where she was. These episodes were extremely painful for Mary. She found it impossible to let them blow over on their own while Geoffrey was less sympathetic. Fanny had considerable musical talent and it was clear from an early age that she would aim for music college and perhaps a career as a pianist or cellist. In her teens she went to board at Downe House School. Here she had very good teachers, but by this time she was suffering great stress and anxiety about her failure, as she felt it, to live up to their expectations. She returned to Oxford for her sixth form at the OHS, after Mary had stepped down as headmistress. Here she played one of Beethoven's piano concertos at a school concert though she found such performance highly stressful. She won a place at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and did well there, but after she graduated her self-confidence collapsed and she did not pursue a career in music to Mary's enormous disappointment. She worked instead in a variety of jobs, never really settling to anything.

Mary's last-born child, Maria, nicknamed Boz, arrived after a five-year gap. She was born with an intestinal obstruction, caused by a rare anatomical anomaly—an annular pancreas. Operated upon within days of her birth, she needed a great deal of medical attention in her first few months and had other medical problems later on. The first affected the muscles in her legs, so she had to have surgery on her left knee when she was three years old and was in a plaster from toe to hip for several months. A recurrence of stomach problems when she was twelve required another lengthy stay in hospital and, in her twenties, she had to have further leg operations. These were carried out in an orthopaedic hospital in Surrey. Mary often came to visit her and, Maria recalls, used to smuggle in gin and Martini.³² Although she missed a great deal of school, her parents remained remarkably relaxed both about her illnesses and about her academic progress. Despite her medical problems, Maria was not at all over-protected. She spent several summer holidays away from her family with an organisation called Colony Holidays which she loved. Later this organisation was reborn as Active Training and Education (ATE) with Maria as one of its directors and holiday organisers and Mary as the Chair. After leaving the OHS, Maria went to the West Surrey College of Art and Design. She trained as a teacher and was Director of Art at Dulwich College for twenty years before moving to other schools abroad.³³

In March 1952, shortly after the birth of Felix, the Warnocks bought a four-storey semi-detached Victorian house in Fyfield Road nearer the centre of Oxford. It was an inconvenient house but they loved it. According to Mary, it was now that she stopped caring about housework. 'As long as things were reasonably tidy, the mice in the larder kept more or less under control, and the water hot, we were content,' she said.³⁴ As happens, the children began to make friends of their own. Mary remembered Kitty, aged five, sitting on the wall in front of the house reading aloud 'to an awestruck group consisting of her brothers, Felix and the infant James, and a slippered girl from across the road and her siblings.'³⁵ At this period, the streets in North Oxford, as elsewhere, were much safer than they are now, and quite young children were allowed to play in them unsupervised. From five years, James was expected to walk to school by himself.

In late 1949, Geoffrey's general practitioner father, James Warnock, despite being a lifelong socialist, became disillusioned with the recently established National Health Service and retired. He and his wife Kathleen left Leeds and bought a house in Sutton Courtenay, a village not far from Oxford. However, James only survived three years there, dying in 1953. Geoffrey's mother was lonely living by herself and in 1956 she helped her son and Mary buy a larger house in North Oxford and moved in with them.

Geoffrey and Mary were generally able to live at a somewhat higher standard than other academic families, with his mother's contribution to the household bills and Mary's modest inherited wealth. They owned their houses outright and had a nanny and a one-day-a-week cleaner and gardener. Groceries were delivered to the door. They were able to afford music lessons for the children and, most expensively, public school education for the four older children (although Felix and James were academic and music scholars respectively which reduced to some extent the pressure on family finances). Holidays were mostly not extravagant; three relatively expensive holidays in Italy required careful planning and were paid for by Geoffrey's lecturing semesters in the US. Geoffrey's personal expenditure was extremely modest and Mary's equally so apart from the occasional purchase of expensive clothes or furnishing. She did love shopping for clothes, and Maria recalled that, for a few months, when Mary was taking part in a regular radio

programme, she would come up to London with her mother who was in a talk show in Broadcasting House. After the broadcast, they would go shopping together for clothes with Mary making, in Maria's eyes, extravagant purchases. But generally, Mary spent extremely little on her own appearance. Given the frequently remarked upon undisciplined state of her hair, it is not surprising to learn that Mary did not visit a hairdresser regularly. When Mary had a second car, it was always something small, cheap and striking—a Heinkel bubble car, a rare Citroen Bijou made of fibreglass (of which only 210 were built) or an open-topped Triumph Herald.³⁶

The presence of Geoffrey's mother in the house meant there was a good deal of tension, especially between Geoffrey and his mother, generally due to their very different political views. Disagreements became acute during the Suez Crisis towards the end of 1956. Mary's brother, Duncan Wilson, was in the Foreign Office. He refused to defend his government's conspiracy with France and Israel to attack Egypt over its nationalisation of the Suez Canal, even though this put his career on the line. Mary and Geoffrey strongly supported his position, but Geoffrey's mother, for whom Prime Minister Anthony Eden was a hero, regarded Duncan as a traitor to his country.³⁷ She took Geoffrey aside and told him she had always known that Duncan was a Communist. Why else would he be so interested in the Soviet bloc? (His subsequent postings included Yugoslavia and Moscow). The house had not yet been adapted to create separate rooms for Kathleen, so they were sharing the same living room and Mary couldn't escape from these attacks on her beloved brother. This particular situation was resolved when Eden resigned, Duncan was promoted, and Geoffrey's mother moved into her own living room.³⁸

The Chadlington Road house where the Warnocks lived for the next fifteen years was ideally suited to their needs. It was a large, sunny, Edwardian house. According to Mary, 'the garden was large, with a huge lawn that had been a tennis court, but soon became a cricket pitch, football ground, space-hopper race-course for the numbers of children who used to drift in and out. My mother-in-law happily took charge of the rest of the garden with the help of an ancient gardener who came with the house, and I reverted to childhood, enjoying the garden but taking virtually no responsibility for it.'³⁹ The road was

quiet and peaceful, ideal for bicycling and other children's games with neighbouring children. The Dragon School which both the Warnock boys attended was close by, and the Oxford High School only a few minutes' walk away. Geoffrey's mother had her own kitchen, bathroom and living room. Mary found her mother-in-law's lack of independence extremely irritating, being used to her own mother managing perfectly well for many years without a husband. The antipathy was reciprocated. Mary thought her mother-in-law never liked her, seeing her as too clever by half, neglectful of her duties as wife and mother and a crypto-communist 'with dangerous connections through Duncan to a world of plots and spies.'⁴⁰ But Kathleen Warnock's presence had many advantages as well as providing some financial assistance. She had the only television in the house in her living room and enjoyed having the children in to watch selected programmes. They chatted easily to her, feeling her to be a constant, amiable presence. Further, she was always pleasant to the succession of nannies and the cleaner and was available to let in plumbers or answer the door to the postman. As a doctor's wife she was accustomed to answering questions about medical matters, so she was always there when one of the children was ill to decide if there was a need to consult a doctor. She never got used to the Warnock family lifestyle, occasionally muttering to herself 'What a way of life.'⁴¹ Mary and Geoffrey found this phrase amusing and often used it of themselves.

In 1958, the Warnocks were well off enough to buy a rather ramshackle holiday house perched on the side of a steep little valley in the village of Sandsend, three miles north of Whitby on the Yorkshire Coast where Geoffrey had come for holidays as a child. The purchase was, in Mary's words, 'a huge success.'⁴² The family went there two or three times a year. The house had two sitting rooms, one for adults and one for children. It had been a bungalow and then the roof space had been opened up to form bedrooms under the eaves with sloped ceilings and dormer windows (two large ones for grown-ups, four small ones with bunk beds for children, and one downstairs room for the nanny), so there was plenty of room for guests. The long dining room, once it was furnished with refectory tables and benches from a prep school's closing down sale, could accommodate large numbers of people for meals as well as games of table tennis. The house was close to a golf course where Mary and Geoffrey played, and not far from Ripon where Mary's sister,

Stephana and her family lived. A piano in the hall and a gramophone in the nursery provided constant music. It was not luxurious. The kitchen was primitive, and Mary's children still have bad memories of the dark, damp and cold downstairs bathroom they had to use.⁴³ Geoffrey's mother used to come to stay sometimes; this made for more work, but it gave her pleasure as she was able to visit old friends in Leeds.⁴⁴ As we have seen, Mary took work away on holiday, but she managed her time efficiently and it was she who did most of the cooking; one young visitor remembers a particularly delicious fruit cake.⁴⁵ Visitors invited to join the Warnocks for their holidays included adult friends, families with children, cousins, or the children's school friends. Stephana would come over from Ripon for a day with four of her children. Guests reported finding these holidays great fun, with Mary constantly energetic and finding new things to do. When the Warnocks later spent three family holidays in Italy, they also went with other families. Geoffrey loved life on the beach at Sandsend—French cricket, building sandcastles against the incoming tide, and particularly damming the streams.

Back in Oxford, Mary resumed her busy life. After preparing breakfast with an ear open for someone's piano practice on the kitchen piano, she would see the children off to school, then leave the younger ones in the care of their nanny and start her day of lectures, supervisions or other college appointments, or work either at home or in her college room, reading undergraduate essays, preparing lectures or working on whichever book she had in progress. By early evening, she was at home again to prepare supper for the children and read to them while they ate it. During much of their childhood, Mary regularly reviewed children's books for *The Times Literary Supplement*, so there was always plenty of suitable reading material around. She later recalled some of the books she read: '*Lord of the Rings* and *The Secret Garden* and *The Little Princess*, and all of the C. S. Lewis *Narnia* books, which in many ways I don't approve of, but the rhythms of the prose are so perfect. I remember when we got to *The Last Battle* all of us were in floods of tears, including me.'⁴⁶ Then, with the nanny, she put the children to bed and cooked supper for herself and Geoffrey. She would often also prepare dinner for Geoffrey's mother, taking it in to her on a tray. She and Geoffrey would have dinner together, the rule being, as we have seen, that the Warnock parents did not expect to see their children after seven or seven

thirty p.m. The nanny was usually free to spend the evening in her own room or go out. After dinner, Mary would carry on working sometimes to Geoffrey's exasperation. He might ask her if she couldn't 'knock off now,' to which she would reply 'What do you expect me to do? Twiddle my thumbs?'⁴⁷ This frenetic pace of life continued as the decades went by. Kitty, interviewed in 1995 when her mother was over seventy years old, reported: 'She's one of those people who can get up at six in the morning, start working or drive to London, do an interview, then come back and write a book, then go off to dinner, come back at two in the morning and start again at six the next day.'⁴⁸

Mary is recalled by her children as a good cook, who served up traditional Sunday lunches every week, with perfectly cooked roast beef being a favourite. She was adventurous, cooking curry, which at that time was quite exotic, and Italian ingredients available from a delicatessen in Oxford market. She was not above serving convenience foods—dried 'Surprise' peas, or a powdered pudding called 'Angel delight.' Maria recalled later that 'some things acquired new names—Heinz salad cream was called 'false' to distinguish it from home-made mayonnaise; when Hellman's mayonnaise appeared we called it 'real false'—and any salad cream not made by Heinz was called 'false false,' and so on. I still call golden syrup 'beastly,' having been told as a child 'don't eat that, it's beastly.'⁴⁹ Except when they were on holiday in Italy, they never went out to eat in restaurants; this would have been regarded as a ridiculous waste of money.

Mary's intelligence, level of energy and intensity of activity were found intimidating by some of her friends. Ann Strawson recalled that Mary 'was a great character and had a huge force of personality.'⁵⁰ Though an Oxford graduate herself, Ann admitted to being rather frightened of her and feeling she had nothing to say to her, despite the fact that Mary was 'terribly nice' to her and gave her books to read. Ann thought that Mary was good at setting people at their ease though she could be caustic about them behind their backs. She was not alone in noticing that, in her thirties, Mary seemed very attractive to men, who often made 'passes' at her.⁵¹ One of Mary's favourite memories gives credence to this suggestion. On one occasion, when Geoffrey was lecturing abroad, she was invited to lunch by the Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*. The only other guest was Hugh Gaitskell, then Leader of the

Opposition. Gaitskell, though just fifty-six years of age, only had a few months to live. He clearly took to Mary and was reminded by his host that Mary was the sister of Duncan Wilson, with whom he had been a pupil at Winchester. In Mary's words, Gaitskell turned to her with an intense and piercing smile and said, 'I don't need to know whose sister you are.'⁵² Ann remembered Geoffrey as lovely, very witty, though a controlled person. He was athletic. Ann showed the author a small table in her living room and claimed Geoffrey could stand on his head on it. She thought he was very good at entertaining young children.⁵³

In 1972, when Geoffrey was appointed Principal of Hertford College, the Warnocks moved into the Principal's lodgings, a large house that formed part of the college building in central Oxford. Mary was very fond of Hertford and of their house. She loved the view from their bedroom overlooking Radcliffe Square, with the Bodleian Library just across the road. It had the disadvantage of being noisy. 'In the summer,' she wrote, 'both tourists and undergraduates swarmed like flies most of the night, sometimes playing guitars or kicking empty coke cans down the road outside our window.'⁵⁴ The bedroom had another disadvantage: accessibility to the outside world. On one occasion, an undergraduate who had climbed up a drainpipe, looking he said, for a friend, came into their bedroom where the Warnocks were asleep. On Mary's account, 'Geoffrey, by threats of the police, got him to give his name and college, and escorted him out of the front door. The next day he sent a large cheque for the college appeal, and an apology. But he was a bright chap, and he also sold his story to one of the tabloids, claiming that he had surprised us in bed discussing the philosopher, Kant.'⁵⁵ Geoffrey's main concern was that his children, especially his daughters, should behave themselves in the college buildings. On one occasion, he turned up in his pyjamas in the college bar, to extricate Fanny from the company of Hertford undergraduates and take her back into the lodgings.⁵⁶

Despite having a family and teaching duties, Mary was very sociable and generous and there were often guests staying in the house—friends, relatives or young people needing shelter during some sort of difficulty. Sometimes a whole family would come and stay for several weeks. The three-child family of her school-friend Imogen visited from Washington DC, the two-child family of Geoffrey's sister Jocelyn visited from Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe), the two sons of a visiting academic

colleague stayed while their parents looked for accommodation. Jeannie Simpson, a school friend from Prior's Field, was a frequent visitor, sometimes leaving her two children with the Warnock nanny while she went off elsewhere. Jeannie was a great favourite of Geoffrey who objected when other parents dumped their children with the nanny, but not her. It was through Jeannie that Mary met Kingsley and Hille Amis in the early 1950s, before and after Kingsley published his enormously successful novel, *Lucky Jim*, in 1954.

The Warnocks' closest friends at this time were two couples, Peter and Ann Strawson and Marcus and Cecilia Dick. Both the men were philosophers and both the wives Oxford graduates. Both families had children roughly the same age as the Warnocks,' so the children could be relied on to go off and play or chat together, leaving their parents in peace. Mary and Ann Strawson had their first children within a few weeks of each other and thereafter, with one exception, whenever one gave birth, the other did too. Thus Kitty, Felix, James and Boz all had a same-age friend in the Strawson family. James was also particularly close to Sophie Dick who was in the same class as he in primary school. Fanny Warnock complained to Ann that it was unfair that she had failed to produce a playmate for her.⁵⁷

Despite seeing themselves as the reverse of smart, the Warnocks were frequent attenders at parties, sometimes quite smart ones. One host was Anthony Quinton, an unusually wealthy philosopher who, later, like Mary, was made a life peer by Margaret Thatcher, to whom he was an adviser. At his lavish events, guests were asked to write down the name of the most attractive person in the room. It was said that Mary and Geoffrey always wrote each other's names down on the grounds that if they didn't, they wouldn't get any votes at all.⁵⁸ Another wealthy host was Ian Little, an economist with whom Geoffrey had shared tutorials with Herbert Hart at New College. Ian and his wife Dobs lived in Sutton Courtenay, the village where Geoffrey's parents lived when his father retired. Mary and Geoffrey would sometimes leave the children with the Littles' nanny and go for a round of golf with the Littles. When the Littles moved to a larger house in Clifton Hampden on the Thames, they used to give parties there for the so-called 'dancing economists.' The Warnocks were not the only non-economists invited. There was at least one developmental biologist, Geoffrey Dawes, and several front-bench

Labour politicians. Nor was dancing the only activity. Mary reports that if one ventured upstairs and was unwise enough to open a bedroom door, one was quite likely to encounter Labour politicians, 'Gaitskell or Douglas Jay in bed with the girl of their choice.'⁵⁹

Towards the mid-1950s, although the friendship with the Strawsons continued, the Warnocks developed a closer and much more intense relationship with Marcus and Cecilia Dick. Marcus, after a brilliant undergraduate career, was offered a fellowship at Balliol even before he had taken his Finals examination. Cecilia had taken a resoundingly successful first-class degree in history and was offered a lectureship at Lady Margaret Hall. They were a 'golden pair' and Mary was surprised that she and Geoffrey should be chosen by them as sufficiently interesting to be friends.⁶⁰ When Marcus and Geoffrey developed the habit of dining in their own colleges on Wednesdays, Cecilia and Mary started to spend those evenings together. The families began to go on holidays together and the two sets of parents would often go as a foursome to the cinema. Other friends, apart from the Strawsons, were relatively neglected. As time went on, it gradually became clear that both Marcus and Cecilia had major problems. According to Mary, Marcus was compulsively unfaithful and more and more dependent on alcohol. Cecilia, whose lectureship at Lady Margaret Hall was not renewed, felt paranoid hostility to her college and developed an obsessive hatred of her husband.⁶¹ In 1963, Marcus left Oxford to become Professor of Philosophy in the new University of East Anglia. He was successful there, became involved in university administration and was appointed Dean. But his drink problem persisted and he died in 1972.⁶² Cecilia, who had started divorce proceedings after he left Oxford, became more and more dependent on Geoffrey for emotional support. This precipitated the greatest crisis in the Warnocks' married life, but the three of them gradually established 'a new but never an easy relationship.'⁶³

Whether Mary herself had any extra-marital relationships is an open question. In her memoir she described how Oxford was 'a place for extraordinary friendship, and indeed for adultery (though gossip and the grapevine were for most people partially inhibiting factors in this field).'⁶⁴ Every fellow had a private room and a telephone. 'There can be no other profession,' she wrote, 'so well suited to friendship or, as I have said, to extra-marital flings.'⁶⁵ Reviewing Mary's memoir, published in

2000, John Bayley, Iris Murdoch's husband and a Warnock friend, while finding much to praise was evidently disappointed at the absence of titillation or revelation. One might surely have expected, he writes:

that a memoir of contemporary Oxford High Life by such a forthright, strong-minded and fearless woman as Baroness Warnock would have contained a good mouthful at least of juicy gossip, all the more so because the Baroness has an excellent sense of humour and can be extremely funny at her own expense. Unfortunately, she is invariably kind to enemies and to the foolish, as well as unswervingly loyal to friends.

Why, John Bayley asked, was there 'no mention of the well-known Oxford story of the don, deeply smitten, who went to bed in one of Mary's nightgowns (how did he get hold of it?) to the amusement rather than indignation of his own wife?'⁶⁶ Was he the only philosopher who had an intimate relationship with Mary? Possibly not. Certainly, Ann Strawson, the widow of Peter Strawson, the distinguished philosopher, believed that her husband and Mary had had what she called a 'brush.' Ann described how, at one point, her husband had left his gloves behind after seeing Mary. Geoffrey went to Peter's rooms at University College with the gloves and said to Peter 'I think these are your gloves, Peter, that you left behind.' Without another word, he walked out.' Ann commented on this episode—'You know how it is when you're young.' When asked if any of these extra-marital relationships became 'serious,' Ann replied 'Oh no. We knew on which side our bread was buttered.'⁶⁷ Ann Strawson's daughter, Julia, reported that her mother thought that Mary had had a similar 'brush' with Marcus Dick.⁶⁸ It seems possible that Mary did have a number of such relationships and that these were known to some, but well concealed from others.⁶⁹

After the end of World War Two, Mary's brother Duncan was posted by the Foreign Office to China, then as Ambassador to Yugoslavia and in 1968 to Moscow. In April 1971, he invited Mary and her music student son, Felix, to spend two weeks in the Embassy in Moscow to attend some Days of British Music that Duncan (by now Sir Duncan Wilson) had organised.⁷⁰ This was a memorable occasion. Duncan had invited Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears, William Walton and the whole of the London Symphony Orchestra. For Mary, highlights of this visit included hearing Sviatoslav Richter playing some of Britten's music for the piano in Leningrad and being introduced to Dmitri Shostakovich.

Another memorable encounter was with a class of English students at Moscow University. Duncan's wife, Betty, invited Mary to take a session of a seminar she regularly taught there.⁷¹ It was not revealed to the students that Mary's field was philosophy for if they knew they would have expected her to talk about Marxism and Communism. Instead, she had a free-ranging discussion about images and icons. The students revelled in the freedom they were given to discuss anything they wanted to. When they eventually extracted from Mary the confession that she was a philosopher, they were delighted and asked her incredulously 'Is this how you are allowed to teach in Oxford?'⁷² The idea of such freedom amazed them.

After he retired from the Foreign Office, Duncan served for six years as Master of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge. His major contribution while he held this position was fundraising for a new University Music School.⁷³ He then retired with Betty to Islay, the southernmost island of the Inner Hebrides where he had long owned a house. In his last years he frequently visited Oxford and stayed with the Warnocks while he was researching in the Bodleian Library for a biography of Gilbert Murray, the early twentieth-century Oxford classical scholar.⁷⁴ Geoffrey greatly enjoyed these visits, frequently playing golf with his brother-in-law. When Duncan died suddenly, two years after retirement, he had not completed his book but had left sufficient notes for Mary and Betty to finish it.⁷⁵

The title of Valerie Grove's book, *The Compleat Woman: Marriage, Motherhood, Career: Can She Have It All* accurately sums up Mary Warnock's life. She did indeed 'have it all.' But her life contained more than that. In her diary entry for 4 February 1944, when she was nineteen, one of the resolutions she made for her future life read: 'My life to be balanced with riding and poetry and the utmost energy and generosity towards my friends.' Riding she gave up fairly soon, but poetry remained an abiding love; energy and generosity were absolutely the hallmarks of her life with friends and then with her husband, children and then grandchildren as well as her siblings. Even given her superabundant energy, she had to prioritise. When there was a choice between family and work, if her family needed her, she was always there. But when family life was apparently going smoothly, she had no hesitation in ignoring the family to concentrate on her work. Mary's own view of her success

in combining family and work was pretty negative. She told Valerie Grove 'I do think I have partially failed as a wife and partially failed as a mother.'⁷⁶ This emphasis on failure rather than on success a great deal better than 'partial' is not a view shared by her family, particularly her children or by her professional colleagues. For her children, her wider family and her friends, she was always there with her support when they needed her while her professional colleagues accurately judged her to have had an admirably productive career.

Notes

- 1 As will be apparent, in writing this chapter, I had an enormous amount of help from Mary's surviving children, Kitty, Felix, James and Maria. They all gave most generously of their time to provide vivid and detailed accounts of their childhoods. I have only attempted to attribute information infrequently as there was much unanimity between their accounts. Any inaccuracies are entirely my responsibility.
- 2 Valerie Grove, 1988.
- 3 Valerie Grove, personal communication.
- 4 Unpublished autobiography (UA), 6, p. 1.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 3–4.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Mary Warnock, 2000, pp. 197–201.
- 10 Strawson, 2004.
- 11 UA, 6, p. 5.
- 12 Private correspondence, JW to MW
- 13 Valerie Grove, p. 48.
- 14 Mary Warnock, undated typescript.
- 15 UA, 6, p. 2.
- 16 Ibid.
- 17 Ibid., p. 3.

- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Grove, p. 44.
- 20 Ibid., p. 43.
- 21 Ibid., p. 45.
- 22 Spock, 1946.
- 23 Grove, p. 47.
- 24 Ibid., p. 48.
- 25 Maria Jenkins, personal communication.
- 26 Grove, p. 471.
- 27 Felix Warnock, personal communication.
- 28 A. Thomas, S. Chess and H. Birch, 1965.
- 29 Grove, p. 47.
- 30 Ibid., p. 46.
- 31 James Warnock, personal communication.
- 32 Maria Jenkins, personal communication.
- 33 Ibid.
- 34 UA, 6, p. 11.
- 35 Ibid.
- 36 Kitty Warnock, personal communication.
- 37 UA, 6, pp. 32–34.
- 38 Ibid.
- 39 Mary Warnock, 2015, p. 33.
- 40 UA, 6, pp. 32–34.
- 41 Ibid., p. 34.
- 42 Ibid., p. 33.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Kitty Warnock, personal communication.
- 45 Julia Lloyd, personal communication.
- 46 Grove, p. 46.

- 47 Ann Strawson, personal communication.
- 48 Malu Halasa, 1995.
- 49 Maria Jenkins, personal communication.
- 50 Ann Strawson, personal communication.
- 51 Ibid.
- 52 Warnock, 2000, p. 160.
- 53 Ann Strawson, personal communication.
- 54 Warnock, 2000, p. 28.
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Maria Jenkins, personal communication.
- 57 Ann Strawson, personal communication.
- 58 Personal communication to author.
- 59 Warnock, 2000, pp. 158–159.
- 60 UA, 6, p. 23.
- 61 Ibid., p. 25.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Warnock, 2000, p. 122.
- 65 Ibid.
- 66 John Bayley, 2000.
- 67 Ann Strawson, personal communication.
- 68 Julia Lloyd, personal communication.
- 69 In the account of the meetings of the Committee on Special Educational Needs in Chapter Seven, the author describes how Mary reports (accurately) that he had been ‘though not a lover, a great friend and support (and probably all the better for not being a lover).’ It might be thought that this remark suggests that Mary was more open to taking lovers than many people thought possible. When the author delicately broached the possibility of affairs with some of his interviewees, the response from most was along the lines of ‘Goodness me, no. She was far too busy for any of that.’ Others were less certain.
- 70 Warnock, 2000, pp. 219–230.

71 Ibid., pp. 228–229.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid., p. 233.

74 Ibid., pp. 237–238.

75 Ibid., p. 236.

76 Grove, p. 47.

