

OTIS LEE

1902 - 1948

The College community and philosophical scholars mourn the unexpected death of Otis Lee in Peacham, Vermont, on September 17, 1948.

Professor Lee was born in Montevideo, Minnesota, in 1902 and grew up in the Middle West, where he was strongly influenced by the cultural traditions which prevailed there -- especially by the idea of the open society or community. After receiving his B.A. degree from the University of Minnesota in 1924, he went to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. There he encountered the German philosophical tradition as it was being interpreted by the Oxford Hegelians. 'He returned to America, again to different traditions, this time at Harvard, where he came under the influence of the pragmatism of C. I. Lewis and the metaphysics of A. N. Whitehead. In 1930 he received his Doctor's Degree and for the next three years taught in the Philosophy Department there. Then with his wife, Dorothy, he went to Germany to study for a year with the leading representative of contemporary Hegelianism, Professor Richard Kroner, who is now at Union Theological Seminary partly through Professor Lee's assistance in escaping from the Nuremberg Laws of the Nazis. After his return to this country, Professor Lee became Chairman of the Department of Philosophy at Pomona College and remained there until he was invited to assume a similar position at Vassar College in 1938.

During the ten years that Otis Lee was with us he took an active part in many aspects of community life even though he did not enjoy robust health. An able violinist, he helped to organize an informal student and faculty quartette, which often played in his home. A strong believer in democracy, he acted on his beliefs by participating in forums and political affairs in Poughkeepsie -- even to ringing doorbells during a political campaign. He became interested in the Poughkeepsie Day School, served two years on its Board of Trustees, and had been President of the Board for a year at his death.

Within the college community he carried his full share of committee work. He was eager to develop interdepartmental courses, and the Freedom Seminar was largely OTIS LEE (Continued)

the result of his interest and efforts. Himself the product of many traditions, he worked to build the Philosophy Department on the principle of diversity. He played an important part in the education of many students -- inside and outside the classroom, and

after their graduation -- as teacher, counsellor, and friend. Kindliness, tolerance, and a passion for justice characterized his relations with all people. Besides all this, much of Otis Lee's time and energy was directed toward writing his forthcoming book, *Existence and Inquiry*, the last galley of which he sent to the University of Chicago Press two years before he died. Already the author of many articles and the editor of a book on the philosophy of Whitehead, Professor Lee had been granted a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1940 to write this work; but never one for hasty evaluations, he wrote and re-wrote it until last year. Like his life, the book is a creative and critical synthesis of the major philosophical traditions in modern thought. Professor Lee saw in the development of philosophy since Descartes three main tendencies: analysis, dialectic, and a pragmatism. In a book which he was already projecting, he hoped to achieve a positive reconstruction of modern philosophy, in which his ideas of value, of the individual, and of the community were to be developed in the context of American society. For he recognized the rich possibilities of contemporary American thought and always refused to adhere uncritically to strictly European movements. He was not a Hegelian, a Bergsonian or an Oxfordian, but a philosopher who sought to bring together these strands of thought and to interweave them with the cultural fibers of American life.

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