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Back to Berlin

by Roger Scruton

The mark of a great letter writer is not the number of letters sent, but the number subsequently kept. By this measure Isaiah Berlin must surely count among the most noteworthy correspondents of the modern era. His letters were sent to, and kept by, people as interesting and highly placed as himself, so that these private communications are also valuable public records, giving a unique perspective on the post-war events in Britain, America, and the wider world. They are full of gossip, of course, and—as in his published writings—Berlin touches on the big questions without always wrestling with them. But they are a pleasure to read and have been edited to a high standard by Berlin's devoted executor Henry Hardy, with the help of Jennifer Holmes. [1] Not a name has gone untraced, nor a reference left incomplete. The reader is transported to post-war Oxford, at the very moment when Oxford, thanks to the Labour Party, was taking over Britain.

Berlin was a famously garrulous person, whose conversation fascinated and charmed his audience. He was also both deeply interested in other people and affectionately disposed towards them. Indeed, if there is one positive quality above all others that comes across from these letters, it is that of constantly renewed affection—for which Berlin was rewarded in life by the enormous circle of his friends, and in death by the devotion of those who seek to keep his memory alive. He was not uncritical, and the letters contain some striking pages of demolition—of G. D. H. Cole (Berlin's predecessor as the Chichele Professor of Social Thought), the loathsome Isaac Deutscher, Michael Postan, and E. H. Carr—in which Berlin's very real antipathy to the Soviet apologists comes to the surface. Nor was he entirely free from duplicitousness—writing an unctuous protestation of friendship to A. L. Rowse, for example, while expressing to other correspondents his heartfelt loathing for the man. But, as Berlin himself concedes, he was plagued by "an excessive desire to please," a desire which is everywhere apparent in the letters, and which might indeed have been his principal fault as a human being—since it caused him not to speak out in defense of the liberal values which are now associated with his name—had it not also been so deeply necessary to his irenic personality.

The period covered by these letters was that of Britain's post-war recovery, made painful by the Labour Government and dangerous by the Marxists and fellow travelers who had emerged in the ancient universities, and whose primary loyalty was to the Soviet Union. Two factors served to inoculate Berlin against the communist disease: his war-time experiences in the British Embassy in Washington, which had made him profoundly aware of the depth and importance of the "special relationship"; and his own Russian and Baltic connections (he was born in Riga). Berlin spoke fluent Russian and had visited the Soviet Union after the war in the course of his diplomatic duties, meeting the poet Anna Akhmatova who profoundly influenced his view of the Soviet "experiment." He had relatives in the Soviet Union and for this reason hesitated to expose them to danger by

speaking out. But for the same reason, he experienced a deep suspicion towards those who felt free to praise the great killing machine from their secure positions in the West.

These people occupied high places in the diplomatic, academic, and political establishment, and Berlin could have avoided them only by renouncing his gregarious way of life. He learned to move adroitly in leftist circles, and knew when to add his voice to the collective denunciation of "right-wing anti-communist reactionaries," and when to remain discreetly silent. To a conservative of my cast, brought up in the 1960s, and experiencing the Thatcherite revolution as a breath of fresh air, this aspect of Sir Isaiah aroused no sympathy. He appeared to me during the 1980s and 1990s as a weak and somehow bloodless apologist for the old left-liberal status quo. I described him as such in the *Times* of London, in an article that quickly became notorious and which I came as quickly to regret. Looking back on it, I see that my article was hurtful and unjust. I was ignoring the qualities Berlin had needed when it fell to him to steer the British elite away from Soviet sympathies and back into the transatlantic camp.

As these letters reveal, Berlin would have had no influence at all had he defended free markets, constitutional monarchy, the English common law, or hereditary elites from his ivory tower in All Souls. What our country needed at the time, and what it obtained in Sir Isaiah, was the brilliant outsider, who could speak the new language of history and its discontents as fluently as the Marxists, who could call on the extracurricular resources that would internationalize the debate, and who could move effortlessly in the upper reaches of society, with an eloquent flow of ideas that would never be regarded as dogmatic or finger-wagging.

The difficulty of Berlin's position as a symbol of the post-war Oxford establishment is apparent throughout these letters. He worries constantly that he might be offending members of the elite; he unflinchingly dismisses as confused, irrelevant, or evil those figures on the "right" who had been singled out for attack by the leftists—including Evelyn Waugh, Karl Jaspers, Michael Oakeshott, Friedrich Hayek, Michael Polanyi, and Kingsley Amis, with all of whom he ought to have agreed; he passionately declares (to his friend the philosopher Morton White) his steadfast loyalty to left-wing causes and his urge to close ranks against anti-Communists of the Mortimer Adler kind; and he is adamant that we should not oppose Communism with some rival system of belief, or quasi-religious commitment, but only with the armory that is provided by our free institutions and our open minds.

But Berlin's thoughts constantly drift in another direction. He is fascinated by Tolstoy's philosophy of soul and soil; he is drawn to de Maistre, ostensibly as a case study, but in fact as the leading voice of the counter-Enlightenment; he invokes the sophistication of nineteenth-century society, and he frequents a Proustian world of high connections and Bohemian charm. He cooperates with Irving Kristol in the *Encounter* venture, which involves setting up an anti-Communist organ of culture in London (funded, as it happens, by the CIA). He accepts a knighthood from the Queen (describing lunch with Her Majesty in a most witty letter to Edmund Wilson), and in the 1960 election he even votes Conservative—excusing himself to Sir Maurice Bowra in self-abasing terms, describing how he felt ashamed to be on the side of the "ghastly line of Tory MPs," and in general groveling in a manner all the more unnecessary given the contempt that he himself had expressed for Bowra (his predecessor as the icon of upper-class Oxford) in a letter to John Sparrow of six years before.

All this makes for fascinating reading, and Berlin's ebullient style and lightly worn erudition make him vividly present to the reader—a character both charming and authoritative, securely on top of things, and at the same time endearingly vulnerable. Incidental observations are often highly penetrating—notably his descriptions of Toscanini's conducting, and his touching portrait of Chaim Weitzmann, Israel's first president and a personal friend. Berlin's powers of observation are never more acute than when directed at himself, and it is clear that he was not a confident member of any of the milieus in which he hoped to shine. The letters were composed during the intellectual reign of

J. L. Austin, Gilbert Ryle, and P. F. Strawson and, writing to Morton White on Austin's death in 1960, Berlin pays profound tribute to the man who, for him, symbolized more than any other the rigor and achievement of Oxford post-war philosophy. Berlin spent much time in America, invited to give distinguished lectures at Harvard, Princeton, and elsewhere. But his heart was in Oxford and in his rooms at All Souls, which he exchanged for a house only after his marriage to Aline Halban, in 1955. It is testimony to Berlin's social adroitness that he was so successful a college man, despite the disability—which, from the point of view of leftist orthodoxy, bordered on crime—of heterosexual inclinations. Admittedly Berlin was not, from the sexual point of view, so fired up as to make a show of things. Nevertheless, in one unusually honest letter to Alice James (William James's daughter-in-law) he expresses his discomfort at the gay collegiate culture. He was the kind of shy heterosexual who recoils from the predatory and innuendo-filled air of the homosexual hothouse, and many of his letters to women suggest a constant desire for the mother figure who will firmly close the bedroom door.

What should we make of Isaiah Berlin? We should surely forgive him his posture in the face of the Left establishment: what appears now as pusillanimity was probably, at the time, the only effective anti-Communist tactic, even if it did serve to entrench the left-liberal attitudes which have since dominated British intellectual life. His defense of negative liberty (liberty as personal sovereignty) is of enduring value, as is his critique of the "positive" alternative—the idea of liberty as "empowerment"—which comes to the fore whenever egalitarians seek to "liberate" us from our traditional freedoms.

Many praise Berlin, too, for his defense of "pluralism," attributing to him the view that human beings have different and incommensurable values, for which no ultimate or shared foundation can be provided. This idea does indeed play a large part in Berlin's later and more long-winded writings, and has been made part of a "Berlin liberalism" by its principal defenders, Michael Ignatieff and John Gray. But it is not at all clear what it means, or how Berlin himself would have wished to defend it. After all, Berlin was an advocate of basic humanitarian values; he believed in the rule of law and the pursuit of impartial justice; he had no time for murderers or their apologists, and he was a severe critic of cruelty in all its forms. How this amounts to "pluralism" I do not know, and if it is compatible with a variety of stances on other and less vital issues that does not differentiate Berlin from the rest of us.

Introducing him to the audience at the first Auguste Comte Memorial Lecture at the London School of Economics, in May 1953, Michael Oakeshott mischievously described Berlin as "one of the great intellectual *virtuosos* of our time, a Paganini of ideas." This spiteful jibe is not altogether without truth, and Berlin recalled the episode (on one of the tapes transcribed in this volume) with evident distress. But, just as Paganini left that one immortal idea (*Caprice No. 24*), built into sublime sets of variations by Schumann, Brahms, Rachmaninov, and others, so taking his place among the second rank of the musical immortals, so did Berlin produce that one great distinction between negative and positive liberty, upon which subsequent thinkers have built their many fertile variations, and which has conferred on him a small but permanent place in the philosophical pantheon.

Notes

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1. *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960, Volume 2*, by Isaiah Berlin, edited by Henry Hardy and Jennifer Holmes; Chatto & Windus, 864 pages, $95. Go back to the text.

Roger Scruton is resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. His latest book is *Beauty* (Oxford Universitry Press).

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