**Assisting Popper[[1]](#endnote-1)**

1. **Introduction**

I worked for Karl Popper as his full-time assistant from 1971-1979. In this piece, I will share some reflections upon my time with him. What I can discuss, in a piece of this length, must obviously be highly selective.

First, however, I should say a little about how I came to work with him. At the school which I attended, as was common in British schools, in my final two years I specialised in three different academic subjects – history, chemistry and mathematics. Our careers adviser suggested that it might make sense for me to apply to the London School of Economics to read for an undergraduate degree in economics. (At that time, to go to Oxford or Cambridge to read for a degree other than in the sciences, one needed to have passed an exam in Latin; something at which I was a miserable failure.) I duly went to the L.S.E (in 1966).

I had not studied economics previously, and I really did not take to it. Or, rather, while what economics studied was interesting, the way in which the subject was taught I found dismal. As I discovered later, it was taught after the fashion of a ‘normal science’ as described by Thomas Kuhn in his **The Structure of Scientific Revolutions**. We were given – in a simple way – information about then-current ideas, which were taught without discussion about what the ideas involved, contending ideas, or the history of the discipline. Rather, ideas were explained; we were given examples, and then simple problems to solve with the help of the ideas. While I did OK, I found it rather tedious, and at times baffling – as when ‘Keynesian’ ideas about multipliers were introduced as if they were something analytical, rather than being, at bottom, empirical claims.

By way of contrast with all this, I happened to take a course on logic – just because, at the time, I thought that it would be useful to me in the study of economics, alongside a course in the foundations of mathematics. In the event, rather than the usual way in which such courses are taught – which make economics seem intellectually riveting – this course was taught by way of a history of problems in the philosophy of logic and mathematics, with technical material introduced to us in the context of the problems towards which it was directed. This was the most interesting material that I had ever come across, and I was able to shift my work, within my economics degree, to largely doing philosophy in Karl Popper’s department of ‘Logic and Scientific Method’.

This was distinctive, in that it had grown up round Popper, and the approach that it took to philosophy was influenced by his work. The approach was not uncritical: there were lively disagreements between people in the department – notably, over the time that I was there, as exhibited in the work of Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend. (Feyerabend visited, I think in 1969, to give a course in the philosophy of science, after Popper had retired. In this, inter alia, Feyerabend talked about the **Malleus Maleficarum[[2]](#endnote-2)** – a hostile treatise on witches – as offering better empirical support for its claims – e.g. about the characteristics of the devil’s penis – than Galileo was able to offer for his mechanics!) I was able, as an undergraduate, to obtain permission to attend Popper’s graduate seminar – at which, again, there was lively critical discussion. I, and other students in the L.S.E. programme, also attended seminars at University College, London, where the approach taken by Larry Laudan to the philosophy of science was, again, rather different from Popper’s

At the same time, however, I also studied the history of political thought, which was taught in Michael Oakeshott’s programme within the Department of Government (i.e. of political science). Oakeshott, in his programme, had a similar influence on most of the other political theorists as Popper did in his department. I was able to obtain permission to attend Oakeshott’s seminar for graduate students in the history of political thought – and thus experienced an initiation into two strongly contrasting systematic approaches to philosophy.[[3]](#endnote-3)

I was able to continue my studies in philosophy beyond my undergraduate degree, but rather than continuing to take a Ph.D. I decided to be trained as a university librarian, planning to return to take a Ph.D. in philosophy, part-time, once I had a job as a librarian. In the event, a good friend of mine who was teaching at the University of Edinburgh urged me to apply for a position which had just been advertised at the University of Sheffield. I wrote to my former tutor at the L.S.E. to ask if he would write a reference for me. He said that the department in question tended not to be keen on people from the L.S.E. But he also mentioned that Popper’s full-time assistant, Arne Petersen, was leaving (to return to his work in animal psychology), and asked if I would be interested in the job. My response was an emphatic ‘yes’, and I went down from Durham in North East England where I was working, to see Professor Popper.

1. **An Initial Meeting**

I had attended Popper’s lectures at the L.S.E.,[[4]](#endnote-4) and had attended his seminar. But I had not met him personally. He had, at this point, retired from the L.S.E., and was working from his house near the village of Penn, not far from High Wycombe – a town about 30 miles from London. Popper and his wife had moved there fairly soon after they moved to Britain from New Zealand. In New Zealand, they had lived in a quiet property on the outskirts of Canterbury. When they moved to London, they initially lived in a terraced house in an area of North East London, East Barnet, which they hated – not least because it was noisy.[[5]](#endnote-5) Popper’s wife very much liked peace and quiet, and when they could, they purchased a house somewhere quiet, as far away from the L.S.E. as the university regulations allowed them to live. My understanding is that Popper was able to pay for the house using funds which he received for delivering the William James Lectures at Harvard, in 1950.

Getting to the Popper’s house from central London involved a train journey to High Wycombe. On this occasion, Popper came to the station by car to meet me. Unfortunately, however, trains went to High Wycombe from two different London stations: Paddington, and (a slower train) Marylebone; the two trains left at the same time. I took the slow one by mistake, so that I did not arrive at the station when I was expected! Despite this, he hired me.

The Poppers’ house was, indeed, quiet. It was about a kilometre from the nearest main road, in the kind of area often referred to as ‘the stockbroker belt’ – i.e. one in which there were a number of large detached and quite expensive houses, in a quiet setting, at a certain distance outside London. The Poppers’ house was fairly small, but was on a double-sized lot, which had on it a garden and also a small orchard. The house itself had a large main room. This contained a small grand piano, some bookshelves, and some Bauhaus-looking easy chairs made of wood, which Popper had himself designed. There was a small kitchen, an office in which Popper worked, and another room in which books and papers were kept. I never visited the upstairs part of the house, but Popper’s wife, in addition to using a typewriter in a bay window in the main room, had a radio upstairs. They did not own a television.

Popper took me to his house by car. But – I am happy to say (as by that point he was not someone by whom one would wish to be driven) – he subsequently shifted to taking me to near the end of his road, from which there was an occasional bus service to High Wycombe. From there I could catch a train back to London. Subsequently I used to take my bike on the train and cycle to and from his house.

1. **Assisting Popper**

What, you might wonder, did I actually do? I had the use of an office at the L.S.E. I would arrive there each morning, and would call Popper at about 9.30, by which point he had looked at his mail. He would then tell me about work that he was doing, and make requests for me to obtain books and articles for his work. One of my tasks was to identify and obtain these – which, in the days before the internet, was not always straightforward. Not only were library catalogues not available on computer, but nor were there any computer-based finding aids.

This would mean that, if Popper referred to a book, I would need to identify it using printed library catalogues and reference material, and published indices to periodicals. I was typically able to request books by means of linter-library loan from the L.S.E. library. Journal articles had often to be tracked down physically: some were held by the L.S.E.; others I was able to obtain at various academic and other research libraries in London, and to copy for Popper’s use. I would take these with me when I went to visit Popper at Penn. This would typically involve me in a bike ride from the L.S.E. to Marylebone Station, a train to High Wycombe, and then a 4km ride – up a long and quite steep hill – to Popper’s house.

Once I was there, I would work with Popper at a small table in his office. This work would typically involve his going over typescripts which I had brought with me from the L.S.E. These would have been typed up by his part-time secretary, from initial versions produced by Popper’s wife, which Popper would typically have revised heavily by hand. I would also have read over these, and would put to him questions and suggestions about the style and the content of his work. Popper was an accomplished English stylist. But this was a product of a characteristically Popperian process of critical feedback. When he was absorbed in his work, his feeling for grammar, and for the structure of his sentences, would often disappear. I would also read proofs for him – checking them against his manuscripts with his part-time secretary, at the L.S.E.

Popper was totally absorbed in his work. Into his 70s, he would often work right through the night, if he was excited by some new idea. If the Poppers went on holidays (which were infrequent) – it was often to Switzerland, which his wife particularly enjoyed. Soon after they had departed, however, written material from Popper typically turned up at the L.S.E. for me to work on. Popper also gave me detailed instructions as to just how tasks should be undertaken for him. How an envelope should be opened to avoid damaging the contents, and just how corrections were to be made to proofs. Popper was also suspicious as to whether printers would make corrections properly – to the point that one of my tasks was to go to the company printing one of his books, to watch the compositor set into print some of Popper’s technical corrections.

As time went on, I undertook more intellectually demanding tasks. I prepared the indexes to Popper’s **Objective Knowledge** and his **Unended Quest**.[[6]](#endnote-6) In addition, Popper sometimes discussed ideas with me on which I took notes, or even – in some parts of **The Self and Its Brain** – drafted material, upon which he worked and then included into his text. His own writings were themselves the product of such critical activity. He would almost endlessly make small improvements and changes in the light of suggestions or queries raised by friends or assistants, or issues which struck him as he read over what he had written.

If people have read Popper’s work, they will know that he had a very wide range of interests. He was concerned – among other things – with developments in the physical and biological sciences (and corresponded with specialists about them). He was also interested in, and knowledgeable about, all kinds of issues in philosophy and its history – including, for example, work in phenomenology, about which there is no reason to have expected that he would have an interest, and the Würzburg school’s ideas about psychology. He also had a particularly strong interest in the history of music – ideas concerning which had played an important part in the development of his views, more generally.

One real regret, on my part, is that I did not myself have the knowledge or the opportunity to talk with him about such matters (or, indeed, about issues in social and political philosophy, in which I am myself particularly interested). In part, this was because my task, as his assistant, was very much to engage with his current work. In addition, Popper was badly deaf, and tended to have to try to reconstruct what others were saying from what little he could hear.

1. **But What, Substantively, Was I working on With Him?**

I can, here, discuss just a few major items of Popper’s work. In addition to these, Popper was at work on papers and public lectures on a wide range of topics, from the interpretation of pre-Socratic philosophy, to the philosophy of biology, to the rationality of scientific revolutions, to the philosophy of mind, and to social and political philosophy.

I went to work with Popper when he was in the latter stages of preparing **Objective Knowledge** for the press. My role, in this, was very limited. The volume consisted of one new chapter – which Popper had worked on extensively with his former assistant, and of small revisions to work which had been published elsewhere.[[7]](#endnote-7) My own role in all this was extremely limited.

The next major effort, related to the publication of **The Philosophy of Karl Popper**, ed. P. A. Schilpp. This was a volume on Popper’s work in a major series. The format consists of an intellectual autobiography by the featured writer; critical papers about his work as invited by the editor; and then responses to his critics, by the featured writer. Popper’s autobiography had been written when my predecessor was his assistant (it was subsequently revised for separate publication as **Unended Quest**). Popper was assisted, in writing his responses, by a former assistant of his, David Miller. My tasks were still relatively routine, although Popper subsequently decided to re-write his response to Imre Lakatos – who had been a colleague of his at the L.S.E., and with whom personal and intellectual relations had become tense.[[8]](#endnote-8) Once this had been sent off to the publishers, I started to wake up in the middle of the night worrying about it. Were, for example, quotations from his own work in Popper’s response correct? I kept finding that they were not quite right. In addition, Popper’s re-written response was a hard-hitting denunciation of Lakatos as a reliable guide to the development of Popper’s work. I was dreading what would happen when this was published, not least as, while I worked for Popper, my workplace was the L.S.E. where Lakatos was an influential Professor. I must confess that, while it made me sad – as I thought that he was a very interesting intellectual, as well as being a distinctive and amusing personality – Lakatos’s premature death, before the book came out, came to me as an incredible relief.

After all this, Popper asked me to work on papers the bulk of which eventually came out as Popper’s **The Myth of the Framework**. This we had taken close to the point when it could have been sent to the publishers. But Popper’s wife indicated that she wished, instead, for work to be undertaken on a collection of papers, **Philosophy and Physics**, which was intended to be a companion volume to **Objective Knowledge**. It was to consist of (slightly) revised versions of a number of Popper’s papers on different issues in science, together with some new papers. Popper had, from the publication of his **Logik der Forschung** in 1934,[[9]](#endnote-9) been concerned with substantive issues in the physical sciences. He had published on such topics as the interpretation of quantum theory and the ‘arrow of time’, and at one point was planning a book taking issue with what he saw as forms of subjectivism that people were in his view mistakenly drawing from ideas in physical science.[[10]](#endnote-10)

I faced two problems in approaching this task. The first was that I did not myself have the kind of knowledge that one would need to be able to work intensively on such a volume. The second was that, in fact, Popper’s views had changed over the time period from which the papers stemmed. To bring the work out as a volume – other than something with purely historical significance – would in fact have required that exactly what had changed, and when, and why, had been identified and explained. In addition, it would have enhanced the work considerably, if the volume had also contained a discussion of how argument about the issues that Popper was addressing had, itself, changed over time. This, however, was not work that I could have undertaken myself, and it was also not clear that it was something that Popper, at that time, wished to undertake.

In the event, two things happened.

The first concerned Popper’s **Postscript to the Logic of Scientific Discovery**. Popper had hoped that this would be published in 1954, when he was anticipating that the English translation of his **L.Sc.D.** would appear. It would offer an updating and defence of his views. In the event, work continued on this through the 1950s and 1960s, with material from it – e.g. work on the propensity theory of probability, and on how metaphysical theories could be critically appraised, and on their role as ‘metaphysical research programmes’ in the development of science – being drawn upon in shorter pieces. Over the years, the proofs had become heavily annotated, and new sections had been added. Popper had asked my predecessor, Arne Petersen, to arrange for the material to be retyped. He subsequently asked me if I would be willing to edit it for publication. But there were problems about this. I was already very busy – indeed, more than busy – with regular work for Popper. Parts of the material dealt with technical issues in probability theory and physics. In addition – but in a manner which I don’t think that Popper appreciated, the re-typing had given rise to significant gaps in the material. In the event, Professor Tom Settle, in Canada, said that he would undertake the editing. He was not able to get far with it, but the task was taken over by Professor Bartley, in California, who brought the task to completion in the 1980s, and supplemented the material by other work of Popper’s on quantum theory, and also by essays about indeterminism and free will, and on scientific reduction, which Popper had worked on while I was his assistant.

The other issue was posed by the neurophysiologist Sir John Eccles asking Popper if he would collaborate with him on a book on the mind-body problem.[[11]](#endnote-11) Popper had known Eccles from when he was in New Zealand during the Second World War. Eccles had appreciated his ideas about scientific method, and had invited him to his university – in Otago – to give a course of lectures about them. Popper also discussed with Eccles his scientific work. Popper had for a long time been a dualist with regard to the mind-body problem, and Eccles championed similar views; in his case this was related to his personal religious concerns. Their collaboration was intended as a defence of the unfashionable theory of dualist interactionism, although not in the form that this had been championed by Rene Descartes. It was called **The Self and Its Brain**.

The collaboration was, in some ways, rather strange. They initially met to discuss issues, and to record conversations about the topic, at the Villa Serbelloni, in Italy. They then each returned to write their different parts of the book: Eccles to Buffalo, New York, and Popper to Penn. They in effect produced two separate and rather different books, Popper dealing with philosophical issues, Eccles with scientific ones, while a third section consisted of an edited version (which I was asked to look after) of the Serbelloni discussions.

There were, in fact, significant points of difference between Popper and Eccles. For example, Popper saw consciousness as associated with the phenomena of life, and animals as having consciousness – albeit of a different character from ours; not least because of the way in which, for Popper, we are formed by way of our interactions with human culture. Eccles’ view was more along the lines of humans having souls, which could exist after our death. For Popper, human consciousness depends on (but is not the same as) the human body and brain, and he was sceptical about the possibility of its continuing to exist on its own. These and other differences, however, were not explored.

There were also some practical problems about work on the book. Eccles worked on it rapidly, and wished for his part to be up-to-date in terms of current science. Popper worked more slowly, but also faced some problems. His wife became severely ill, and they had to move to somewhere closer to where she was obtaining treatment. Popper was preoccupied by problems about her health – including the practical difficulties of trying to get different specialists who were involved in her treatment actually to talk with one another. He was able to work on the book; but it became difficult for him to have a good overview of its developing structure. Popper, in my view, had lots of striking ideas; but his approach to these issues was in some ways so different from that of his philosophical contemporaries that there was not, it seems to me, the kind of cross-fertilization that there might have been. This was the work to which I probably contributed most: for example, some of the material in section 26 of Popper’s contribution was drafted by me, on the basis of initial conversations with Popper, and then re-worked by him for the final version.

Much more could be said about my time with Popper – both in terms of my experience of him as a personality, and because of the many, many different projects on which I was able to assist him. Working with him was an incredible education for me. But I would have gained more if I had been older and more knowledgeable and experienced, and he had been younger, as that might have made it possible to ask him deeper and more interesting questions about his approach, and in this way to make a more substantive contribution to his work.

Working with him has made a real mark on me: not least in terms of his dedication to working with problems, and thinking critically about his work. I would have been happy to continue working with him, but I faced a practical problem. I was promoted from the position of ‘research assistant’ to that of ‘research officer’. This gave me full parity with a young member of the faculty. But to continue in such a position would have meant that I would have faced a difficulty in eventually moving to a lecturing position, as it would have been unattractive to other people to appoint me, as someone with increased seniority, but without lecturing experience.

In the event, I moved to a temporary position in the Department of Philosophy at the University of Edinburgh – taking with me all the experience and knowledge that I had acquired while working with Popper. In addition, and of great significance, was that Popper’s part-time secretary made the move with me, and we were eventually able to marry. But all that is another story.

1. The idea of writing this piece – which consists of reminiscences of the eight years that I worked as Karl Popper’s full-time assistant – occurred to me as I was reviewing my ‘Editing Hayek’ for **Ideja** [please add publication details which I don’t have]. I would like to thank Ali Paya and Pam Shearmur for comments on an earlier version. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Heinrich Kramer, **Malleus Maleficarum**, 1486; English translation by Montague Summers, 1928. Donald Gillies has written some reminiscences of these lectures (in which Feyerabend lectured, while Lakatos wrote critical comments on the chalkboard behind him), and which were attended for their sheer entertainment value by people from other programmes in the university. Gillies’ recollections, however, differ in some ways from my own see:

https://www.ucl.ac.uk/sts/sites/sts/files/gillies\_2011\_lakatos\_popper\_feyerabend.pdf [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. I have written about this contrast in **Ideja** [please give reference]. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Popper had taught there since 1946. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. It is ironic that a London-based organization which places commemorative blue plaques to commemorate where well-known people lived, were only able to place one in East Barnet – at a location that the Poppers had hated. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. The index to **Objective Knowledge** gained minor fame as the result of an accident. A passage in Popper’s book which could be read as a criticism of Lakatos, but in which he was not mentioned, was listed under ‘Lakatos’ in the index. This, however, was an accident: a reference to a volume edited by Lakatos and Musgrave was eliminated from the same page of the book in proofs, and I had simply omitted to remove the reference to Lakatos as an editor. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. There was also a semi-technical paper which Popper gave at a symposium on Tarski’s work in 1971. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It had got to the point where they were threatening legal action against one another, as to whether a copy of the proofs of Popper’s (then unpublished) **Postscript to the Logic of Scientific Discovery**, which Lakatos said had been sent to him by Popper’s publishers, should – when Popper asked that he should do so – be returned to Popper! [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. The book was published with the imprint ‘1935’, but in fact appeared in late 1934. Popper – and those close to him – always referred to its date of publication as ‘1934’. One other oddity. **Logik der Forschung** eventually appeared in English as **The Logic of Scientific Discovery**, and references to it were made with the abbreviation **LSD**. However, once the Lysergic acid diethylamide started to become widely known as a hallucinogenic drug under the name ‘LSD’, the references were changed to **L.Sc.D**. I also had the delicate task of passing on to Popper (who had a gentle but somewhat puritanical temperament) the suggestion that it was possibly not the best form of wording to refer to Galileo, in his work on mechanics, as having rolled his balls down an inclined plane. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. He worked on this with David Miller, but his plans were interrupted when – faced with an invitation to contribute to a collection on quantum theory – he extracted what became ‘Quantum Mechanics Without “the observer”’ from this projected book, and expanded it for the collection. Some of the issues which he was planning to cover were reviewed more briefly in his **Unended Quest**. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. I do not know when Popper had agreed to do this. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)