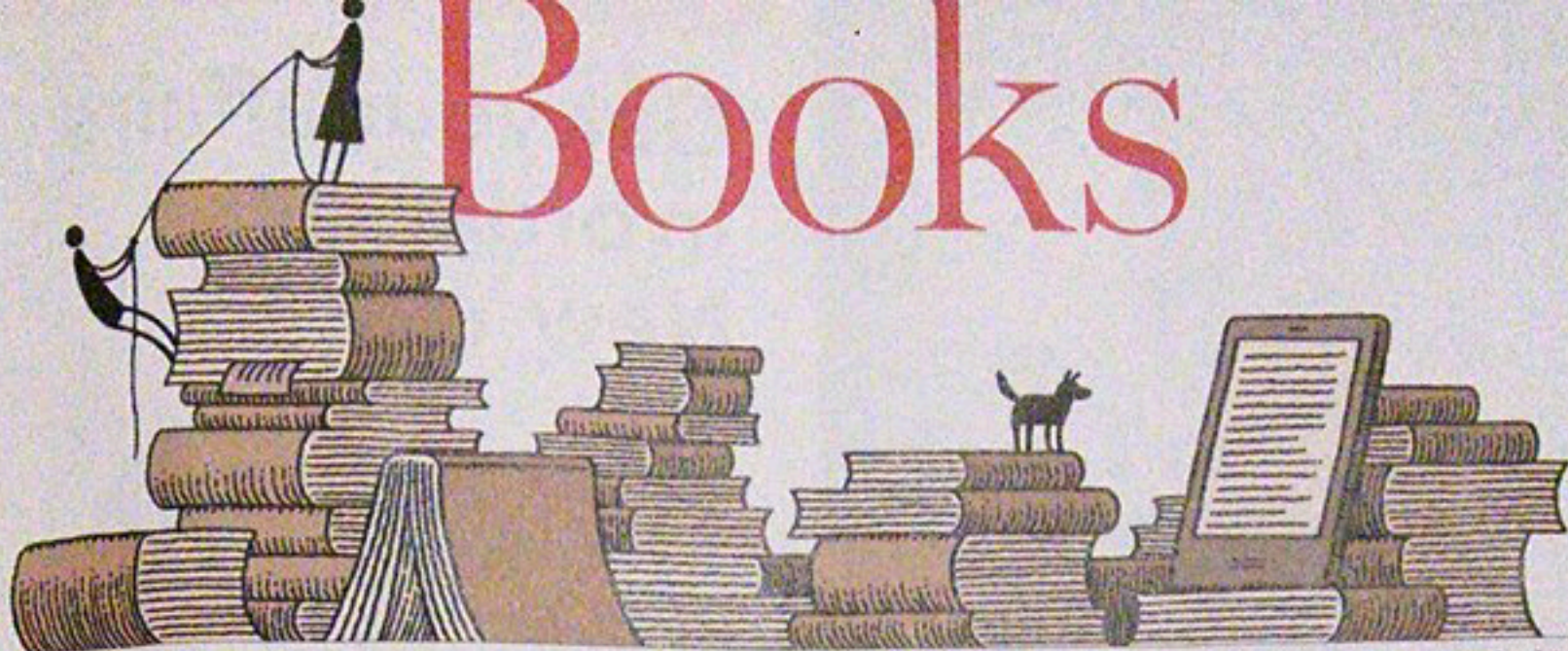


# Books



## The book of Isaiah

**MICHAEL BARBER**

*In Search of Isaiah Berlin:  
A Literary Adventure*

By Henry Hardy

IB Tauris £20

A long time ago, outside a studio in the bowels of Bush House, I heard someone talking on air so torrentially as to be almost unintelligible.

'Who on earth's that?' I asked my producer.

'Isaiah Berlin,' she replied.

If Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) was hard for a stranger to understand, it was because his tongue had to sprint to keep up with the pace of his thoughts. He was consumed by curiosity and bursting with ideas about everything under the sun, the trivial as well as the portentous. To the end of his days, he would speculate about the precise difference between a cad and a bounder.

But despite the array of glittering prizes he amassed, culminating in the Order of Merit, Berlin was haunted by self-doubt. He never thought of himself as a scholar and described his writing, much of it for obscure academic journals, as 'misbegotten, worthless and shallow'.

Fortunately, his meticulous and indefatigable publishing editor, Henry Hardy, disagreed. Convinced that Berlin's writing was as stimulating as his talk, he has spent the past 40 years getting as much of it as possible between hard covers. Thanks to him, it is no longer justifiable to portray Berlin as primarily a 'salon virtuoso' who squandered his gifts in conversation.

Hardy's title is slightly misleading. Anyone hoping to learn much about Berlin's life, as opposed to his values, will be disappointed. Instead, the book describes a battle of wills between 'the

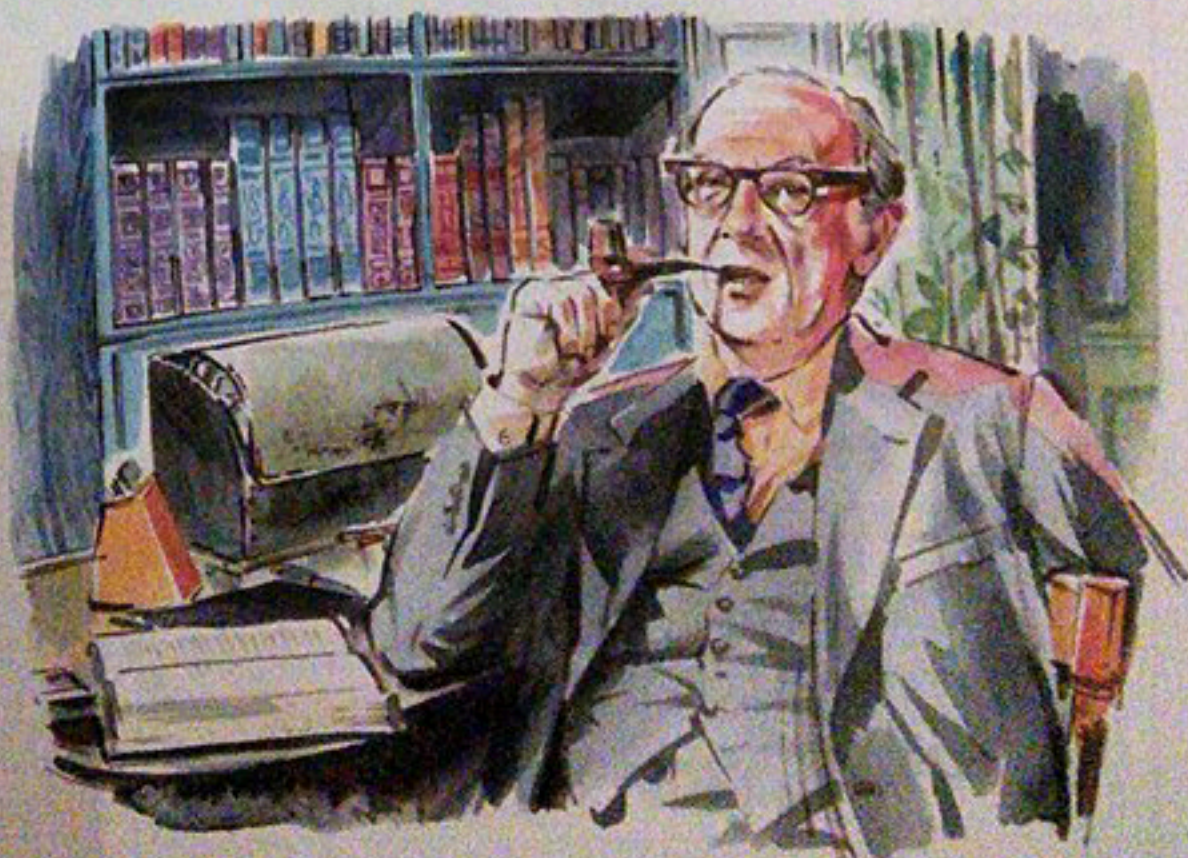
genius', Berlin, and 'the pedant', Hardy. Berlin believed in 'personal liberty', defined as 'the right to be left alone'. But Hardy wouldn't leave him alone, bombarding him with queries that required a response.

One problem was, as Berlin acknowledged, that in the interests of clarity he took unscholarly liberties with texts. Sometimes this 'mild cheating' was defensible, a classic example being his distillation of Kant's observation, 'From such crooked wood as that from which man is made, nothing wholly straight can be constructed.' Surely Berlin's version is an improvement: 'Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made.' But Hardy would not let him get away with, for example, an unreferenced quotation, finding the source of which Berlin regarded as drudgery.

Hardy took liberties, too, one of which not only imperilled his friendship with Berlin, but also Berlin's with Noel Annan.

Against Berlin's wishes, he asked Lord Annan to write an introduction to Berlin's miscellany, *Personal Impressions*. Very reluctantly, Berlin agreed to this, but then insisted on numerous changes to Annan's 'sincere, laudatory and warm-hearted' text. Annan, meanwhile, had arranged for his piece to appear in the *New York Review of Books*, to which both he and Berlin regularly contributed. 'Absolutely not,' said Berlin, insisting that such personal publicity, however favourable, would 'cause me pain for the rest of my life'. Annan's response was equally unequivocal. 'I spent more time and care on that piece than [on] almost anything I have ever written,' he told Hardy. 'I never want to see the bloody thing again. You can correct the proofs. I won't.'

Of course Hardy acted with the best of intentions, and in doing so confirmed one of Berlin's most uncomfortable contentions, that good ends conflict. Happily, Annan and Berlin were



reconciled, and Annan would later devote a whole chapter to him in his entertaining appraisal, *The Dons*. By then Berlin had died, having told his biographer, Michael Ignatieff, 'After I'm dead I don't care what is said or thought about me.' Tolerant of religious practice as long as it was not imposed by force, he described himself as 'tone deaf to God'.

Try as he might, Hardy cannot fathom Berlin's habitual self-deprecation. Could it be that, like the art historian Kenneth Clark, he regarded his life as 'one long, harmless confidence trick'? After all, the British public probably knew even less about the history of ideas than they did about art; so when someone with a bit of authority enlightened them, they were prepared to listen. Whether they would still listen, I rather doubt.

So let's be grateful that Berlin lived at a time when, as one of his obituarists put it, intellectuals could 'still be prized as civilising influences in Britain'.