Kathleen Vaughn Wilkes was a Fellow of St Hilda’s College and Lecturer in the Faculty of Philosophy from 1973 until her untimely death in 2003. In April 2018 the College celebrated her life and work by holding a two-day conference in her honour. The event formed part of a year-long celebration of the 125th anniversary of the College. Close to one hundred people gathered from all around Britain and Europe to share memories of Kathy as both a philosopher and political activist. At the first session one of her brothers spoke of Kathy as a sister and family member, Professor Julia Annas reminisced about a shared time with Kathy as an undergraduate at St Hugh’s College, Professor Helen Steward spoke of Kathy as a beloved tutor, Dr Edward Harcourt attested to her as an inspirational graduate supervisor, Dr Ralph Walker talked of her contribution to the Faculty of Philosophy, and Dr Anita Avramides spoke of her as a colleague at St Hilda’s. At the dinner that followed, the crime writer Val McDermid told of her friendship with Kathy that began when Val was an undergraduate at St Hilda’s and Kathy the College Dean. Among the many books that Val has written, she has dedicated one to K.V. Wilkes. The Skeleton Road tells the story of an intrepid Oxford don from one of the Oxford women’s colleges who travels to Croatia and gets caught up in the war for independence. While the story is fictional, it is inspired by Kathy’s life and works.

Kathy’s political work began, not in Croatia, but in (what was in 1979) Czechoslovakia. The story of how she came to be involved with the dissident philosophical community in Prague in 1979 has been recounted by many. In his obituary for Kathy, published in the Guardian, Bill Newton-Smith remembers that it was Kathy who first responded to an invitation from the philosophical community in Prague to conduct clandestine seminars there. Newton-Smith writes: “Harassment by the security police never daunted her; though, inevitably, the authorities eventually denied her visas. This merely galvanised her further and, with friends in the west, she created the Jan Hus Foundation, which was to become a major source of support for the dissident community.” At the conference in April, Bill—along with Sir Anthony Kenny and Sir Roger Scruton—spoke of Kathy’s commitment to the philosophers (and, indeed, all the people) of Prague. They recounted stories of imprisonment and of being chased to the border by the secret police. When the time came and Kathy was no longer allowed to enter Czechoslovakia, she turned her attention to the philosophers in Dubrovnik—working at the Inter-University Centre (the IUC) to bring together academics from both the east and the west of Europe. When war broke out between Serbia and Croatia, Kathy remained in Dubrovnik. To mark her courage and assistance, she was made an honorary member of the Croatian army, and an honorary citizen of the city of Dubrovnik. After the war, she worked tirelessly for the city: raising money, organising mine clearance and re-establishing the IUC, which had been largely destroyed by the war. For this, and her contributions to philosophy, she was awarded a doctorate honoris causa by Zagreb University. To honour her, the Croatian Ambassador, HE Igor Pogaz, attended the conference at St Hilda’s in April and spoke warmly of what Kathy meant—and continues to mean—to the people of Dubrovnik.

Anita Avramides reports on the memorial conference for her colleague Kathy Wilkes.
Kathy Wilkes was first and foremost an Oxford philosopher. On the second day of the conference there were sessions devoted to her philosophical work. One session concentrated on interdisciplinary work between philosophy, psychology and neuroscience. In another session, Dr Karen Nielsen (Somerville College, Oxford), Professor Joseph Moural (Prague) and Professor Ricardo Viale (Milan) spoke about Kathy’s legacy in both ancient Greek philosophy and philosophy of mind. Kathy’s interests in philosophy ranged wide: she studied Greats as an undergraduate and did her PhD under the supervision of Tom Nagel and Richard Rorty at Princeton. Many of us, as we read back over Kathy’s work—her books Real People and Physicalism, and the volume of papers she edited with Bill Newton-Smith, Modelling the Mind, as well as her many journal articles—were astonished at how well they have stood the test of time.

The conference was brought to an end with a concert of piano music by the Botrell Piano Duo, who played music associated with both Prague and Croatia. A photograph of Kathy now hangs in the corridor outside the Ryle Room in the Philosophy Faculty. She is a woman whose intellect and whose passion touched the lives of generations of students and ordinary citizens. Bill Newton-Smith summed things up perfectly when he wrote, again in her obituary in the Guardian: “Some have sought to understand the world; others have sought to change it. Kathy’s goal was to understand the world, but by insisting on the right of others to join with her in seeking to understand it, she did change the world as well.”

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