



## **Discovering Isaiah Berlin**

**Johnny Lyons in conversation with  
Henry Hardy, June 2019**

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# Discovering Isaiah Berlin

*Johnny Lyons in conversation with Henry Hardy, June 2019*

Johnny Lyons is the author of *The Philosophy of Isaiah Berlin* (2020) and *Isaiah Berlin and his Philosophical Contemporaries* (2021). He is currently editing a volume of newly commissioned studies of some of Berlin's best essays, entitled *Understanding Humanity with Isaiah Berlin*, to be published by Cambridge University Press. During daylight hours Lyons works as a consultant in the corporate business world.

Henry Hardy is a fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, the principal editor of Isaiah Berlin's writings, a Trustee of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust, and author of *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure* (2018).

An audiovisual version of this interview, which took place in Dun Laoghaire in June 2019, is available at <https://johnnylyons.org/films>. This transcript has been freely edited for readability and accuracy.

**Johnny Lyons** This interview will be focused on your professional and personal relationship with the great twentieth-century thinker Isaiah Berlin. But before we begin to talk about that relationship, it might be helpful to readers if you could tell us what Berlin and you yourself were doing before your paths crossed. So can you start by giving us a sense of who Berlin was and how he had become such a renowned figure by the time you met him in 1972?

**Henry Hardy** Berlin was born in 1909 in Riga, which is now the capital of Latvia, but was then the capital of Livonia, which is roughly the same area and was a province of the Russian empire. So he was born in tsarist Russia. He was the son of a reasonably wealthy Jewish entrepreneur. His father, Mendel Berlin, was in the timber business and was part of a family with a long tradition of owning forests in that part of Russia, felling the trees and bringing them down the River Daugava to Riga, where they were sawn up and then sent on to various destinations. The supply of sleepers to the Russian railways was the main part of the business. Because

they were well-to-do bourgeois Jews, they were not confined to the ghetto area of the city, but lived in the prosperous suburban Albert Street in a nice flat. And that was where they were for the first six years of his life. But when the First World War arrived and the German army was getting closer to Riga, they decided that, for the safety of the family, they would decamp to Russia proper. They moved to a blue clapboard house in a little town in the interior called Andreapol', a forestry settlement where the family firm had an office. Less than a year later they moved on to St Petersburg, which was called Petrograd at the time, where Mendel's business had a bigger office. The family was in Petrograd when the Russian Revolutions occurred. Berlin witnessed both revolutions, the social democratic one in February and the Bolshevik one in October. The family remained there for a further three-and-a-half years. But life under the Bolsheviks was oppressive and there was a significant amount of anti-Semitism.

In August 1920 the Latvian–Soviet Peace Treaty gave Latvia its independence and provided that anybody who was born in Latvia could return there as a Latvian citizen without having to secure permission from Soviet Russia. The Berlins took advantage of this arrangement and returned to Latvia in October 1920. But Latvia had its own difficulties, some of an anti-Semitic nature. Mendel already had extensive business interests in Britain – he had deposited a large sum of money in a British bank – and decided to emigrate to England with his family in early 1921.

Berlin went to an English prep school for a year and a half, learnt English quite quickly, and then entered St Paul's School, which was one of the leading English public schools – that is, of course, private schools. Though Berlin was more successful at school than he cared to admit he wasn't an absolutely runaway star pupil. Nevertheless, he did manage to get into Oxford. He tried first to get into Balliol College on a scholarship, failed, tried again to get in as a commoner, and failed again. He then turned to Corpus Christi College, the smallest college in Oxford, where he won a scholarship to read Greats, which is a combination of

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classics, ancient history and philosophy, at the time the leading school at the University. That's when his academic success really took off in a big way. He got a first in Greats in 1931, and then decided to read PPE, which is philosophy, politics and economics. In November 1931 he was the joint winner of the John Locke Prize, which is an independent exam for philosophers. He succeeded in completing PPE in one year, and got a first in that too, in 1932. So he was obviously very good at philosophy. In October 1932 he sat a prize fellowship examination to get into All Souls College, a college for researchers, with no undergraduates. This exam is famously, fiendishly, difficult, but to his astonishment he was accepted. He was the first Jew ever to be elected to a prize fellowship, and indeed to any fellowship at All Souls. So he made history in that way, and there was an article in the *Jewish Chronicle*.

**JL** What was the longer-term impact of his appointment to a fellowship at All Souls?

**HH** His star rose in the academic world from that time onwards. His fellowship at All Souls lasted for seven years but he left after six because he had by then finished his main project, which was to write a biography of Karl Marx. That was his first published book, the only proper book he ever wrote. It was commissioned by the Home University Library, which was a series of guides for the graduate housewife, as was commonly said at Oxford University Press. He wasn't the first choice to write the book. Several other distinguished people were asked and declined. The editors decided to take a punt on Berlin, who was rather an unknown quantity. Their choice turned out to be justified. He wrote a brilliant book on Marx that is still in print, eighty years later, now in its fifth edition.

He completed the book in 1938, a year before the expiry of his All Souls fellowship. In that year he moved to New College, where he had been working as a lecturer since the beginning of his time in All Souls, and became a fellow and tutor in philosophy, teaching

undergraduates for several hours a week. That took him to the beginning of the war.

In 1940 he made a very strange journey to America with Guy Burgess. The trip was based on his desire to return to Russia: partly for sentimental reasons but also because he felt could be of some help to the war effort – he was, for one thing, fluent in Russian. But it was problematic to get there, and he made various approaches which didn't bear fruit. And then one day, suddenly, Guy Burgess, who knew about this intention of his, turned up and suggested that they go to Russia together. He said he'd fixed something. It's all very obscure, and we don't have time to go into it in detail. But the long and the short of it is that in July 1940 he set sail with Burgess for America. This was the route that they intended to take to Russia, via America and then westerly across to Russia.

When Berlin arrived in America his plan to travel to Russia proved unsuccessful, for complicated reasons. But he was picked up by an institution called British Information Services, which was based in New York. He ended up writing surveys of American newspapers and public opinion which were sent back to the British government, who wanted to draw America into the war. America was at that time unwilling to join the war effort against Germany and its allies; and of course the entry of America into the war had to wait until Pearl Harbor, when all the efforts of British Information Services became irrelevant. Berlin then moved to the British Embassy in Washington, where, again, they were sending information about American political opinion back to Britain. He was charged with the continuous surveying of American opinion, which suited him very well because he was a fantastic gossip and loved mixing in all sorts of different circles. Every week he would draft a summary of what was going on, which was formally submitted to the British government by the American Ambassador to Washington, at that time Lord Halifax. A selection of these reports was published subsequently in a book called *Washington Despatches 1941–1945*.

**JL** Did he remain in Washington throughout the war?

**HH** His job in Washington took him right through the war. After the war had formally ended, he tried again to go to Russia, and this time he succeeded. He was sent to Russia by his bosses in Washington, ostensibly to undertake a similar task in Moscow, that is, to write a report on Russian opinion both in the government and amongst the people at large, with a view to throwing light on their foreign policy. As it turned out, he never wrote such a report. It's not clear how he got away without doing what he was sent to Moscow to do. Instead, he wrote a report on the state of culture in Russia. This was based on a whole range of meetings that he had with writers and artists of all kinds in Russia when he was there. How useful it was to the British government I don't know. It did have a few political remarks in it. It's a wonderful piece, as it provides a virtuoso survey of the state of Russian culture under the totalitarian Soviet regime. His main informants were two very famous poets, Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova. He met Pasternak in the writers' village of Peredelkino, and several times in Moscow, and got to know him very well. Pasternak gave him part of *Doctor Zhivago*, which he was then working on, to read and take to his sisters in Oxford.

In November 1945 – his visit to Russia ran from September 1945 to January 1946 – he made a trip to what was then called Leningrad: St Petersburg had once more changed its name. He wanted to return to visit the family home where he had lived as a child, and he was very moved by doing so. While he was there, he went to the famous Writers' Bookshop on Nevsky Prospect, where authors tended to gather to talk. He deployed his usual fluent gossip technique and picked up from a critic named Vladimir Orlov that Anna Akhmatova, one of the most famous living Russian poets, lived just round the corner on the Fontanka canal. Orlov phoned her and arranged for them to meet. So Berlin went round to see her, which was the beginning of a very long visit. The first session lasted from three o'clock in the afternoon for only half

an hour or so, because it was interrupted. But Berlin returned at nine in the evening and stayed right through the night until eleven o'clock the following morning. They had a most amazing discussion, and a terrific rapport. They got on, Berlin said 'too well'. I have never quite understood what 'too well' means, but that's what he said. And when he returned finally to the Astoria Hotel, where he was staying, you his companion who had travelled to Leningrad with him, a woman from the British Council by the name of Brenda Tripp, saw him throw himself on his bed and declare, 'I am in love! I am in love!' People often think that they must have had a physical encounter on that occasion. But Berlin always said, and I believe him, that 'nothing could be further from the truth'. They sat in opposite corners of the room and just talked and talked and talked. They covered everything: their personal lives, literature, Soviet politics and so on. It was for both of them a really important meeting, the memory of which remained a deep presence in their lives ever after. Indeed it inspired Akhmatova to write several wonderful poems, one of which famously refers to Berlin as 'the guest from the future'. Eventually, in 1980, after a long delay, Berlin produced an account of his meeting which is widely agreed to be among his most powerful and moving essays. It was published in a collection of pieces about individuals he knew called *Personal Impressions*.

**JL** What did he do after his visit to Russia came to an end?

**HH** After a short period back in Washington he returned to New College, Oxford, in 1946, where he remained until 1950. He became increasingly frustrated by the limitations of his job and by college life – he grew bored of teaching undergraduates and of the very dull college senior common room, as he saw it. He eventually applied successfully for another post at All Souls, a research fellowship. His plan was to turn to the study of the history of ideas, in particular the Russian intelligentsia of the mid-nineteenth century. Then in 1957 he was appointed to the Chichele chair of

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Social and Political Theory, which is also based in All Souls. In 1958 he gave his famous inaugural lecture, 'Two Concepts of Liberty', which is probably one of the two most famous essays he ever wrote, the other being 'The Hedgehog and the Fox', which was written during his time as a research fellow, in the early 1950s.

Eight years after becoming Professor, in 1965, he was approached by a group of people who knew him and invited to become the first president of a new graduate college which was being founded. It was being set up on a fairly modest scale in a house in a village in the suburbs of Oxford called Iffley, and was originally called Iffley College. Berlin wanted to enlarge the college and make it a more important presence in the Oxford scene. He realised that to achieve this outcome he would need to raise large sums of money, which was not something he had ever done before. So he set to it with a will and turned out to have a great talent for fundraising, as well as contacts which were of use to him. Two contacts were particularly important. The first was Sir Isaac Wolfson, who was in charge of the Wolfson Foundation, based on the wholesale grocery operation called Great Universal Stores. Wolfson was a great Jewish philanthropist with whom he hit it off. The other was McGeorge Bundy, who was the President of the Ford Foundation in America. To make a long story short, both of these organisations committed large sums of money to the new college, which was then launched under the name of Wolfson College in 1966. Berlin was the first President of the college, a post that he held for nine years, until 1975.

**JL** Could you tell us how you first encountered Berlin?

**HH** I had come up to read Greats at Corpus Christi College as an undergraduate in 1967. As I've mentioned already, that was the college that Berlin had attended, although I didn't know that at the time. Nor did I know about Berlin himself. I don't think I had even heard of him. I didn't see my course through to the end, as I switched to PPP, which is philosophy, psychology and physiology,

of which you do two. I left out the physiology. During my undergraduate degree I became very interested, absorbed, intrigued by philosophy, and wanted to continue, in particular to spend some time thinking harder about a particular part of the philosophy of Ludwig Wittgenstein. So I decided that I wanted to do graduate work in philosophy. I applied to various colleges which were offering graduate scholarships to people who were going to do the BPhil (the usual first graduate qualification), and was happily turned down by them all until I got to Wolfson, where I was accepted. And that's where I first met Berlin, because he chaired the interviewing panel for the graduate award I had applied for. I was immediately incredibly struck by him, and excited by his personality and his presence. After arriving at the college, I found, fortunately, that he was immensely accessible. He sat around in the common room for hours. He wasn't like one of these apparatchiks who disappears to a committee meeting immediately after downing his coffee. Sometimes he would sit there from lunch until dinner, and anybody who wanted to could sit and talk to him – or rather listen to him talk, because he was a great talker, and not a fantastic listener at all times, which didn't matter because he talked so wonderfully that one didn't resent it. Anyway, I got to know him.

After a while, I consulted a philosopher friend that I'd made at the college, a man called Samuel Guttenplan, who had worked with Berlin in New York in the 1960s as his research assistant when Berlin had a professorship at the City University there, and knew him very well. I asked him, 'What has he written?', 'What should I read to find out what his ideas are?' Sam referred me to *Four Essays on Liberty*, a collection of independently published essays which had been put together as a book with a long new introduction and published by Oxford University Press in 1969. That was three years previously, so it was quite a fresh book at that time. I took it away with me on a holiday with some friends. I was completely knocked sideways by it. I thought it was a most wonderful book, full of wisdom, and it gave me an intense interest in pursuing his ideas. So I discussed them further with Sam.

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I suppose it was at this point that the idea occurred that somebody needed to rescue more of his work and put it together. He'd published very widely, but often in obscure places – foreign periodicals or pamphlets or things of that kind. *Karl Marx* was published in 1939, *The Hedgehog and the Fox* in 1953 and *Four Essays on Liberty* in 1969, but there was terrific scope for far more to be done, and I entered into negotiations with Berlin with that in view. He was hesitant and blew hot and cold. But he was very loyal to the students at Wolfson, and he would support them in whatever they wanted to do. And just because what I wanted to do involved him, that didn't make this an exception. I think that was part of the reason why he did eventually agree that I could do this, even though various other people had approached him previously and had either been turned down, or been accepted only for him to change his mind. I formulated a detailed scheme, which involved going to the Oxford University library, digging out everything I could find that he had written, and grouping the items that I discovered into subject categories, potential volumes, of which there were four.

From that point onwards, I was working on that project in parallel with my graduate work in philosophy. When the graduate work was nearly finished, in 1975, I went into publishing – eventually becoming an editor at Oxford University Press (from 1977 to 1990) – and continued with the project in my spare time for the next fifteen years. One of the volumes already existed in a rather shadowy way: *Russian Thinkers*, which was contracted to Penguin under the editorship of a Russianist named David Shapiro. For some reason which I don't understand, Shapiro, who had reached an agreement with Berlin to allow him to edit this volume, appeared to be doing nothing about it. So eventually that volume was absorbed into my scheme. And I read all the other essays that I could find. That on its own was a challenge, since it was very difficult to establish what he had written, because he couldn't remember. For example, he had copies of some of his writings but not others; there were various lists and entries in library catalogues; there were cuttings from Durrant's press cuttings agency, which

had sent some reviews. Tracking everything down was quite a detective job.

One of the first things I did was to publish a bibliography of his writings. I published it in the college magazine at Wolfson, which I also founded, it as it happened, because I liked running magazines. It was immediately clear to me that the other essays, the ones that did not belong to the Russian volume, fell into three clear categories. One was the essays on people he had mostly known – twentieth-century figures, scholars, statesmen, intellectuals – which eventually appeared as *Personal Impressions*. By and large, the subjects of that volume were people he knew well. Then there was a number of philosophical essays which came mainly from the earlier period of his career, before he had made a switch from philosophy to the history of ideas. Some of these essays were semi-technical articles in philosophy of the kind that other people were writing at the time, published in philosophy journals. They were written between the 1930s and 1950s. There were also some later articles that displayed the more historical perspective that had taken over by that time, but they were still clearly in the same category in principle. Taken together, these two sets of articles turned into a volume called *Concepts and Categories* – a phrase that Berlin used a great deal, and which just leapt out at me as an obvious title for the book.

**JL** Can you talk a little about Berlin's transition from being an analytic philosopher to being a historian of ideas?

**HH** I think he had some reservations, perhaps serious reservations, about analytic philosophy from the beginning. His room in All Souls was the venue for a regular meeting before the war between the younger philosophers of Oxford, including Freddie Ayer and John Austin. They had discussions ranging over the various main areas of philosophy, but the general analytic approach to the questions of philosophy was what might be called reductionist. Berlin thought that the analytic philosophers wanted

to oversimplify everything, wanted to reduce everything to a kind of fixed form or structure which was a terrific under-representation of what was really going on in human language and discussion. So he was, if you like, set up to abandon this philosophical genre. But there were also two events that he talks of which stimulated his move. Before I get on to those, I should just say that working in America as a diplomat during the war probably didn't hold him back either. It served to broaden his mind and mature him and was probably an input into the decision he finally took.

The first event was a meeting he had at Harvard in 1944 with the logician H. M. Sheffer. They talked about philosophy and its limitations and strengths. Sheffer managed to convince Berlin, on Berlin's account, that what made philosophy distinctive was that it didn't add to the sum of human knowledge. There were certain disciplines you might call semi-philosophical or quasi-philosophical where something like growth of knowledge occurred, such as psychology and logic. But in the traditional main areas of philosophy there wasn't anything that could be described as part of the accumulation of knowledge. You didn't talk about somebody who was knowledgeable in ethics or had added to the sum of metaphysics in the same way that you would about a scientist, for example. Berlin, I think, imbibed and accepted this demarcation of philosophy.

His talk with Sheffer set him up for the other event, which occurred when he had to travel back to the United Kingdom on a military aircraft. You had to sit in the dark with an oxygen mask on your face. Because the mask had to be kept in place – couldn't be allowed to slip – you had to remain awake for the duration of the flight, and planes were slower in those days: the flight took eight hours. Berlin always said he hated having to think, which is a rather remarkable thing for a thinker to say. But he didn't like to be on his own thinking, without anybody to bounce ideas off, without reading a book, without anything else going on other than the contents of his own mind. So, as he put it, he had the painful experience of having to think for eight hours on his own. It was during this flight (he claimed) that he came to the conclusion that

he did want to acquire knowledge. He wanted to know more at the end of his life than he knew at the beginning. Moreover, he had already conceived a considerable interest in in studying the ideas of the nineteenth-century Russian intelligentsia. More generally, he decided that what he really wanted to do was not first-order philosophy, with the problem that we've identified, but the history of philosophy, the history of the people who had been philosophers, and the exploration of what they contributed. So he would end up knowing more about the history of thought in a straightforward accumulation-of-knowledge way. I'm not sure that this isn't a rationalisation of a development that was taking place in any case. But it makes for a good story.

**JL** John Gray, the political philosopher who wrote an excellent book about Berlin's ideas, felt, as I do too, that for Berlin doing the history of philosophy was doing philosophy in another way. He never really abandoned philosophy. Do you think that's correct?

**HH** I do think that's correct. I think the picture of a sharp change from one discipline to another, which Berlin rather promulgated himself, is misleading. If you read both the pre-change essays and the post-change essays, particularly those in *Concepts and Categories*, I think you can see a clear continuity of interest. But it's just that the discussion in the later essays is more historically placed, more historically informed, and for that very reason, I think, richer, because extracting ideas from their historical context and presenting them as if they were free-floating in some abstract realm is unrealistic and unhelpful. So it was a richer form of philosophy, if you like.

**JL** What was the fourth volume that you collected and published?

**HH** The last category was the history of ideas, which was essentially studies of individual thinkers, mainly in the seventeenth,

eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These essays are remarkable because they display his fantastic ability, which I've never seen matched, to get inside the mind and under the skin of a person who could be very different from him and have a very different outlook on life; but somehow Berlin brought these thinkers and their ideas to life and managed almost to speak through their mouths like a ventriloquist. Furthermore, one of the common themes of these essays was that these people were not just remarkable thinkers, but had left a deposit in the mind of humanity. In other words, they changed the direction of human thinking, they had left a legacy in the mental furniture that we all share today. That's why I called the book *Against the Current*, because not only did these essays show this creative ability on the part of the thinkers Berlin discussed to infuse new intellectual content into our storehouse, but they did it against the orthodoxy of the day. These thinkers were able to start journeys in completely new directions, which is part of what made them so exciting.

So that left me with four volumes, which, with a certain amount of coming and going and changings of heart and adjusting and re-adjusting of content, is how things stayed. They were published eventually between 1978 and 1980.

**JL** And did you encounter any resistance from Berlin before the publication of these volumes, or was it a smooth process?

**HH** Far from smooth. The worst example of his weakness of will, or whatever you like to call it, was that, after having agreed and signed up to the four-volume scheme, he suddenly got cold feet about the philosophy volume. He thought that too many of the articles either were too dated or no longer held any particular interest, and that they would attract negative commentary from critics. He claimed that he wasn't worried about negative feedback, but that he didn't want to visit upon the world something which wasn't worth publishing in volume form. But I believe that he was in fact always influenced by the thought of harsh comment, and didn't want to expose himself to it, especially when he didn't have

to. He wrote to me out of the blue and told me that he had suddenly decided he didn't want this book to appear at all. Unsurprisingly, this made me very downhearted. I even had a long argument with him in letter form about it. In the end, we agreed to submit the idea to the arbitration of his friend Bernard Williams, who was a leading philosopher, and somebody whose judgement he respected more than he respected mine, which is to say, in the latter case, not at all, probably. Anyway, I'm happy to say that Bernard, who later had quite negative views about some of the volumes I produced, in this case was in favour, and wrote a strong letter to Berlin arguing the proposed book's merits, with the exception of one of the essays I'd planned to include, which was very closely bound up with an essay by another philosopher that Berlin was replying to, and so didn't stand up independently quite so well. And so, finally, Berlin changed his mind back again, writing to me: 'So I am made of wax after all.' And that book was the second to be published, after *Russian Thinkers*.

**JL** So after a very busy, frenetic period of preparing and publishing these four volumes, you then enter the 1980s, which from a Berlinian publication point of view was quite a fallow period. Yet this decade was a productive period in your own life as an editor at Oxford University Press. I'm referring, in particular, to the series Past Masters. Can you tell us a little about the origins of this series and your role in instigating it?

**HH** As I've said, I was working as an editor at Oxford University Press. I had joined the General Books Department, as it was called by OUP, which aimed to publish high-quality books about serious subjects for a general readership as much as an academic readership. And I had the idea, which arose directly out of my work on and with Berlin, that we might issue a series of short, hundred-page-long guides to the ideas of individual thinkers who had made really creative contributions to human thought, slim volumes which explained what these thinkers' ideas were, why they were

different from what went before, how they had changed the way people think, and how they remain part of our mental structures even today. Fortunately, this idea was accepted by Oxford University Press, which published the first volumes of the Past Masters series (as I named it, plagiarising Fontana's Modern Masters) in 1980. We began with six volumes in the first season and followed up in subsequent seasons with three or four books, depending on the availability of manuscripts. In the end the series became quite numerous, reaching perhaps a hundred volumes. Its remit was later widened to include topics as well as people, and the series was renamed Very Short Introductions. Indeed, Very Short Introductions is now one of OUP's flagship series. So I'm pleased and proud about that, although I wasn't involved in the series by the time it became Very Short Introductions.

**JL** One of the assumptions underlying the Past Masters series was, as you said, that the ideas of great thinkers are not exhausted by the particular context from which they emerge. This is very much Berlin's view of the history of ideas. Can you say something about that?

**HH** While Berlin acknowledged that there is a purely historical way of studying past thinkers, which is of interest to historians and antiquarians of various kinds, he felt very strongly that the fundamental point of studying certain figures of the past – what made these figures intensely interesting to him and of potential interest to a wide readership – was that they grappled with and made contributions to issues which are of permanent concern to any thoughtful human being. This works against another school of thought about the history of ideas, which is sometimes called the Cambridge or contextual school of intellectual history. This method places the thought and discussions of past thinkers primarily in the context of their own time, and tries to convince us that we're guilty of anachronism if we speak to these people across time as if they were in the same room with us, starting from the

same assumptions, so that we can talk to them straightforwardly without complication, as if we were speaking the same language.

Berlin certainly recognised that there was some truth in the contextual approach: he didn't want to be anachronistic. But he thought that even when you had made due allowance for the difference in context between thinkers of the past and us today, there was still a residue of universal interest, and that this was what made studying these thinkers valuable and important. And if it hadn't been so, then, as I said before, although there would have been antiquarian interest in these figures, they would have been of little or no interest to a general reader. Berlin made this point with particular force about the relatively obscure seventeenth-century Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico, whom he rated as a thinker of immense originality and importance. I told Berlin that a Cambridge scholar named Peter Burke was due to write a book on Vico as part of the Past Masters series, and the synopsis of this book made clear that Burke wasn't going to discuss Vico in the way that Berlin would have wanted him to be treated. Burke was going to talk about how Vico's ideas were so bound up with the intellectual world of his time that they didn't translate into our own contemporary preoccupations and worries. Berlin's reaction was to ask why, if that's true about Vico, we bother to study him. He also once wrote to Quentin Skinner, possibly the leading figure in the Cambridge school, arguing quite firmly that it was the enduring issues that are still alive today that made him interested in the figures from the past who were also concerned with these issues. He felt that without that assumption the main point of the history of ideas would disappear.

**JL** Towards the end of the 1980s you came up the idea as well as the title of a new book of Berlin's writings. I'm referring to the *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*. It's a wonderful title. Can you say something about the book's title and its origins?

**HH** The title comes from a quotation from Kant which was one of Berlin's favourites: 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' That had always seemed to me a wonderful quotation, so that the title of the book chose itself, in a way. For once, Berlin accepted the title straightaway and never repined. The volume was published almost exactly at the time that I left Oxford University Press to start full time work on Berlin's papers.

**JL** That collection includes the essay 'The Pursuit of the Ideal', which is a very eloquent summary of Berlin's credo. Can you tell us what Berlin's credo consists in, with the emphasis on his idea of pluralism?

**HH** He presents himself in that essay as having initially been a believer in what he calls 'monism', which he identifies as a dominant current in Western thought that goes back at least as far as the ancient Greeks and endures right down to the present. Monism varies a bit, but essentially it revolves around the central thesis that all genuine questions, including questions of morals and politics, must have a single correct answer.

I should perhaps interject here that, for Berlin, it was the fundamental, persistent questions of philosophy that exercised him, that brought him alive. These are the really deep questions about human life such as 'What should we do?', 'How should we live?', 'What can we be and do?', 'What are the opportunities open to us?', 'How should we use our lives in the world?'

Berlin often characterises monism in terms of three propositions, which he sometimes describes as a three-legged stool. The first proposition is that genuine philosophical questions must have answers, just as scientific questions or other kinds of questions have answers. The second proposition is that there must be a way of discovering these answers. There are various candidates proposed, such as scripture or experiment or the simple heart of the uncorrupted peasant or our own innermost feelings. A whole range of possibilities opens up, but, in principle, there

must be some way of finding an answer to these questions. And the third and last proposition, or leg, of monism is the claim that if these answers are correct, then they must all fit together into a consistent structure. This implies that there must be a single architecture of answers to all kinds of genuine questions, answers none of which contradict each other, since no truths can contradict each other.

That, in summary, is monism, or what is sometimes referred to by him as *philosophia perennis* or the perennial philosophy. He identifies monism as being dominant in philosophical thought for at least two thousand years. I've always had a problem with it myself because it seems so obviously wrong. It's an example of how philosophers come up with ideas which create problems, and which, if they just had been ordinary people and had not gone off on these flights of intellectual fancy, wouldn't have been there to trouble us in the way that they have. Yet people are ready to be influenced by such theories, particularly in the world of religion, where, for example, Christianity turned into a monistic system. Islam is today a system of this kind too. So there are religious versions of monism. There are also non-religious, political versions of it, such as the kind of state totalitarianism exemplified in the former Soviet Union and in contemporary Communist China, where the underlying assumption of the rule imposed by the leaders is that there is a true structure of moral and political understanding which experts can discover and then impose on the people beneath them. Such forms of authoritarianism or tyranny which embody oppressive monist ideologies constrain and restrict people's freedom to follow their own self-chosen path and develop in unpredictable directions. Berlin believed that you such ideologies flew in the face of our true nature and our fundamental needs.

**JL** So Berlin rejects monism. Interestingly, those who have opposed monism have tended to be relativists. But Berlin's rejection of monism is not based on any allegiance to relativism.

Instead, he rejects it on the basis of what he calls ‘pluralism’. He doesn’t think that the incoherence of monism leaves us with relativism or nihilism. Can you explain what he means by ‘pluralism’?

**HH** He regards pluralism as a truer account of human moral and political experience and behaviour. Its core claim is that there is a large number of goals that we pursue, ends that we aim at, values that we are guided by, which are generated by the shared nature that all human beings have enjoyed from the beginning of time until now. These aspects of human nature include basic biological needs such as those for food and drink and shelter and social membership, but also more abstract values such as liberty and equality and dignity and so forth. And the important thing about pluralism is that these values don’t all cohere into the type of single consistent structure that I referred to in relation to monism, but they are distinct from one another in irreducible ways. That’s to say, you can’t translate these values and ideals into one super-value, or examples of one super-value, as the utilitarians tried to do, by giving marks to each value in terms of its ability to cause happiness in human beings, so that you could then add up the contributions of the various values and work out what was the best thing to do in any given situation. The demands that are made of us by the desire for equality are distinct from those made by the desire for liberty, and the two demands are also, as he put it, ‘incommensurable’. You can’t measure different values together on a single scale, which is what I was just saying about utility. You can’t reduce them to, or translate them into, the terms of one super-value. So there are endless choices to be made between all the different values, because each makes its distinctive demands. You have to balance one against the other and achieve a compromise between them, which is a matter of judgement and not of calculation. That’s the starting point for Berlin’s pluralism.

**JL** So is he saying that you can have moral objectivity without moral agreement?

**HH** Absolutely, yes. Berlin sometimes calls his position ‘objective pluralism’. It’s not perhaps a hundred per cent clear what this objectivity consists in. But I think we can probably usefully define it in terms, again, of human nature. There are certain natural objectives which human beings aim at because of the kind of beings that they are. These natural objectives or ends are plural and sometimes in conflict with one another. In addition, one person may give a higher value to one particular moral or political value as opposed to another in a certain situation, whereas somebody else in the same situation would make the choice differently. At a more holistic level, a given culture will come up with a package of values that identify that culture which is very different from the package of values adopted by another culture. Both are right answers to the deep questions I referred to earlier, of how to live, how to structure society. One culture is not necessarily better than another, one is not right and the other wrong. All of them are right. It’s the conflict of right with right, as Hegel once said. So my particular assemblage of values and my prioritising of values is mine, and yours is yours, and there’s no saying that one is superior to the other. The same goes for different cultures. So, as you rightly say, there’s objectivity in that all the values and all the assemblages of values respond to recognisable features of human nature, recognisable human needs, but there isn’t moral agreement, because there is no way of saying that one decision, one way of forming a culture, is objectively better than another. There are just different options available to us.

**JL** This sets up a very profound connection between pluralism and liberalism, which before Berlin wasn’t clear. His pluralism leads to a very interesting justification of liberalism.

**HH** Yes, it does, in my view, and, it seems, in yours too. There is a huge literature in the philosophical journals arguing the toss about this. Some people say that pluralism does lead to or justify liberalism; others say that it doesn’t, or indeed, in some cases, tends

in exactly the opposite direction. But I think it's clear that there is a link, because if it's right that you can't put different moral world views, different cultures, in an order of priority, then there's no justification for any one person or one political order to impose a particular vision on everybody else, because it's arbitrary to choose that vision rather than another vision. And if there's no justification for that kind of authoritarianism, then the alternative is liberalism, which allows all of us to pursue our own particular arrangement of values so long as we don't harm other people, or interfere with *their* freedom, which is the central principle of liberalism.

**JL** Around the time you published *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* you left Oxford University Press and became a full-time editor for Berlin. Can you tell us what you focused on when you dedicated your time to being Berlin's literary executor, and what was the next Berlin book you published?

**HH** My first task when I had left OUP was to examine all of Berlin's papers in order to see what my job as his literary executor was going to be. I was actually one of four literary executors, but it was clear that I was going to be the one who actually did the legwork, and the others were going to operate in a more benedictive or supervisory capacity.

With Berlin's approval, I conducted a top-to-bottom search of his house, starting in the attic and ending in the cellar. Most of his papers were in the cellar, and there amongst a great deal else I saw on the top shelf of a little wooden bookshelf a brown envelope on which appeared the word 'Hamann'. I opened the envelope and in it I found a whole series of red plastic belts – Dictabelts, as they are technically called. They were continuous strips of red plastic which had on them grooves of exactly the same kind that you see on vinyl records. I had never heard of this technology at the time: apparently, it was widely used by people who had secretaries in the 1950s and 1960s. I subsequently discovered that it was manufactured by the Dictaphone company. I was very excited by

what I had found, since there was a typescript in Berlin's papers of a long essay on Hamann which had a significant gap at a crucial point, and would not have been publishable without the missing portion. The typescript had been typed by a secretary from Dictabelts. It turned out that the belts I had found contained the missing portion of the essay, which was much longer and more important to the book than I had recognised. There was a missing section of one chapter and a very large part of another one, and that made it possible, ultimately, to complete the book, which was published in 1993, three years later, as *The Magus of the North*, with the subtitle *J. G. Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism*.

The book was widely and positively reviewed. I know of no book on Hamann written by anyone else which received the notice that Berlin, given his inimitable approach, achieved with his. It was a very successful volume and eventually became part of a book called *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, which brought back into being an abandoned project of Berlin's to produce a book of essays on some leading Counter-Enlightenment figures.

**JL** It's interesting that Berlin was a writer who, more often than not, went back to the anti-Enlightenment thinkers as opposed to the Enlightenment thinkers for insights, even though he was fundamentally in sympathy with the Enlightenment.

**HH** Yes. He always said that he found it much more interesting reading the work of enemies rather than friends because friends said things that you agreed with. He felt it was boring to have your own ideas restated or reconfirmed, which is exactly what happens on social media today, where people just get fed their own opinions again and again, which in turn makes them more and more prejudiced in the direction in which they were originally prejudiced. But if you read the work of your opponents, even ones with whom you may strongly disagree, they manage to identify weaknesses in your own vision. Your opponents tend to reveal chinks in your armour which need attention. This enables you to strengthen your

own views in ways that make them more resilient. That's one of the main reasons why Berlin liked to study the opposition.

**JL** In the early 1990s you also started collecting essays that would end up being published about a year before Berlin died. Again, you had to deal with Berlin's resistance to having this book, *The Sense of Reality*, see the light of day. But thankfully it did. Is there anything you would like to say in particular about this book?

**HH** Yes, it's in many ways the book that is closest to my heart, because it emerged out of that initial search of his house for material that hadn't been made public before. The book takes its title from the subject of a talk which Berlin gave in America, and which I placed first. I thought it was one of the best essays of his that I had read. And indeed that essay, together with the next essay in the book, on political judgement, created a kind of sub-department of Berlin studies which had not been in the forefront of people's attention before.

But there was a long battle between me and Berlin to get the book published. This was due, partly, to his disinclination to read his own work, which he felt he ought to do before he allowed it to appear. He hated reading his own writing. He thought what he had written was poor stuff, not worth publishing. He did genuinely think that. The other factor was his sheer idleness. He was an old man by then, and he didn't see why he should be sweating away at reading and revising his work when he didn't want to. As a result, he kept putting it off, partly appealing to the 'Nothing again for several years' argument, partly appealing to the 'It's all second rate' argument. I found it difficult to achieve a balance between pestering him and treating him with consideration and respect. However, he eventually relented and read through it, making a number of corrections and additions. Finally, he allowed me to go ahead with the publication of the book in 1996, which was the year before he died.

I feel a special fondness for it because of the relationship it had to this treasure trove of papers in his house, and that stage in my

work as his editor. I think it's a wonderful book full of wonderful essays. When I sent him a copy of the finished book, he wrote, 'The book looks splendid – unreadable according to me, but I expect kind persons may find otherwise. Very heavy stuff, I consider.' This judgement is, of course, nonsense.

**JL** I believe a new edition of *The Sense of Reality* has just been published.

**HH** Yes, Princeton University Press has published new editions of all the Berlin books I have edited. So they're now available in a uniform series. And in each case I've been able to add extra material of one kind or another that I've discovered since or that I had considered adding before but which Berlin hadn't been keen on for various reasons. There are two new essays in the new edition of *The Sense of Reality*, which I think is one of his most important volumes

**JL** In the second part of your book, *In Search of Isaiah Berlin: A Literary Adventure*, you change gear somewhat: you cease being Berlin's Boswell and start being his philosophical gadfly. Can you indicate what you believe are the main appeal and strengths of his work?

**HH** Berlin would be the best person to answer that question, of course. It's difficult to sum up his work in a brief way. But I would say that his understanding of human nature, its range, its potential, the way it really works as opposed to the way some ideologue might want it to work, the richness of human nature, its variety, its nuance, its various anti-monist ingredients, is second to none.

There is also his capacity, which I've referred to already, to convey the outlook of a thinker by speaking from within his standpoint rather than describing it from outside, which, again, is unmatched in my experience.

And there is the fact that he conveys his outlook in wonderful prose. Not all people admire his style. It has a certain nineteenth-century tendency towards long sentences with lots of sub-clauses. But its English is plain, always clear and comprehensible, and there is no use of jargon. In addition, there's no unnecessary obscurity, there's no showing off. In short, it's a wonderful experience to read it. And as you read it, you feel you are in the presence of somebody who really does get what it is to be a human being, and the potential open to us as human beings, who captures it in his writing and in his descriptions of the different individuals who have thought about it deeply. I haven't found this matched anywhere else either.

Anybody who wants to ask the deep human questions is going to be interested in somebody else who has addressed himself or herself to these questions in an illuminating way. And I think there's nobody who asks and addresses the questions better than Berlin; it's both the choice of questions and the manner of addressing them.

And the choice of questions goes very much against the grain of the philosophical world in which he grew up, where people were arguing about pedantic points of analysis, which is a very uninspiring activity. He thought that the purpose of philosophy is to ask about the most general questions that face human beings, questions we have touched on before. Why are we here? Where are we going? How should we live? What can we be and do? These questions were at one stage dismissed by philosophers as meaningless questions, or questions to which philosophy could have no answer, and therefore shouldn't waste its time on. But, like Socrates, Berlin never wavered from his view that those were indeed the questions that we should be approaching as philosophers. I think he did so in all sorts of different and illuminating ways. We leave the experience of reading him as better human beings and better understanders of human life than when we began. That seems to me enough of a justification for anybody to read him.

**JL** On that Socratic point, do you think Berlin would have gone along with Socrates' view that the unexamined life is not worth living?

**HH** Yes, I suppose he would. Whether he would have made it an article of faith in quite the same way that Socrates did, I somewhat doubt. I never discussed this with him directly. But it seems to me that one of the consequences of a fully pluralist understanding of human life is that you have to make room for people who are not inclined to examine life in a philosophical way. There are some people who just prefer to live in the comforting embrace of a tradition, for example, without going into deep questions like the ones which preoccupied Socrates and Berlin. I don't see why pluralists should want to unsettle people who live naturally and unreflectively in that way. Why should they? 'There is room in the world for you and for us', as one of Hamann's contemporaries put it. There's plenty of room for reflective people and for unreflective people. So the strict Socratic view that the unexamined life is follow through on seems me to be prejudiced in favour of intellectuals, and that's an unjustifiable prejudice.

**JL** Can you indicate what you feel are the main weaknesses or shortcomings of Berlin's outlook?

**HH** Well, it may be that that the main weakness is a necessary weakness. What a lot of people would say is that he is not a systematic thinker. He doesn't set out to build a definitive structure of ideas from which you could read out answers to political and moral questions of various kinds, in which everything is coherent and everything fits together. But of course, as you will immediately appreciate, that follows necessarily from his pluralist outlook. If you are a pluralist, it's in principle impossible for you to come up with a systematic account of everything, because there can be no such systematic account. To offer one would be to fly in the face of reality, in particular human reality.

## DISCOVERING ISAIAH BERLIN

Having said that, and it's a very important thing to say, it's also true that he isn't careful enough to make his statements consistent with one another, to make entirely clear what he means. He is not a photographic artist of thought, he is what you might call an impressionist or pointillist. He creates an impression of a mental map of someone's mind by dabs of paint, by flashes of genius, not in a way that a camera would. As with an impressionist painting, you can't reconstruct the real scene from the impressionist painting as exactly as, in theory, you could from a photograph. The result is that there is a latitude for interpretation when you're reading his work which some find frustrating. In fact, there is a lot of scholarly debate about Berlin's ideas, regarding what he really meant by such and such, and whether one statement is consistent with another statement, and if not, why not? What do you think would be the best view to attribute to him, and the best view to discard, and so forth? It's not that you can't extract something clearer and more consistent and systematic from his ideas. Indeed, I think you can, and that's what I have tried to do, at least in part, in my book *In Search of Isaiah Berlin*, and in another book that I'm working on now. But there is no doubt that people do criticise him for this woolliness, as they would call it, or vagueness, or indeterminacy of description of the content of his ideas. So that would be one quite general weakness, which, as I said, is partly unavoidable but partly a genuine fault.

I have one special personal worry of my own about his ideas, which is something I spend a good deal of time on in my book. My basic point is that pluralism has implications for our attitude to the main religions of the world. This is something Berlin was never really willing to follow through to its logical conclusion. And I argued with him a lot about that, as reported in the book.

**JL** Can you give me a sense of why you have a worry about, or perhaps a frustration with, the fact that Berlin didn't follow through on this aspect of his thought? What didn't he follow through on in your view?

**HH** Well, as I've said, the really fundamental element in his thought is that there can be no one uniquely true moral or political ideology which gets everything right and which rules out all alternatives, so that it can be imposed on everybody. The main instance he has in mind when he's setting up this view is the totalitarian ideology of the Soviet Union, and in particular the oppression visited on Soviet citizens by the Soviet state. He is thinking of the appalling suffering created by Russian Communism, which we all know about, from the Stalinist murder of millions of people through to the thought control of their society. That is where Berlin's motivation comes from. My own motivation comes from a different personal story. I was brought up by religious parents in a way that he wasn't. And I saw in his theory of pluralism a very strong argument against any universalist religion which claims to have the right answer to the question of how to live. It seemed to me that the same hostility which he exhibits towards political authoritarianism should for the same reasons be exhibited towards religious authoritarianism. I tried to recruit him to my side on this, to get him to agree with me that religious oppression was just another example of exactly the same anti-pluralist oppression which was visible in the Soviet Union, in Nazi Germany, in Pol Pot's Cambodia and in other places. But for some reason, which I still don't fully understand, he never agreed with me about this a hundred per cent. And I think you'll see from reading my book that we to some extent talk past each other in a way that I never managed to overcome. I regret that I didn't, as I'm sure it was my fault for not taking the right tack. The outcome was that we left the subject in a state of some unclarity.

**JL** In your book you say that 'Berlin had a genius for being human.' That is a rather startling statement. Can you elaborate on what you meant by it?

**HH** Perhaps it was only half of what I should have said. I should have said he had a genius both for being human and for

understanding humanity. I've said quite a bit already about the second part, about the way he asked questions and the way he used his reading to throw light on the deepest human issues.

But the other part, the part I described as a genius for being human, is that by being in his presence and hearing him talk you were made aware of areas of human potential which might not otherwise have occurred to you. It's exactly what he himself said about some of the geniuses *he* met. He said that talking to a genius, perhaps Pasternak, or Akhmatova, or Virginia Woolf, enlarged your sense of what human beings could be and do, revealed ways of being human which just wouldn't have occurred to you if you hadn't met somebody like this. So, in a way, his life and his conversation demonstrated the ways of being human that he elucidates in his work.

He was a living example of his ideas. You felt when you were talking to him that you were taken up to a level of intellectual competence or inspiration or personal potential which exceeded the normal resting level at which you lived your life. You came out walking on air, feeling excited and inspired and enlarged.

**JL** You have also published four large volumes of Berlin's letters. Do you think the letters tell us something about him that his other works don't?

**HH** Yes, I think they add a lot of detail, a lot of colour, because he's not on his best behaviour when writing letters. He's more candid, more gossipy, as his professional guard isn't up. If you want to have a full understanding of his mind and its contents, you will certainly derive benefit from the letters.

One of the things that comes out in the letters, more strikingly than anything else, perhaps, is his sense of humour. If you read the more formal essays that he wrote you might have the impression of somebody who's very serious. But the letters give you a truer impression, which is that he loved to laugh. He loved jokes. He loved watching the panoply of human beings of all sorts of idiosyncratic and eccentric kinds. And he revelled in observing and

describing their behaviour. The letters are just terrific fun to read, because they're so full of detailed observation of diverse human beings. He had a favourite remark, which wasn't his own, but well expresses his attitude. The German Jewish poet Karl Wolfskehl once said, 'People are my landscape.' Berlin said, 'Entirely true of me.' That's what he was, an observer of people. The letters are an extreme example of that, and they are simply hugely entertaining.

**JL** Berlin died on 5 November 1997 at the age of eighty-eight. Within a few months of his death, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, an anthology of published writings, was published in America. You took the opportunity to write a postscript to your preface to that edition. Could you read the closing section of that postscript?

**HH** *Since I am writing this only five weeks after Isaiah Berlin's death, I shall for a moment allow myself to relax an editor's customary, somewhat formal, manner and express the hope that this retrospective anthology of the work he published in his lifetime may now fittingly take on an extra role: to serve as a tribute to a man I loved, a friend who, of the human beings I have known, was not only the most remarkable and delightful, but also, in so many ways, the wisest, the surest in judgement, and the best.*

**JL** Thank you. After Berlin died, you continued the work of publishing his writings. Can you say something about the nature and scope of those posthumously published works?

**HH** They were of a rather mixed nature. But the point of two of the books I published after he died was to make transcriptions of extempore lectures available. This was a controversial project because, of course, extempore lectures are much less carefully constructed, much less tightly argued, even when you allow for the general looseness of his argumentative style.

There were two main famous sets of lectures which he had given that were obvious candidates for conversion into book form. One was the Mellon Lectures, which he gave in 1965 in

Washington, on the origins of romantic thought, or ‘The Roots of Romanticism’, as it was originally called. And the other was a series of lectures which he gave earlier both in America and on the BBC Third Programme in England called ‘Freedom and Its Betrayal’, which is a set of six lectures on key enemies of freedom.

Both sets of lectures had a certain reputation and notoriety, or fame, attached to them. There were those who thought that such material shouldn’t be issued in book form because it lowered the intellectual level in some way. Bernard Williams was one of them. He had very strong reservations about the project, but I’m sure he was wrong, and the reception of these books by their readers encourages me to persist in that view. It’s not just that *The Roots of Romanticism* and *Freedom and Its Betrayal* preserve his thoughts on topics that would otherwise not feature to the same extent in his published *oeuvre*, but that they do so in a way which preserves the liveliness and excitement and engagement of his spoken performances, which is well worth doing for its own sake. In fact, it’s a form of publishing pluralism, by which I mean that not only can you publish carefully constructed work, of which there is plenty in the books of his that I have produced, but it’s good also to have some examples of how he was when he was speaking off the cuff. Anybody who reads those two volumes will see what I mean. You get a strong sense of a mind in full flight being excited about something.

JL Were there any other writings to publish after *The Roots of Romanticism* and *Freedom and Its Betrayal*?

HH Yes. *Four Essays on Liberty* badly needed to be re-edited because it was full of mistakes of various kinds and didn’t have references, and suffered from various other boring defects of the kind which editors eliminate. So I gathered together a number of other pieces which belonged in the same company and republished the book under the title *Liberty*, so that all his writings on that topic would be available within one set of covers. *Liberty* has become a

kind of staple student textbook as well as one general readers can read.

There were various other bits and pieces that I put together in various ways. One that does merit a specific mention is a volume of his writings on the culture and politics of the Soviet Union. These weren't generally known. In fact, two of them had originally been published pseudonymously because he didn't want to go on the public record being critical of the Soviet Union, given that he had relatives and friends there who would probably be harassed, at the very least, by the Soviet authorities if he was to publish his opinions openly. Once again, too, some people were against the publication of these writings in book form on the grounds that they were below the standard of his other published works. I disagreed. Ultimately a conference was put together by Strobe Talbott, who was Deputy Secretary of State when Madeleine Albright was Secretary of State, during the Clinton presidency. We had a discussion with various Sovietologists about these essays, which in turn created a very good opportunity to publish them as a book arising from the conference, which I did. It's called *The Soviet Mind: Russian Culture Under Communism*, now also in its second edition. It's a wonderful book, and in a way it's the most remarkable empathetic achievement of his, because he gets right inside the minds of the people he's most horrified by, namely the Soviet apparatchiks. He knows what it's like to be in their minds and he conveys it. But he doesn't stop hating it all the way through.

**JL** You mentioned earlier in the interview that Berlin visited Ireland. Can you tell us something about his trip to Ireland?

**HH** Yes, trips rather than trip. It was in the 1930s. The first visit took place in 1933. He had a couple of pupils he became close friends with. One was Mary Fisher, who was the daughter of the Warden of New College. Another was Maire Lynd, who was an extremely beautiful Irish girl whose parents were writers. He was also friends with an ancient history don called Christopher Cox,

who taught at New College with him, and was one of the exceptions to his general rule that the New College senior common room was dull. He and Berlin got on very well. Cox had a friend whose mother-in-law lived in a place called Oughterard in County Galway near the west coast of Ireland. She was called the Countess Metaxa, because she had married a Greek aristocrat. The four Oxford friends wanted to go on holiday together in the long vacation of 1933. And the Countess said to Christopher Cox, ‘Well, I own a small island in a lake, with a kind of shack on it. Why don’t you come and use that?’ The island, which I have visited, is in Lough an Illaun, which is just near Maam Cross, also in County Galway. It’s a remote place that you can get to only by boat. And there they stayed for several days in four successive years, and had a wonderful time.

Photographs survive showing them doing this and that, which are fascinating to look at. You will find one of them in the volume called *Flourishing*, the first volume of letters. And then there are some more photographs in the last volume, called *Affirming*, which are there because he wrote a letter to Maire Lynd for her seventieth birthday, reminiscing about their wonderful holidays in Ireland together.

**JL** Can you say how you came to go there yourself, I believe with your wife?

**HH** We have a connection with Clifden, which is not too far from Maam Cross. And because we were going there to visit friends of my wife’s I thought I’d see if I could find the island. I was keen to see the actual place where these holidays had taken place. I had no idea who owned it or how to get to it. We drove to the lake, parked the car at the roadside, and noticed that there was a boathouse nearby. I’d taken a print-out of a photograph showing the holidaymakers in the 1930s with a rowing boat, which had given me the clue that access to the island was by boat. So we went and looked at this boathouse and noticed that the padlock was not secured. Cheekily, we opened the door and looked inside, and there

before us was the very rowing boat that appeared in the 1930s photographs. I wrote a note on the print-out that I had with me, explaining my interest, and put it in the boat. A while later we had an email from the people who owned the island, an English couple who had bought it from a local man. They invited us to go and have lunch with them on the island. So we did that. The only difference was that in the 1930s the island was very bare, with rocks and grass, but now it's completely overrun by enormous rhododendron bushes, so that you can wander along tall-sided paths and not see anything to left or right. Otherwise everything is as it was. The shacks are intact and the concrete landing jetty which the early photographs show is still there in exactly the same form. So that was another magical Berlinian experience.

**JL** Are there any treasures we have yet to see from the Berlin archives?

**HH** There are some things that haven't been published, for one reason or another. There are still quite a lot of unpublished essays, which are in many cases available online but haven't been collected into volumes. I would publish more volumes if I was left to my own devices. But I'm one of a number of trustees of Berlin's literary estate, and unfortunately the other trustees feel that enough has come out, and the rest should be published only online. Accordingly, unless or until their view changes, the online approach is the only one that I can adopt; but the corpus of online essays will continue to grow.

There will be opportunities, I hope, if there are further new editions of the existing books, to add further material, which would gradually enlarge the physically published corpus a little. There are also some letters which haven't been published: his early letters to Aline Halban, who became his wife, for example, which of course I can't publish without the permission of the family. The family feel they're a bit too personal. Several of these letters show a side of Berlin which Aline herself was very anxious to have shown to

the world. A point she often made to me was that he was a very passionate person, and that his letters to her showed that. This was a side of him which didn't come out from most of his other letters. Luckily, Aline did in her lifetime, after initial hesitation, allow us to include some of his letters to her in the third volume, *Building*. These later letters, written after they were married, do contain or convey some of the same passionate feelings, although, inevitably, they had simmered down a bit by then. But she was pleased that in the end we did publish these letters, so that that side of him was on display.

Those are the main things that come to mind. But there are of course hundreds and hundreds of letters that we didn't include in the published volumes. In the later volumes, we were publishing less than a quarter of the letters that survive. Obviously some of the letters are less interesting than others. Yet some of the ones that we didn't include are as good as the ones we did. We are gradually publishing more of these letters online, and that process will continue. Moreover, we are still discovering new letters and new writings that we didn't know about. Just the other day, I suddenly came across a detailed account he had written about world politics in 1951, covering the whole globe. It shows an extraordinary range of knowledge, and a facility to analyse disparate material. And we've recently found some extra caches of letters, for example, the letters he wrote to the editor of the *Atlantic Monthly*, Edward Weeks, which include some very interesting material.

**JL** How did Berlin come to meet Aline in the first place?

**HH** He first saw her as Aline Strauss all on a ship travelling from Lisbon to New York in 1940, but didn't speak to her. He met her briefly at Victor Rothschild's New York apartment in 1942. He met her properly in Oxford after the war. By then she was married to her second husband, a physicist named Hans Halban who was working in Oxford. I suppose he met her at social events such as concerts. Indeed, he and Aline used to go to concerts a lot on their

own, and they became friends, and gradually inclined to be more than friends. It's clear that there were problems in the Halban's marriage. Eventually things got to the point where a decision had to be made: whether she was going to leave her husband for Berlin or whether she was going to carry on with her existing marriage. Halban and Berlin ended up having a conversation in which Berlin convinced Halban that by forbidding his wife to see Berlin he would actually be increasing the likelihood that she would abandon him, since, if you imprison somebody, that increases their desire to get out of the prison. It was a conversation which showed a certain bravery on Berlin's part, which in one way is uncharacteristic of him. He must have been calling on all his reserves of courage. At any rate, Hans Halban now understood what the situation was. Around this time he was offered a new job in Paris, a high-profile physics post. And it is reported that Halban said to Aline, 'Well, I'm going to go to Paris, which means a decision has to be taken. Are you going to come to Paris or are you going to stay with Isaiah? Paris or Berlin?' And we know what Aline decided.

**JL** You have talked about Berlin's interest in other thinkers, nearly all of whom were historical figures. Were there any philosophers that he particularly admired in his own time?

**HH** I would say that the chief example amongst his contemporaries was John Austin. He really did admire him enormously. He thought that Austin talked directly about the subject without, as he put it, having to translate it into a form of technical jargon, without forcing you to use terminology which belonged to him and not to you. There was a phrase that Berlin used about many thinkers whom he admired, namely, that there was nothing between the thinker and the object. People often interpose some kind of ideological preconception or some enormously technical jargonised system between themselves and whatever it is they're trying to elucidate. This is a kind of roadblock in the path of clear thought, a kind of fogging of the view, which

he deprecated. Austin was a prime example of somebody who didn't do that. When Austin died prematurely of cancer in 1960, it was a terrible loss of a talent that might have gone on to achieve even greater things.

**JL** Berlin liked a metaphor Austin used all for philosophy. Austin described philosophy as 'the initial central sun, seminal and tumultuous', which from time to time 'throws off some portion of itself to take station as a science, a planet, cool and well regulated'. Philosophy has this ability never to stop producing questions, questions that may or may not be answered. Some of its questions are taken over by the natural sciences, others by the formal sciences, and yet others are thrown on the scrap heap of superstition or plain nonsense. And yet it remains a source of wonder and energy and keeps producing questions or problems that are undeniably meaningful yet stubbornly intractable.

**HH** Yes, he thought that each stage of human thought generated its own problems and questions, and that you couldn't therefore aspire to build up a complete list of answers to philosophical questions which would apply for all time and could be read off in all conceivable future situations. He thought the history of philosophy could be described in terms of a series of parricides whereby philosophy would shed parts of itself which would then become independent disciplines. So psychology, for example, became a fully-fledged science as opposed to a part of the philosophy of mind; logic and mathematics achieved complete independence; and so on.

So philosophy deals with the questions that are left over, which cannot be transferred to other fields of enquiry. And you might ask, 'Well, will a time come when all the contents of philosophy will have been siphoned off into new domains and there won't be anything left for philosophy to study?' Berlin's answer to that would be a clear 'No.' He thought that there are certain kinds of questions, importantly human questions, which are, of their very

nature, permanently philosophical. They will never be amenable to an exact scientific approach.

He had a view of the nature of a philosophical question, of which such questions are good examples. He divided questions into three categories. There were empirical questions, which you could answer clearly, at least in principle, by examining the world or carrying out experiments of some kind. How many miles is it to New York? Measure it. At what age did President Kennedy die? Look up the sources. These are empirical questions. Then there are formal questions, which are to do with systems of thought which we create ourselves, such as logic and mathematics. Other examples of formal thought he gives include heraldry and chess. If you want to see how a king moves in chess, you look at the rules which we created for the game of chess. You don't watch the behaviour of a king on a chess board. If somebody says to you, 'Well, last Tuesday, I saw a king move three squares at once', that doesn't tell you something about the rules of chess. It tells you about somebody who doesn't know the rules of chess, which is a different sort of problem.

And then, in between these two, or in addition to these two, there is the philosophical question, the question we don't quite know how to answer: we have no clear technique of answering it. We can't examine the world. We can't examine a formal system. Yet these questions are no less real, no less pressing for that. They are 'queer' questions. He gives an example of such a question in an interview he gave to Bryan Magee in 1976. He asks 'Why can't I go back and meet Napoleon? Why can't I go back in time?' That is a philosophical question *par excellence*. Many of the central moral and political questions that every human being has to face at some level, in some form, in life belong clearly in this third category, this third 'basket', as he calls it, of philosophical questions.

**JL** Interestingly, most of us stop asking these questions at some point. We think we've become mature or commonsensical or

whatever when we no longer wish to ask them. Indeed Berlin often compared philosophical questions to childlike questions.

**HH** Yes, he did. I think that's an important observation. He was in that way a great child himself. He never lost the capacity to be absorbed or mesmerised by deep philosophical questions. He remarks in that same discussion with Bryan Magee that most people don't want to ask or consider these questions after a certain time in their lives. Grown-ups don't want to. Indeed, they say, 'Oh, don't bother me with that: just go and climb a tree' or whatever. And gradually, of course, most children, as they grow up, are conditioned into not asking these questions any more, into forgetting about them, not bothering with them. 'More's the pity', Berlin says. 'The children who are not so conditioned turn into philosophers.'

**JL** This reminds me of a remark of Austin's about the ever-questioning spirit of philosophy: 'Neither a be-all nor an end-all be.'

**HH** Yes. It's also a kind of pluralist slogan. It's against the construction of final answers and unique systems which are imposed from above. Rather sweetly, Austin said he dreamt it. It's obviously a version of Polonius's advice to Hamlet: 'Neither a borrower nor a lender be.' It must have occurred to him in the still watches of the night.

**JL** You have spent most of your professional life being an editor. What are the attractions of editing, for you?

**HH** Difficult to say. Answering that question requires a kind of psychoanalytic self-knowledge which I probably lack. Part of it is simply a natural obsessiveness of personality and enjoyment of imposing order on chaos: in fact, a kind of very un-Berlinian drive to tidy up some aspect of the world. In the specific case of Berlin, I think by far the strongest motivation was the knowledge that he

needed an editor. It became plain that he was never himself going to put his work together and publish it in thematic volumes in a form that would be easily accessible to readers. But the task also required a lot of detective work, particularly in tracking down ostensible quotations to their sources and giving them proper references. That too is something which I just have a natural taste for – finding a quotation which Berlin uses but never attributes, or never attributes correctly, and probably gets wrong. It's the thrill of the chase, if you like, of that particular kind. A lot of his quotations are from foreign originals – in particular, Russian originals. They are often short phrases that he plucks out of somewhere and remembers. It can be very, very difficult to find them.

**JL** I think Berlin has got the editor he deserved. I'm not entirely sure if he's got the biography he deserves yet. What is your view on this?

**HH** I doubt whether any single biography could do him complete justice. I certainly don't want to denigrate Michael Ignatieff's book at all. I think it was a terrific achievement, and it was brought out within a year of Berlin's death. It's the closest thing we'll ever have to an authorised biography of him. It was based very closely on a series of mostly recorded conversations that took place over a period of ten years. Michael also very diligently read vast quantities of Berlin's correspondence and made quite a lot of use of this in the book. So it's a covert autobiography, because it presents Berlin from the angle that he would have chosen himself, though he always said that he wasn't sufficiently interested in himself to write a biography. I don't think that's entirely true. I think he was much more interested in himself than he cared to admit. I have a certain scepticism about his declaration on that point.

The biography was written at a stage when the papers had not been systematised and catalogued in the way that they subsequently were by the Bodleian Library in Oxford. There is a possibility that

more could be gleaned from them now than then. I am not sure how big a factor that might be.

There is of course more than one alternative life that could be written. Another possibility might be an intellectual biography, a study of his ideas as they developed through his life. There's a certain amount of that in John Gray's book on Berlin. But it and other accounts of his ideas tend to treat his body of work as static, as something which came into being all at one time rather than developing. There have been subsequent books, one by Joshua Cherniss, for example, which take a more historical view – in Cherniss's case, of Berlin's early political thought and its development. These books do a Berlin on Berlin in the sense that they treat his thought historically rather than analytically. I think that's a productive line to take. Indeed, a study that went through his whole life relating his ideas to his life would be a possibility. There is one such book in the pipeline, I understand, being written by somebody who has a form of writer's block. So it might be some time before it appears.

One could also imagine a much more detailed conventional biography twice as long as Ignatieff's. Such a book could be written from a more objective and critical viewpoint than Ignatieff's biography was or indeed sought to be. But this is yet another example of pluralism. There are many possible books on Berlin, all of which have their distinct value. There is a remark of Berlin's that applies here which is one of my favourite remarks of his: when he was talking about the famous confusion between Irving Berlin and Isaiah Berlin on the part of Winston Churchill in 1944, he used to say, 'There are many versions of this story, all true.' In the same way one might say that there are many biographies of Isaiah Berlin, all true.

**JL** The final question I'd like to ask you is about your forthcoming book on Berlin. Can you give a sneak preview of its nature and scope?

**HH** Yes, it's called *Isaiah Berlin in Brief: A Critical Survey of His Key Ideas*; or at least that's what it's called at the moment. My original idea was to write a Past Masters type of book on Berlin, because I thought he himself was an appropriate subject for the series which he'd inspired me to create. In fact, I began by offering such a book to Oxford University Press, thinking they might like to include it in their Very Short Introductions series, the one that emerged from Past Masters. Unfortunately, they declined even to look at the outline I had written, on the grounds that they were not currently commissioning new studies of individual thinkers for the series. I am slightly sceptical about whether that was the real reason, but whatever the reason was the book can't therefore take that form, and is due to be published by Princeton University Press instead, as a free-standing book.

**JL** What is your motive in writing this book?

**HH** My idea is that there isn't a short, really accessible account of Berlin's main ideas for a general reader who wants a brief guide. There are very good books on Berlin's thought, but they are longer or slightly more difficult to read. Part of my aim is to write an essay about Berlin's ideas of the same kind that Berlin might have written if he himself had been his own subject, to aspire to his level of accessibility and clarity – a very tall order. I don't want it to be entirely descriptive, just a summary of what he said, as I think that's less interesting than an account that engages with some of the difficulties and problems of his thought. That's why I've called it a 'Critical Survey'. Whether I'll pull it off is another matter altogether. But there is no such book of that kind at the moment.

There is a quite general problem in talking about Berlin or explaining to people why he is important, which is that his corpus of work is so luxuriant, so detailed, so various, so rich that you can't sum it up in one proposition or even a series of propositions. You can say that Einstein discovered relativity, for example; I don't think you can say a similar thing about Berlin. You can say he was

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a liberal and you can say he was a pluralist. That's the closest you can get to it. But the gap between saying that and a full engagement with the whole glory of his work is enormous. I'd like to bridge that gap a little bit and provide, if you like, a bluffer's guide to why Berlin matters, why Berlin is important.

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**First posted in the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library 13 November 2020**

**Posted on 29 August 2025 in Isaiah Berlin Online**

**Revised 4 September 2025**