



Sir Isaiah Berlin

by A. L. Rowse

Isaiah Berlin Online aims to post, in the fullness of time, PDFs of all Berlin's uncollected and unpublished work, including lectures, interviews and broadcasts, and occasional related documents such as the present one, so that this material is conveniently readable and searchable online. The present PDF is part of this series.

The PDF is posted by the Isaiah Berlin Legacy Fellow at Wolfson College, with the support of the Trustees of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust.

All enquiries, including those concerning rights, should be directed to the Legacy Fellow at berlin@wolfson.ox.ac.uk

Sir Isaiah Berlin

by A. L. Rowse

From the unpublished manuscript 'Private Lives of the Fellows of All Souls', vol. 2, 1965. Footnotes are editorial.



*Caricature of IB by David Hawkins in the Oxford undergraduate magazine Mesopotamia, early 1960
('“Oxford” Pants for Knowledge’, detail)¹*

PEOPLE WILL WANT to know about him; I haven’t much to tell them, though I have known him since he was an undergraduate. For he was a protégé of dear Charlie Henderson at Corpus, who spotted his ability. I remember my first meeting him: an evening in Charles’s characteristic Georgian rooms in the Fellows’ Building at Corpus. Here was this young man, very much at ease in Zion, while we listened to gramophone records – he has always been very musical

¹ The whole drawing is reproduced at E 714.

– singing and conducting the score. I was absurdly put out, thought he should have known his place better. One day he asked Charles to tell him what he candidly thought of his appearance. Charles was embarrassed at this, for Isaiah is really ugly – an attractive, nice personality considering how ugly. Large white round face, fat, eyebrows meeting over his nose (I told him about this, since when he has kept them divided), large, fleshy nose, large ears, fine dark intelligent eyes under early-balding hair; a misshapen, partly useless left arm; a fat, waddling, Jewish figure. What was poor Charles to say?

But, as with John Wilkes, it doesn't take Isaiah long to talk away the effect of his physical appearance.² He is such a dear that everyone likes him.

He had no difficulty in being elected a Fellow, for he is very clever and knows all those languages. He was born in Russia and Russian was his first language. His people came to England before the first war,³ managing to transfer some of their property, so they were never poor, perhaps moderately well-to-do. Like so many Jews, Isaiah was sent to St Paul's School and was well grounded in the Classics. Emerged with the advantages of a public school background and education.

The only child,⁴ and not strong, he was very much mother's darling. His mother was a strong-minded person. Once, when Isaiah was ill, she installed herself in a college bedroom – against all the rules – to watch over him. In college she always lived the life of a *déreglé* Continental intellectual, stopping up half the night talking and not getting up till lunchtime. This did not improve his health, and he talked all he had to say. The result is that, for someone of his quite-out-of-proportion international reputation, he has written nothing – nothing of any significance. His first little book on Marx stops virtually half way, at 1848;⁵ and deals mainly with Marxist philosophy, the least important part of his thought. Nothing about

² The famously ugly John Wilkes (1725–97) allegedly claimed that it took him only half an hour to talk away his face.

³ In fact in 1921.

⁴ A sister was stillborn two years before his birth.

⁵ The chapter on 1848 is the seventh of eleven. Rowse's review in *Political Quarterly* 11 no. 1 (January 1940), 127–30, is strikingly more favourable: 'Mr Berlin's attitude to his subject is exemplary, and on the whole it is the best introduction to it that we have.'

his economics, little of his politics. Silly. He hadn't *thought* it out beforehand. However, it was a young man's book. He didn't put out a little book again until after the war, and only an expanded essay at that, on Tolstoy's treatment of history.⁶ The truth is that he doesn't write at all well – garrulous, shapeless, like his talk. I recently read a fascinating British Academy Lecture of his on Montesquieu:⁷ my God, with little trouble I could have pared and trimmed it into something excellent. Why doesn't he learn? He admits that he doesn't write well, then why not set himself to?

He is a nice nature, a thorough gentleman, a great gossip, his malice is never venomous, indiscreet, generous, kind and, of course, a snob. (All the best Fellows of ASC are.) In college his friends were Rees, Douglas Jay, Hampshire, Richard Pares, but I doubt if he was very intimate even with his best friends. So much is on the surface, so gregarious and amusing, urbane and unreserved, but underneath there must be a real reserve. For one thing, English public-school gentleman as he is for all social purposes, underneath he is a loyal Jew, with perhaps a core of passion. How could it be otherwise with all that suffering? He has been good about Israel, visited it with enthusiasm, sent his friend Stuart Hampshire and others there.

During the war he became great friends with John Foster, a professional pro-Semite anyway, in America together. Isaiah did a very useful job through his Jewish friends in New York & Washington in helping forward sentiment on our side. Hence the famous story of Isaiah or Irving Berlin⁸ being invited to lunch by Churchill and his mistaking one for the other, inviting his opinion on the American attitude towards the war under a misapprehension. I must ask Isaiah what is the truth about this. However, he was knighted for his good work, whatever it was.⁹

I think I have heard that he had a great disappointment in his love life when young (as Richard Pares had) – was turned down by a girl.¹⁰ It was only belatedly, after the war, that he married, and then by co-correspondency. He took away a scientist's wife, Mrs Taylor with

⁶ *The Hedgehog and the Fox: An Essay on Tolstoy's View of History* (1953); 2nd ed., ed. Henry Hardy (2013); still in print after seventy-two years.

⁷ 'Montesquieu', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 41 (1955), 267–96; repr. in AC.

⁸ It was Irving: see F 478–9.

⁹ There was no citation.

¹⁰ This may be a reference to Rachel 'Tips' Walker, whom he turned down; or to Patricia de BERNARD, who was married.

a ready-made family of children.¹¹ But she was a Paris Rothschild, sister of the young Baron de Gunzbourg who was on my staircase at Christ Church for a brief spell. And Aline, with lovely blue eyes, is not only beautiful but enchanting; she is a dear, on top of everything else. It was a real love match and saved Isaiah's life – he was so *déreglé* before; she looks after him. She is pretty well off, they live in the most beautiful old Georgian house at Headington – the Hall¹² – with plenty of pictures on the wall, exquisite furniture, rugs, everything, entertaining the whole time, especially people of note.

Isaiah had not the slightest trouble in carrying his co-correspondency through – not a murmur. Everything prospers with him, and after his marriage more than ever. Became Chairman,¹³ I think, of Covent Garden, very much a social figure: stays at Hatfield, knows the Queen Mother, Harewoods, both BBs (Britten and Berenson), wherever he goes meets the *crème de la crème* – if France, Picasso; if USA, the Kennedys; if Russia, Pasternak, Anna Akhmatova, Shostakovich.

It has long been so. In Oxford in young days it was Wystan Auden, Stephen Spender, David Cecil, Joyce Cary, Elizabeth Bowen. It is not only that Isaiah is a brilliantly amusing talker, but he *is* nice – rolling around laughing like [a] half garrulous old woman, half rabbi. Everybody wants to know him. Of course, it eats up his time. With his linguistic gifts, bilingual in Russian and English, speaks French, German, Italian, and with his abilities, he should by now have written half a dozen significant books. He hasn't written one of any significance. And yet he is treated royally wherever he goes, as if he had. Always being asked over here – to lecture at Harvard, to give a lecture to the whole assembled American Historical Association. As usual, they couldn't hear half of what he said. Adlai Stevenson, on the platform for the Occasion, whispered to Allan Nevins, 'I've no doubt that what he's saying is very important, only I can't make out what it is.' The truth is that it wasn't very important – only people think it is, the ~~bloody~~ fools.

¹¹ Mrs Harriet Taylor brought three children by her first husband to her marriage with John Stuart Mill; Aline Halban had had three sons by her first two marriages when she married IB.

¹² They lived in Headington House: Headington Hall was the home of Robert Maxwell.

¹³ Just a Director.

It was the same with his Mellon Lectures at Washington. Joe Alsop wrote me, apropos of nothing (for I hardly know him), that Isaiah's 'impact on the intellectual life of Washington was comparable only to that of the Russian ballet upon Paris with Diaghilev and Nijinski.)' Isaiah as Nijinski! Sense of humour should have prevented him from talking such rot – and a little bird might have warned him not to write it to me. Just the Jewish claque.

Actually Isaiah's intellectual position is not at all original or exciting; it is very much a matter of common-sense English empiricism. The philosophers in Oxford don't take him seriously as a philosopher, he has no contribution to make there. He is really a historian of ideas, and that is not so common in the English environment, though easy enough. He is widely read – people who don't write have the time to read (like GFH and Stuart Hampshire). G. D. H. Cole was very anxious to have Isaiah as his successor in the chair of Social and Political Theory, instead of John Plamenatz, who has done far more and better work in the field. GDHC said to me of Isaiah – 'He's more fire in his belly.'¹⁴ But, of course, Douglas and Isaiah were both Paulines, and I wonder if Douglas, with that very dark and glittering appearance, hadn't a streak of Jewish blood? Everything falls into Isaiah's capacious washerwoman's lap. And so it will be until the end – when it will be discovered that, with all his talents, he has accomplished nothing at all significant.

Isaiah's musical knowledge is very extensive. He built it up on a foundation of gramophone records, which he received in quantities for review, even as an undergraduate, later as a young don, from the *Oxford Magazine*. Later, developed from much concert- and opera-going. He is a good mimic – can do Lightfoot of New College, Roy Harrod and David Cecil better than they can do themselves. Is a good companion: has travelled abroad with Maurice Bowra, John Foster and others. Travelled in England with Spender. He has a malicious story of a day with Hugh Walpole and Hugh's Cornish policeman. Stopping to eat somewhere, Hugh very solicitous of Harold's appetite. 'Won't you have a little –' something or other, 'Harold?' 'No, thank you, Mr Walpole', in broad Cornish. And Hugh, sighing, 'If only one could write about life as it really is! ...'.

¹⁴ Here ALR later added, but then crossed out, '(I wonder now if Cole wasn't Jewish? He looked it, and had the characteristics.)'

Curiously enough, for all Isaiah's fame as a conversationalist in two continents, I don't remember that he has made any good *mots*. Like Maurice Bowra on Queen Juliana, 'Every inch a Queen.' Or David Cecil on Maurice, 'He should be made an Earl for his jokes', or on Wystan Auden's intricately wrinkled face: 'Were a fly to try and cross it, it would break its leg.' Or John Sparrow to the policeman: 'One man's beat is another man's poison.' The only approximation is his description of Oliver Franks, 'If you break the ice you'll find cold water underneath.' But he says things in such a droll manner, head wobbling off his neck with laughing, that everybody else laughs too. It has been worth a fortune to him.

But he has his principles, might even be described as a man of principle. I was not surprised that he should have ganged up with John Foster to prevent G. N. Clark's re-election one year. Foster on the characteristic ground that Clark was 'dull', which is not the case; Isaiah on the ground that GN is a man who suffers from cold feet – which is true. All the same I'd never have said that in a college meeting; I don't trust people sufficiently.

But then, Isaiah can get away with anything.

© Estate of A. L. Rowse 2025

From EUL MS113/1/2/4/2, courtesy of Special Collections, University of Exeter; posted with permission of The Royal Institution of Cornwall

**Posted in Isaiah Berlin Online and the Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library
10 September 2025**