

Editing Genius

The Isaiah Berlin Papers Project

by **Henry Hardy**

Isaiah Berlin, Wolfson's founding President, was a leading twentieth-century public intellectual – an arresting liberal thinker with a magical prose style and a prodigious gift for making ideas interesting. He was also a legendary talker and friend, sought out both for his exhilarating company and for his sure judgement. His influence on politics and culture was greater than is often recognised, because he lived and moved more behind the scenes than in the spotlight – always with a twinkle in his eye.

During the Second World War Berlin worked for the British Foreign Office in the USA, reporting on US politics for Churchill and his government as they tried to secure America's help against Hitler. His weekly 'political summaries' were said to be Churchill's favourite reading. In 1945 he was posted to Russia, and in Leningrad (where he had lived as a child) had an iconic all-night encounter with the great Russian poet Anna Akhmatova which, she believed, started the Cold War. He also came to know Boris Pasternak, and on a return trip in 1956 was given a manuscript of *Doctor Zhivago* to smuggle out of Russia.

As a Jew and lifelong Zionist, and a personal friend of Chaim Weizmann, first President of Israel, Berlin was at the centre of Zionist politics; he was offered more than one post in the government of Israel, but always declined. He helped to set up the Marshall Plan scheme that rescued the economies of Europe after the war. A scintillating series of lectures on freedom on the BBC Third Programme in 1952 brought him national fame, and he became an intellectual celebrity featured in gossip columns and glossy magazines.

His contacts with politicians in several countries gave him an inside view of major world events – the creation of the State of Israel, the Suez Crisis, the Cold War. He knew President Kennedy and had a ringside seat at the start of the Cuban missile crisis; he knew many of the leading figures in British politics, including Harold Macmillan and Richard Crossman. Elizabeth Bowen, Alfred Brendel, Stuart Hampshire, Arthur Schlesinger, Stephen Spender, Bernard Williams and Edmund Wilson were among his close friends.

His intellectual preoccupations, too, have deeply informed Western culture. His trademark doctrine is 'pluralism', the view that human values are irreducibly multiple and often in tragic conflict, so that there can be no simple, consistent recipe for the good life. This subversive view stands against centuries of utopian philosophical dogma, and is growing in relevance. All the issues that gather round the question of the proper limits to tolerance of difference – multiculturalism, nationalism, fundamentalist extremism and terrorism, cultural imperialism – turn on whether pluralism is true, and what its implications are for our conduct.



◆ *Isaiah Berlin at Headington House with Oxford University philosopher Stuart Hampshire and Russian-born composer, Nicolas Nabokov; photo by Dominique Nabokov*

Add that he was a reluctant publisher and a prolific correspondent, and the ingredients for a matchless publishing project are in place.

'The Isaiah Berlin Papers Project' began in 1990 and ended almost a quarter of a century later, in early 2015. It arose from a request Berlin made in 1988 that I should serve as one of his literary executors, having already edited four volumes of his collected essays.

I came to Wolfson as a graduate student in 1972 with an established taste for editorial work. There I met Berlin, and came to admire him and his essays enormously; discovered that most of them had not been collected; and subjected him and them to my editorial attentions. Once the fourth volume had appeared I imagined that my task was complete, until he asked me to be an executor. This spurred me to conduct a search of his home to see what I should have to deal with. I discovered a wealth of relatively finished but unpublished material; and eventually persuaded him that the task of editing his papers should begin while he was still alive, and could answer questions. I realised, too, that I should have to leave my then job as a commissioning editor at Oxford University Press and work full time on his material, if only I could raise the necessary funding; with that in view, I made my proposed new occupation more solid by adding the task of preparing an edition of Berlin's correspondence.

By a stroke of good fortune, I met Lord (Alan) Bullock at the crucial moment, and discovered that he both admired Berlin and loved the challenge of fund-raising. Once he had elicited the funding I needed, I took up a post at Wolfson and set to work. Before Berlin's death in 1997 three volumes had appeared:



Isaiah Berlin with members of Harvard's Department of Government, 1949: in front, Sam Beer, long-term professor at Harvard; IB; Adam Ulam, Polish-American historian and political scientist at Harvard; Roy Macridis, subsequently professor of politics at Brandeis University; Louis Hartz and Robert McLoskey, subsequently professors of government at Harvard

a book on the extraordinary German thinker J G Hamann, a collection of mostly unpublished essays and lectures entitled *The Sense of Reality*, and a 'best of Berlin' volume co-edited with another Wolfsonian, Roger Hausheer, *The Proper Study of Mankind*.

After Berlin's death I was free to publish material that he had not wished to release in his lifetime. Between 1997 and 2006 I published three sets of lectures – including the 1952 series already mentioned, and his equally celebrated 1965 Mellon Lectures on romanticism – and four collections of (mostly) published essays, including a revised and expanded edition of what he regarded as his most important book, *Four Essays on Liberty* (retitled simply *Liberty*), and a volume on Russian culture under Communism, *The Soviet Mind*.

At the same time I was collecting Berlin's letters – a sometimes tortuous and frustrating process. It was over a decade before I was ready to begin editing them for publication.

As work progressed I was joined by two experienced researchers. One of them, the brilliant Jennifer Holmes, became my co-editor for the second volume. Later, Mark Pottle, also from Wolfson, the acclaimed editor of the diaries and letters of Violet Bonham Carter, took up the baton from Jennifer, and he and I co-edited the last two volumes. Mark's historical expertise, as well as his wonderfully co-operative temperament, made him the ideal companion-in-arms, and I was delighted that upon my 'retirement' in 2015 he was appointed to the new post of Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson, charged with keeping the Berlinian flame alight during the next phase of the College's history.

Berlin always denied being sufficiently interested in himself to write an autobiography, but his letters are the next best thing: better, in some ways, because fuller and more unguarded. But he was far too prolific for us to be able to include more than a small fraction of what he wrote, even in our four volumes; so we selected the

letters that best told the tale of his life and opinions. Even so there was much editorial work to do to make the selection work biographically. Themes needed to be introduced, gaps in the story filled, context provided and allusions explained by linking passages (which Berlin called 'connective tissue') and thousands of footnotes (which he loved). Some of the footnotes were really challenging: Mark Pottle and I coined the concept of an 'iceberg' note, whose brevity belies the hours of research on which it rests. We also added chronologies that list the main events in Berlin's life.

Berlin was one of the last great letter-writers of the pre-email age, and we shall not see his like again. As well as being full of sometimes mischievous fun, his letters display his breathtaking understanding of the human condition, and are as much part of his *oeuvre* as his more formal writings, throwing new light on his ideas. Their cast of thousands made annotating them a challenge, but also an education in twentieth-century history and culture. They include passionate letters to his wife Aline, and a wealth of gossip,

as well as serious (but never solemn) treatments of issues in music, politics, philosophy – and life in general.

It is one of the glories of my fortunate life that I discovered a totally unplanned vocation when I was young. When Merton turned down my application for a graduate scholarship in 1971 they did me an unwitting favour: they caused me to apply to Wolfson, where I met Berlin. The rest is history – and for me,

what a history! I am as certain as I can be that Berlin was one of the geniuses of the twentieth century, and to have had the chance to act as his intellectual midwife is one of the greatest privileges I can imagine. What greater luck could an editor aspire to? ■

On 28 May, Henry Hardy gave the 2015 Isaiah Berlin Lecture, entitled 'The Genius and the Pedant: Working with Isaiah Berlin'.



Henry Hardy speaking in Riga in 2011; photo by Valdis Kaulins

Henry Hardy first came to Wolfson in 1972 as a philosophy graduate student, when Isaiah Berlin was still President of the College. Berlin was extremely accessible to those who wished to talk to him (or listen to him talking), often remaining in the common room between lunch and dinner. Henry soon realised that Berlin was an ideal victim of his editorial propensities. While still working on his DPhil, he persuaded Berlin to allow him to publish four volumes of his collected essays, which started a ball rolling that came to (comparative) rest only forty years and thirty books later.

While a Wolfson student, Henry founded the College magazine, originally called *Lycidas* (Greek for 'Wolfson'), and the College choir, which performed some of his own compositions; he also ran the music society, inaugurated by a Bach cello recital from Mstislav Rostropovich. Thereafter he had a fifteen-year career in publishing, latterly at Oxford University Press, before returning to Wolfson in 1990 as a research fellow (later a supernumerary fellow) to work on Berlin's papers and letters until his retirement in 2015, whereupon the College elected him to an Honorary Fellowship. He hopes to write more about his work with Berlin, and Berlin's ideas, which he considers to be of the greatest importance.

