

# *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher:* **The Making of the Biography**

**Phil Mullins**

ABSTRACT Key Words: William T. Scott, Martin X. Moleski, Michael Polanyi biography  
*This short essay describes the long process of producing the 2005 biography of Michael Polanyi.*

In May of 2005, Oxford University Press published the long-awaited Polanyi biography, *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher*, by the late William T. Scott and Martin X. Moleski, S. J. For scholars interested in Polanyi's thought, this work now provides a standard reference point for Polanyi's career. Present and future generations of scholars will rely upon this new biography to help them understand the historical context that provided opportunities Polanyi turned into solid contributions in science, economics, and philosophy. This work fittingly reflects Polanyi as a multi-talented and energetic person deeply committed to understanding and addressing the cultural malaise of his time. It richly portrays Polanyi as a person who accepted his calling. Readers see the trajectory of a life here.

Like a few others in the Polanyi Society, I have been reading versions of this book for 15 years; my primary response to its completion was a combination of relief and gratitude that a great project arrived at a successful, public conclusion. To celebrate the biography's publication, a session of the 2005 annual meeting that included Ann Scott and Marty Moleski was devoted to discussion of the book. Most of this issue of *Tradition and Discovery* is also devoted to comments on *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher* by a set of people who worked with Polanyi and/or early recognized the importance of his writing. Lee Congdon, Paul Craig Roberts, Ruel Tyson, and Richard Gelwick are recognized scholars, and some of these folk play a role in the biography. Marty Moleski kindly agreed to respond to their comments on *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher*. As a prelude to this discussion, I have gathered below several important facts about the biography project.

## **The Book Project**

Bill Scott began work on *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher* in 1977, the year after Michael Polanyi died. Magda Polanyi asked Scott to write the biography because she was concerned to find someone competent to treat not only Polanyi's philosophical ideas but also his scientific achievements.<sup>1</sup> Bill Scott, of course, since he was a physicist, was well suited to digest the roughly two hundred scientific publications by Polanyi as well as the large body of philosophical writing, and he started in earnest on this project right away.

By the time Polanyi died, Bill had already been interested in Polanyi's thought for a bit more than sixteen years. He first met Polanyi on November 24, 1959, when he was on sabbatical at Yale and came to a faculty dinner for Polanyi. He was pressed into service as an available scientist able to converse with Polanyi over breakfast the next morning. Polanyi came to Yale to deliver "Beyond Nihilism" in an American practice run for the Eddington Lecture delivery of this material at Cambridge in February of 1960. Scott acknowledged that

in his first encounter with Polanyi he did not much understand Polanyi's philosophical ideas; he had only been able to do a quick reading of *The Study of Man*. After the meeting, however, Scott dug in and worked seriously through *Personal Knowledge*. Scott later wrote an important 1962 review of the book, one that Polanyi appreciated and which led to their friendship in the last phase of Polanyi's life.<sup>2</sup>

In remarks in an early draft of the biography, here is how Scott came to describe his appreciation for Polanyi:<sup>3</sup>

. . . I was excited to discover a scholar who profoundly addressed contemporary issues of belief and value, speaking from a formidable background in physical science and providing a new understanding of the knowing process throughout the wide range of human experience. Polanyi presented an analysis of our situation as persons who have lost the ability to justify our beliefs, beliefs which we do indeed hold but hesitate to admit into our rational discourse. Dealing with an extraordinary variety of subject matter, he gave an insightful view of the causes of our loss and showed the way to the rational holding of our fundamental beliefs.

Scott acknowledged that he found particularly helpful Polanyi's ideas about boundary conditions and the hierarchical levels of reality: "By coupling the ideas of boundary conditions and hierarchical levels of reality, Polanyi creates a new and fruitful way to relate the intricacies of science to the life of the human spirit." Scott regarded Polanyi's account of tacit knowing as an account that rehabilitated, in the scientific and philosophical traditions, a commonsensical and human-centered understanding of inquiry:

Thus tacit knowledge gives a respectable status to intuitive processes, which are commonly treated as being secondary or inferior, and provides a basis for trust in our own perceptions and in the perceptions of others. By demonstrating the ubiquitous personal element in the entire knowing process, Polanyi puts the person back into the scientific world view from which he has been removed from the time of Descartes.

Bill Scott, along with his wife Ann, visited Polanyi on several occasions late in Polanyi's life and Polanyi also went to Reno, where Bill was a professor of physics at the University of Nevada. After Polanyi died and Scott was asked to undertake the biography, Bill began an extraordinarily careful and thorough review of all written materials, scientific, philosophical, economic and personal (i.e., family collections), that he could find. As the Acknowledgments in *Michael Polanyi, Scientist and Philosopher* make clear, Scott interviewed more than 150 people who knew Polanyi and wrote another 150 persons. After the University of Chicago archive was set up, he poured over the material that he had not seen in the many boxes; he looked also at materials held in other libraries. At the very beginning of his research in 1977, Scott recruited Monika Tobin, the spouse of a University of Nevada colleague, who helped him organize what he gathered. Without doubt, the completion of the biography project owes much to Monika's skills and perseverance, not to mention the skills and hard work of Ann Scott and Mary Kliwer of the Physics Department. Monika helped not only Bill Scott, but also Marty Moleski when he took up the work after Bill's death. Bill's university and many other institutions interested in seeing that a Polanyi biography was completed also supported the biography project.

Of course, many Polanyi scholars were curious and somewhat impatient about the biography project after Bill had been working on it for a decade or more. It was a big project and Bill was meticulous and, as we

now know, drawing together all the many elements he had gathered was very likely impeded by the early stages of Bill's Parkinson's disease, which was not diagnosed until the nineties. Based on his work on the biography, Bill did produce a captivating address on Polanyi's early life delivered at the Kent State Centennial Conference (April 12, 1991). This was later published in *Tradition and Discovery* (25:3, pp. 10-25) in slightly revised form, including an interesting chart on Polanyi's work from 1958-1971. Ann and Bill formed an advisory committee in 1991 comprised of several members of the Polanyi Society (Richard Gelwick, Walter Gulick, the late Charles McCoy and Phil Mullins) and we took up the charge to look at manuscript materials and provide advice. Monika and Ann completed the first draft of the full manuscript in 1994. It had 25 chapters and 293,000 words. This draft and subsequent ones were circulated for comments and there were a number of people who (in addition to the advisory committee) provided thoughtful suggestions. Many of these folk are identified in the biography's prefatory material.

While in California in the summer of 1996, I visited Ann and Bill in Santa Rosa. By this time, it was very clear that Bill's declining health would prevent him from undertaking the revision of the massive first draft of the manuscript. Those of us in the advisory group stepped up our efforts to help Ann find a way the biography project could be brought to a conclusion. Marty Moleski was scheduled for an upcoming sabbatical leave and made known that he would be interested in tackling the biography. After some preliminary negotiations with the Scotts, Marty and I went to California in the summer of 1997 and worked out a formal agreement whereby Marty would take up the biography project as a co-author.

As Marty notes in his Preface to the volume, he came to be interested in Polanyi as an undergraduate, and this interest deepened in his graduate study at The Catholic University of America. Moleski eventually did a dissertation under (now) Cardinal Avery Dulles that explored links between ideas of John Henry Newman and Polanyi.<sup>4</sup> Marty, of course, has had interests and life experiences quite different than Bill Scott. He is from a different generation; he had no advanced training in science or extended firsthand exposure to scientific research, although he was interested in science and had some basic scientific education. While Bill was a Quaker and a peace activist scientist, Marty is a Jesuit and a systematic theologian. I dwell on these matters of difference only to emphasize the scope of the indwelling necessary for Marty to take up the biography project. He not only had to digest the 293,000 word manuscript and the enormous quantity of research materials that underlay this behemoth; he had also empathetically to understand the man Bill Scott who spent the last twenty-three years of his life consumed by the task of understanding and writing about Michael Polanyi.

Bill Scott died on February 22, 1999. By this time, Marty was already hard at work on the manuscript. Understanding the gathered research and reshaping the draft of the manuscript began on Marty's sabbatical. He finished the first cut and the major reorganization during this period. When he returned to fulltime teaching, Marty had to work on the biography project when he could squeeze in the time. The next two years were devoted to checking references, with Monica's help, and to three or four cycles of informal peer review. The manuscript then began the rounds of review with publishers. The business of reshaping the manuscript and having it reviewed stretched over several years. I think perhaps that some of us doubted that the manuscript could ever be transformed into a concise and tightly ordered artifact that a publisher would accept, hoping for a return on the investment in the book. But Marty did put things in the necessary good order. The final manuscript is about 159,000 words. This is an achievement that ought not to be overlooked as merely an exercise of editing Bill's draft. I suspect that we should take Marty literally when he says,

The book placed before you is not the book that Bill wrote, nor is it the book that I would have written if I had started fresh and worked alone, nor is it the book that would have emerged from a true collaboration between two authors who could fight fairly with each other to achieve a true union of thought (viii).

Surely those interested in Polanyi owe Marty Moleski, as well as Bill Scott, a great debt. Together—yet apart—they have indeed provided “a solid foundation for future investigations of Polanyi’s life and work” (viii).

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Scott briefly described his discussion with Mrs. Polanyi in an early draft of the Preface; see Mullins and Moleski’s obituary for Scott, *TAD* 25:3, 5-9. Some of the details noted below come from this obituary and/or early drafts of the biography. Some details, for example, the story of Scott’s first encounter with Polanyi, are included in the published biography (242).

<sup>2</sup> William T. Scott, “Polanyi’s Theory of Personal Knowledge: a Gestalt Philosophy,” *The Massachusetts Review* 3: 2 (1962): 349-368.

<sup>3</sup> All three of the quotations in this paragraph come from an early manuscript of the biography. For a statement similar to the second quotation, see also William T. Scott, “The Gentle Rain: A Search for Understanding,” *Intellect and Hope, Essays in the Thought of Michael Polanyi*, Eds. W. H. Poteat and Thomas Langford (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1968), 243.

<sup>4</sup> Moleski has subsequently published *Personal Catholicism: The Theological Epistemologies of John Henry Newman and Michael Polanyi* (Washington D. C.: The Catholic University of America Press, 2000). There are interesting review articles by John Apczynski and Joseph Kroger as well as a response from Moleski in *TAD* 28: 1.

## POLANYI SOCIETY MEMBERSHIP

*Tradition and Discovery* is distributed to members of the Polanyi Society. An electronic (pdf) version of the current issue as well as past issues back to 1991 are available on the Polanyi Society web site (<http://www.missouriwestern.edu/orgs/polanyi/>). The Polanyi Society has members in thirteen different countries, although most live in North America and the United Kingdom. The Society includes those formerly affiliated with the Polanyi group centered in the United Kingdom which published *Convivium: The United Kingdom Review of Post-critical Thought*. There are three issues of *TAD* each year.

Annual membership in the Polanyi Society is \$25 (\$10 for students). The membership cycle follows the academic year; subscriptions are due November 1 to Phil Mullins, Missouri Western State University, St. Joseph, MO 64507 (fax: 816-271-5680, e-mail: [mullins@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:mullins@missouriwestern.edu)). Please make checks payable to the Polanyi Society. Dues can be paid by credit card by providing the card holder's name as it appears on the card, the card number and expiration date. Changes of address and inquiries should be sent to Phil Mullins. New members should provide the following subscription information: complete mailing address, telephone (work and home), e-mail address and/or fax number. Institutional members should identify a department to contact for billing. The Polanyi Society attempts to maintain a data base identifying persons interested in or working with Polanyi's philosophical writing. New members can contribute to this effort by writing a short description of their particular interests in Polanyi's work and any publications and/or theses/dissertations related to Polanyi's thought. Please provide complete bibliographic information. Those renewing membership are invited to include information on recent work.