

Hardy, Henry, 'An Open Letter to Isaiah Berlin', *The Times Higher Education Supplement*, 26 March 2004, 20–1

An open letter to Isaiah Berlin

Henry Hardy

Dear Isaiah,

At last the first volume of your letters is finished. Working on it was quite an experience, and I thought you might enjoy hearing about one or two of the high points. I'm not sure what address to write to, but I hope the letter will be forwarded if I've guessed wrong.

Perhaps the most serendipitous find was of two letters you wrote to Adam von Trott in the mid-1930s. You told me these had been lost by Christopher Sykes after he borrowed them for his biography of Adam, where he tantalizingly quotes brief excerpts. With my usual obstinacy I was reluctant to accept that they had disappeared, and badgered various relevant people about where they might be: no joy.

Then my friend Joshua Cherniss at Balliol (Adam's College, of course) was kindly checking various works on Adam for me, and discovered that parts of the same passages were quoted in a thesis completed later by one Henry O. Malone. He was electrified (as was I) to discover that Malone's quotations differed in crucial details from Sykes's, in ways that couldn't be put down to miscopying.

So might Malone have texts of the complete letters? Was he still alive? I eventually tracked him down to his home in Virginia. His memories of his work on Adam were unreliable after the intervening years, but he didn't think he had ever had the letters. However, his remaining Trott papers were in his garage, and he'd look through them. At last he gloriously announced that he did have the letters, in a folder borrowed many years before from Trott's widow, to whom it had after all been returned by Sykes. Later one of Malone's daughters brought the letters over on a trip to Oxford. I took copies and sent them to join the Trott archive in Koblenz. How careless people were with irreplaceable originals in the days before photocopying became universal!

Another episode I relish concerns a wonderful photograph of you shaving in a mirror held by the attractive Lady Prudence Pelham. Again this came to light in a deliciously roundabout way. A copy was listed among the Harman Grisewood papers at Georgetown University in Washington, but it was of poor quality. Where was the original? Georgetown didn't know, but suggested that I ask Thomas Dilworth, an authority on Prudence's friend David Jones, the Welsh poet. Incidentally, you mention Prudence in 1937 in a letter written from Ashton Wold, when you were staying there with Rozsika Rothschild: 'The house is full of vicious members of the aristocracy: e.g. Lady Prudence Pelham, friend of the Hodgkins.' Maybe you were being ironical, or didn't you get to know Prudence properly till later?



Social shaving at Mill House, Falmer, Sussex, 1936

Anyway, Dilworth thought the photo might be in the National Library of Wales, which houses Jones's papers. It wasn't. Next he suggested that he might have been shown it by Teddy Hodgkin, friend of both Jones and Prudence. Bingo! Hodgkin not only had the photo, but thought that he had taken it himself in about 1936. His original print was far clearer than the Georgetown copy. He understandably didn't want to risk losing it by sending it to me for scanning, but his daughter, the novelist Joanna Hines, kindly took it to a local photographic shop. It's a magical photo, and its emergence from oblivion seems to me magical too. I do hope you like it as much as I do.

Also magical are the people who hear of the project and write out of the blue. One of these, James Douglas, emailed me his evocative memories of being tutored by you at New College before the war:

He was much the most brilliant and stimulating teacher I ever met ... he kept an odd collection of things which he had bought off the street traders who in those days sold things from the pavement in Regent Street, and also a magnificent gramophone with a hand-made papier mâché trumpet, the then current equivalent of today's high fidelity equipment. As I would read my essay to him, he would wander round the room toying with his collection: a toy cow would fall off an inclined plane – 'I am so sorry! Please continue'; a blast of Verdi would emerge from the gramophone's trumpet as he accidentally dropped the needle on the disc – 'I am so sorry! Please continue.' Until I got used to it, I would be firmly convinced that he had not heard a word. This was a fatal illusion. 'At one point you say ...' – and a careful

exhaustive cross-examination of the whole argument would develop. At the end of the tutorial, I would be exhausted but also stimulated and interested.

By far the greatest portion of the years it has taken to get to the point of publication has been filled by research for the footnotes and connective tissue. I repeatedly kick myself for not having been sufficiently organized to ask you more questions while you were still available; I should have known how many obscurities there would be that only you could elucidate. Where on earth, for instance, does the quotation you use about Roy Harrod's mother come from – 'the woman whom Pater loved & in whose company Swinburne & Meredith delighted'? Where did Curtius say that the barometers of culture in England were in Oxford and Cambridge and not in London? What is the 'charming French word 'life-struggler''? Who is 'Pearly Twig', or is that a typo? And so on and on.

Most of the time we got there in the end, even if more slowly than if you had been around to help. But my hunch is that sometimes we turned up something even you might have been surprised by. Investigations by the remarkable genealogist Jennifer Holmes suggested that the date of birth claimed by your father (1883) might be wrong. Jennifer got hold of an official copy of his birth-certificate from Lublin in Poland, which confirmed that he was born in 1884. (Presumably he wanted to reduce the apparent age-gap between himself and your mother, since she was older than him; perhaps not as much older as she claimed, but that's another, unresolved, story.)

One nice breakthrough enabled us to identify the Mrs Walton who poured out her sad life-story to you on a train in Ireland in 1938. We started with the nearby Walton Court Hotel, but this proved to be a red herring. Then Kate Payne, the other principal researcher working on the book, contacted the organizer of the Elizabeth Bowen conferences at University College Cork, who turned out to be a friend of Mrs Walton's son Julian. Julian and his siblings produced all the relevant family background, as well as extra titbits. One brother remembers his mother talking about a train journey with you from Fermoy. 'Isaiah Berlin', he added cryptically, 'resolutely disdained any interest in looking through the window.' Absolutely in character, you must admit. 'People are my landscape,' you used to say (was that one of your own?).

I could go on like this indefinitely, but enough! As you once said of me to Michael Ignatieff, 'He always writes at length.' I fear you were right, though I am improving as the years go by. At all events, I'll now draw to a close. But not before telling you that I was lying in my bath one Sunday listening to your favourite radio channel, Classic FM, when I suddenly heard an Irving Berlin song I'd never heard before, and the lyrics immediately spoke to me: 'My British buddy, / We're as diff'rent as can be; / He thinks he's winning the war, / And I think it's me.' This summed up the whole business of bringing America into the war, as well as echoing Churchill's Irving/Isaiah confusion, and it now stands as an epigraph to the Washington section of your letters, together with your own remark to Maire Lynd: 'I wish to help to win the war.' And you did.

We do miss you, Isaiah. It's been more than six years, after all. But working on your letters is a marvellous analgesic: it enables me to spend much of each day in your company, so vividly do the letters bring you to life. Your Russian-Jewish-British light-hearted seriousness, intelligence and wisdom are models to us all. The other day I was rung up by Angela Huth, who is editing a book of eulogies, including yours of Maurice Bowra. She had been asked, somewhat absurdly, to describe each of the contributors in not more than three words, for the

book's contents page, and wanted to know what to say about you. The best I could come up with was 'historian of ideas' – dull enough, but at least, I hope, not misleading. This set me thinking what I should say to you now if I too were allowed only three words. The answer flashed into my mind straightaway:

Thanks for writing.

Yours ever,

Henry

Isaiah Berlin, *Flourishing: Letters 1928–1946*, edited by Henry Hardy, is published by Chatto & Windus at £30