

1937

V2

(Munz, P., 2010)

Popper, Karl Raimund

1902–1994

Philosopher

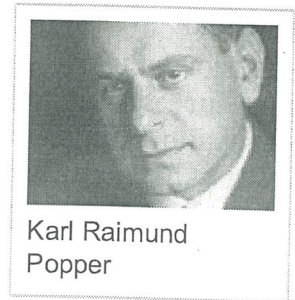
By Peter Munz

1937

Political philosopher Karl Popper takes up a lectureship in philosophy at Canterbury University College, Christchurch

Biography

Karl Raimund Popper was born in Vienna, Austria, on 28 July 1902, the son of Simon Siegmund Carl Popper, a lawyer, and his wife, Jenny Schiff. He turned his inquisitive and enterprising mind to a variety of activities. He was apprenticed to a cabinet-maker, joined a youth organisation where he worked with delinquent adolescents, tramped in the Austrian mountains, taught himself mathematics and physics, and became active in political movements during the First World War as a socialist. Most significantly, he studied philosophy at the University of Vienna and was awarded a PhD in 1928. On 11 April 1930 he married Josefina Anna Henninger in Vienna; there were no children of the marriage. By that time he was an accomplished musician with a decided preference for classical music and had qualified as a schoolteacher.



Karl Raimund
Popper

It was Popper's practical and political interests that first directed him to the philosophy of science, because he realised that it was vital to be able to tell genuine knowledge from pseudo-knowledge and superstition. Having become acquainted with the dominant philosophical school in Vienna, known as the Vienna Circle, he concluded that its philosophy of science was deficient. It was based on the old Baconian inductionist theory that science involves making observations and generalising them into universal laws. This, Popper argued, explained neither how scientific thought actually proceeds, nor why we consider that its findings correspond to reality. He therefore formulated a counter-proposal, which he published in 1934 under the title *Logik der Forschung*; its English translation, *The logic of scientific discovery*, was not published until 1959. On Popper's account, science proceeds by formulating hypotheses. The criterion of a scientific hypothesis is that it generates predictions that are capable of being falsified by reference to empirical data. These hypotheses can never be conclusively proved true, so that scientific knowledge is necessarily provisional. This idea revolutionised the understanding of the nature and value of scientific knowledge. Albert Einstein read *Logik* in manuscript and applauded it vigorously. Popper's radical revision of induction at once brought the philosophy of science into line with actual practice and provided an unprecedentedly convincing account of how science succeeds in arriving at knowledge about nature.

With the advance of Nazism in Austria and the growth of anti-Semitism, Popper, who was of Jewish origin though not a practising Jew, decided to emigrate. In 1936 he learnt of an advertisement for a lectureship in philosophy at Canterbury University College, Christchurch, New Zealand. He applied and took up the position in early 1937.

3rd

Despite having acquired a certain level of fame in Europe, Popper was unknown in New Zealand where knowledge of the significance of his contribution to the philosophy of science was minimal. As a result, his feelings about Canterbury College were ambivalent. He was pleased to be safe from the war and from anti-Semitic persecution, but interpreted the lack of appreciation as hostility to him and his wife, as well as to what he had to offer. His relations with the head of the Philosophy Department, I. L. G. Sutherland, were unfriendly and marked by bitter quarrels. He found it hard to accept that, having made his mark in Europe, he should be inferior in status to a man he regarded as an academic nonentity. Popper's ignorance of the way British universities were run made him interpret the inevitable bureaucracy as an attempt to stifle him personally. And he was probably surprised to find himself in a university where staff did little research.

Nevertheless, Popper made an immediate impression in Christchurch and became profoundly influential. He made contact with a number of scientists who were able to appreciate his contribution to and explanation of their activities. He was specially befriended at Canterbury by R. S. Allan, the professor of geology, and by H. N. Parton, a lecturer in chemistry. He was invited by John Eccles, later a Nobel laureate, to lecture at the University of Otago on the meaning of science and the logic of discovery. Popper was an enthusiastic and devoted teacher and was widely appreciated by a large number of students, both at the university and in innumerable lectures he offered in WEA courses. His lectures were a model of good teaching. He thought aloud and spoke fluently and slowly, without notes, and never faltered. Ideas seemed to flow from him in their own inner logical succession. The combination of seriousness and lucidity, sometimes interrupted by touches of seemingly improvised humour, was completely persuasive. He spoke with a heavy Austrian accent but was always intelligible. He took endless care with individual students, on many of whom he left a lasting impression.

The intellectual climate at Canterbury College in those days was decidedly sluggish. Popper greatly enlivened that atmosphere and in the early 1940s became the most talked about member of the college staff. He generated among students and colleagues major debates on the issue of science versus arts and literature. Popper stressed the importance of scientific research and attacked those die-hard romantics who decried science as a threat to humane imagination. He also became well known as an opponent of communism, which he exposed as a form of totalitarianism at a time when many people regarded the alliance with the Soviet Union against Germany as a battle for socialism.

During his years in Christchurch Popper wrote his second major work, *The open society and its enemies*, which he considered his contribution to the war effort. It traced the wish to construct tightly closed social orders, starting with Plato and working through to Hegel and Marx, whom he held responsible for the triumphs of both fascism and communism. He also argued that there are no inevitable laws of historical development, and that the attempt by totalitarian states to suppress criticism is inevitably self-defeating. Popper's book was published immediately after the war in London and has since gone through innumerable editions and translations into many languages. It was a major contribution to modern political and social thought and continues to be influential. It was taken up with special enthusiasm in the 1980s and 1990s in eastern European countries wishing to revitalise their democratic traditions. The frequent misuse of *The open society* to justify attacks on the welfare state was never publicly opposed by Popper, although the book made it quite clear that he saw the democratic state as a necessary protector of weak and helpless people.

In 1945 Popper was offered a lectureship at the London School of Economics and Philosophy (LSE) on the strength of *The open society*. He was only too glad to leave New Zealand. He did, however, contribute to the publication, in 1945, of an important pamphlet on university reform in New Zealand. Popper turned down an offer of a chair at the University of Otago and was sounded out about the possibility of a chair in the University of Vienna; he had no wish to return to Austria. In 1949 he was appointed to a full professorship at the LSE, where he stayed until his early retirement in 1969.

He continued to lecture and attracted an increasing number of students from abroad. His relations with many of his most devoted students were now often stormy and, with the exception of one or two cases, tended to end in open hostility. Popper had become intolerant of dissent and also inclined to misunderstand the nature of his own contribution to the philosophy of science. He believed that he had solved the problem of how scientific knowledge is generated and established. In reality he had merely moved the problem one step forward and so opened an entirely new problem. In demonstrating that all scientific knowledge is only provisional and hypothetical, he had invited doubts as to the degree to which it genuinely corresponded to reality. These doubts were pursued by Thomas Kuhn and led him to a relativism which never gained Popper's approval.

Popper achieved increasing public eminence. He was invited to deliver the William James lectures at Harvard University in 1950 and took part in many international conferences and lectures both in the United States and in German and Austrian universities. He had public debates with Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno, two of the most popular luminaries of Continental philosophy in the 1950s and 1960s, and in 1972 he published his third major book, *Objective knowledge*, in which he established a close link between his philosophy of science and the development of neo-Darwinism. He was knighted in 1965. In 1974 the prestigious Library of Living Philosophers devoted two volumes to him. Popper formed close personal and intellectual friendships with many leading scientists. He also visited Australian universities and in 1973 was awarded an honorary degree by the University of Canterbury during its centenary celebrations. That year, he held a William Evans fellowship at the University of Otago. He became a fellow of the British Academy and eventually a fellow of the Royal Society of London. He was also awarded many international prizes, including the Sonning Prize in 1973 and the Goethe Medal in 1992, and was esteemed and consulted by many European statesmen.

Popper continued to think and write until the very last years of his life and delivered and published two of his most lucid lectures ever at the age of 88 in 1990. He died on 17 September 1994 in Croydon, Surrey; Josefine Popper had died in 1985.

How to cite this page: Peter Munz. 'Popper, Karl Raimund - Biography', from the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography. Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, updated 1-Sep-10
URL: <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/4p18/1>