

## Editing Isaiah Berlin's Writings

The following article is taken, with permission, from British Book News, 'Headlines and Footnotes', January 1978.

*A fellow scholar at Oxford is reported to have said of Isaiah Berlin that 'he is the man who pronounces "epistemological" as one syllable'. Anyone who has ever heard this fascinating talker, whose ideas seem to tumble out even faster than his words, will know exactly what he means. Dr Henry Hardy, once a graduate student at Wolfson College, Oxford, now an editor at Oxford University Press, and an occasional publisher in his own right under the pseudonym Robert Dugdale (his first publication was the selection of Arnold Mallinson's writings referred to below, and his most recent Martin Robertson's long narrative poem, The Sleeping Beauty's Prince), has been responsible for the monumental task of bringing together and editing a four-volume collection of his essays, the first volume of which will be published by the Hogarth Press this month. American rights for the collection have been sold to Viking. Below, Henry Hardy describes the circumstances which led him to undertake 'the most worthwhile publishing venture with which I am ever likely to be associated'.*

When Isaiah Berlin was awarded the Order of Merit, Maurice Bowra wrote in a letter to Noel Annan: 'I am delighted about Isaiah. He is much better than all alternatives ... and very much deserves it. Though like Our Lord and Socrates he does not publish much, he thinks and says a great deal and has had an enormous influence on our times'.

Bowra's belief that Isaiah Berlin rarely ventures into print has been widely held, but it does not fit the facts. He has published a great deal on a wide variety of subjects – principally philosophy, political theory, the Russian intelligentsia of the nineteenth century, and the history of ideas generally – but most of his work has appeared in (often obscure) periodicals and symposia, or as occasional pamphlets; much of it is out of print; and only half a dozen essays have hitherto been collected and reissued. I have happily had the opportunity to help put this deficiency right, by editing a four-volume collection of his essays. This, I hope, will dispel once and for all the myth that he does not publish, as well as making more of his work as readily accessible as it has long deserved to be.

The first volume, *Russian Thinkers*, includes two of Berlin's most celebrated pieces, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', on Tolstoy's view of history, and 'Fathers and Children', his Romanes Lecture on Turgenev and the liberal predicament. Bakunin, Belinsky and Herzen are the other protagonists. The gifted young Russian scholar Aileen Kelly has written a splendid introduction which sets the essays in the context of Berlin's work as a whole. The essays in the second volume, *Concepts and Categories*, are contributions to philosophy, and there is an introduction by Bernard Williams, one of the leading philosophers of our time. *Against the Current* contains a dozen essays in the history of ideas, the subject that has always

been Berlin's basic interest: the emphasis is on the originality of the intellectual contributions made by individuals, among them Moses Hess, Machiavelli, Montesquieu, Sorel and Vico. The introduction by the young historian of ideas Roger Hausheer reveals the originality of Berlin's own contribution to the study of ideas. Finally, *Tributes and Memoirs* is a collection of Berlin's éloges on the twentieth-century scholars and statesmen he has known and admired: J L Austin, Bowra, Churchill, Aldous Huxley, Namier, Plamenatz, Roosevelt, Weizmann and a number of others.

I came to know Isaiah Berlin at Wolfson College in Oxford, a new college for dons and graduate students that began life in 1966 under his presidency, backed by funds from the Wolfson and Ford Foundations. I had come there to read for a postgraduate degree in philosophy. Until then, to my shame, I had only the vaguest idea of what he had been and done. He was born in Riga in 1909, but has spent his adult life, apart from the war, in Oxford – at Corpus Christi as an undergraduate, and thereafter at All Souls (where he now is again), New College and Wolfson. It was at All Souls in the 1930s that he wrote his brilliant book on Karl Marx. He was Professor of Social and Political Theory for a decade before moving to Wolfson, whose beautiful buildings by the Cherwell, and whose open and democratic organization, unique in Oxford, are lasting reminders of the beneficent effectiveness of his period of office. To have been there during those years was an exceptionally happy experience.

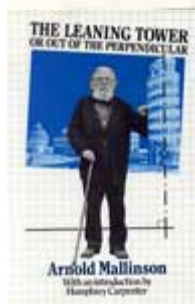
Berlin's writing too, like the college he created, is imbued with his personality, his values and standards. Apart from the great intrinsic interest of what he has to say about ideas (and this alone would place his work in the very front rank), perhaps the most attractive feature of his writing, as of his lectures, is the degree of engagement, moral commitment, that he brings to the subjects that preoccupy him. This contrasts strikingly, and favourably, with the kind of detached academic pedantry so common among scholars – that obsession with purposeless detail of which Berlin is delightfully free. Add to that his genius for capturing the atmosphere of a cultural milieu separated from our own both in time and by many of its basic presuppositions, and his deftness at portraying an individual personality; add his sometimes breathtaking ability to cut through a mass of extraneous detail, and to express the underlying essence with a firmness and clarity that gives form to what previously seemed chaotic and unintelligible; add, in short, his usually penetrating and sympathetic powers of *understanding* – of people and their motives and hopes and fears as well as of ideas and movements and their origins and offspring – and it will be clear why his work is so valuable and important. His contribution to our intellectual life is both entirely sui generis – against the current of the times – and significantly richer and more humane than the background from which it stands out.

I first raised with him the question of reissuing his scattered essays early in 1974. I was then in the throes of editing a collection of writings by my

octogenarian friend Arnold Mallinson, a totally charming but bizarre Anglican vicar with whom I was lodging. Mallinson says of himself: ‘I never throw anything away, and I never organize anything.’ This combination of traits allowed me to conduct a successful search of attics and cupboards, and to round up a weird and miscellaneous anthology which it would never have occurred to him to put in hand himself. As a result I acquired a strong taste for the kind of editorial work that makes possible the publication of a book which otherwise would not have appeared. It is largely a type of midwifery, doubtless, but has the added attraction of allowing a vicarious claim to a tiny fraction of the paternity.



The second edition (still in print) of Arnold Mallinson's anthology: click on image to enlarge



The book Mallinson wrote after the success of his anthology: click on image to enlarge (this book is also still available)

This, together with my admiration for Berlin's work, made the prospect of collecting and editing his essays enormously appealing, as I knew that he was certain never to undertake this himself. He has always adopted a highly critical attitude towards the value of his work. He has never suggested to a publisher that any of it be reprinted, though there has been no shortage of approaches from publishers with this in view. He has yielded once or twice, and *Four Essays on Liberty* and *Vico and Herder* are the main fruits, but there were many more schemes which he turned down. He felt that, before reissuing too many already existing essays and lectures, which might indicate that he had no more to say, he should first be permitted to write one new book on a subject which had always interested him, namely, the intellectual sources of Romanticism. This was the subject of his Mellon Lectures in Washington, later broadcast by the BBC, and indeed it is the development of these lectures into a book that still stands at the top of his agenda.

So I realized that might find it difficult to overcome his modesty, and his feeling that the time might not be ripe for what could seem like a kind of summing-up. Even now, he refers to my selection as his 'posthumous writings'. Nevertheless, he did allow me to persuade him that a collection of his essays might appear. He did not waver in his conviction that a good deal of his work is overrated, or by now obsolescent; or again, that it consists of too many *pieces d'occasion*, whose value has diminished with the passing of the relevant occasions. But a number of considerations

weakened his resistance. He realized that his book on Romanticism was going to take a number of years to complete. He may also have been influenced by the plentiful evidence that others rated his work more highly than he did himself. And, perhaps most crucially, if someone other than himself were to edit the collection, he would be spared the experience of re-reading the essays and trying to repair what he would be bound to see as their manifold blemishes – an experience certain to plunge him into self-critical despair. He was further moved by the suggestion that the proceeds might be devoted to the needs of Wolfson College, towards which his feelings were very strong and warm, and where he had been exceedingly happy.

Even had he wanted to undertake the editorial work himself, he was far too busy. He appears to live a permanently treble-booked life, as President of the British Academy, a Trustee of the National Gallery, a Director of Covent Garden, and under many other hats, quite apart from giving lectures around the world and talking to undergraduate societies (not only in Oxford), colleges of education, and sixth forms. His programme would reduce most people to a state of nervous exhaustion.

Indeed, it is remarkable that he has found time to write as much as he has. When I tentatively suggested to him that I might edit his work, I had come across only his best-known writings, and so I inquired what else he had published. He mentioned a few things, but added that not only had he forgotten about many of his smaller pieces, but he had kept no record of them, so that the compilation of his bibliography would be a task beyond human capability. To my bullishly obsessional disposition this was a red rag, so I set out to discover for myself what he had written, using every device I could muster, and published the resulting list the following year. Even those who knew him and his work best were surprised at the number and range of items, and the editorial project I had undertaken became even more attractive. This bibliography will be reproduced in *Against the Current*.

The rest is perspiration. The pursuit of elusive references in Oxford's Bodleian Library, the choice of publisher, the securing of introductions, would make dull reading. The first volume, *Russian Thinkers*, is published this month by the Hogarth Press, who also published *Vico and Herder*; the American publisher is Viking. The remaining volumes will follow during the course of the next two years. The project as a whole is the most worthwhile publishing venture with which I am ever likely to be associated.