

# MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

## Encounters with Michael Oakeshott

My first encounter with Michael Oakeshott was on a Saturday afternoon in the library of Kenyon College in the fall of 1959 when, with the place mostly all to myself, I found on a shelf the Blackwell's Political Texts edition of Hobbes's Leviathan, edited by a certain Michael Oakeshott. I was just then deciding to change my major field of study – I had started as a pre-med, then considered Classics and English. I was taking my first course in political philosophy, a subject which immediately attracted me. Finding Oakeshott's Leviathan confirmed my intuition. I was about to write an essay on Hobbes for the course. I sat down at a secluded library table to look through what this author, hitherto unknown to me, had to say. From the first sentence, "Thomas Hobbes, the second son of an otherwise undistinguished vicar..." I was captivated. I read through the whole essay as the afternoon wore on. I was taken by what I later learned was a famous and controversial interpretation among Hobbes scholars. As I finished it, I looked up and thought to myself that I must someday write an essay like this, that to desire anything less was not to be serious about what I now knew I intended to do.

The following Monday I burst in on my political theory professor asking if he had ever heard of Oakeshott. Providentially, one might say, he also was an Englishman who had read modern history at Trinity College, Cambridge before coming to America to do graduate work at Harvard and to teach. Not only had he known Oakeshott but he had worked with him on the Cambridge Journal in the 1940s. He was the first of those I was to encounter who described what it was like in the 1930s and 40s to hear the legendary Oakeshott lecture on the history of political thought (others I met later include Brian Tierney and Peter Laslett). My teacher was patient with my enthusiasm to take up political thought and teach it. It is, of course, what I did and do, and I have never regretted it for a moment. I owe my direction, in part, to the Oakeshott I was to meet face to face only much later.

He was legendary among Cambridge students, not alone for his lectures but also for somewhat dandyish ways and for his love of horse racing. He was said to have abandoned his scheduled lectures on certain occasions when the races at Newmarket were on. The latter interest found expression in the book he wrote with his friend,

Guy Griffith, *A Guide to the Classics or How to Pick a Derby Winner*. The book was published in 1936 by the distinguished house of Faber and Faber, whose esteemed editor was T. S. Eliot. At least a few people, looking hastily at the title, must have bought it thinking it was an essay by two scholars on the classics. Eliot mentions the book in passing in his 1944 address to the Vergil Society, "What Is a Classic?" Careful readers used its prescriptions for betting with occasional success and, so I am told, one such sent Oakeshott, in appreciation, a case of Chateau Margaux.

Oakeshott lurked in the back of my mind for a few years until, while I was in graduate school, *Rationalism in Politics* appeared. This was the book that launched him in America and remains today his most widely read book. At this point, my interest was rekindled and, when I came to writing my doctoral thesis on John Stuart Mill, I deployed numerous ideas of Oakeshott's in examining and criticizing Mill's basic political doctrines. In part, also, I was responding to the very controversial view of Mill that Maurice Cowling – at that time, a follower of Oakeshott – had recently published in his *Mill and Liberalism* to the effect that Mill was a "moral totalitarian." This accusation is not one Oakeshott himself would have pronounced. In 1979, through Shirley Letwin, I finally met and began a rewarding friendship with Cowling who, by then, had overturned a number of his earlier Oakeshottian views and who, characteristically as I came to know, rebuffed my praise of his early work. When I started teaching, Oakeshott's work became a regular part of my courses on modern political thought.

My first meeting with Oakeshott came in 1974, the centennial year of Colorado College. (He was to return once more, in June 1982, to receive an honorary degree) I had proposed, and the college had put me in charge of, organizing a year long lecture series on the present and future state of liberal learning. I wrote to Oakeshott, inviting him to spend a week at the college and to present the first lecture. He accepted, and offered, in Tutt Library at Colorado College on September 17, 1974, to an audience of nearly four hundred, "A Place of Learning." This now well-known essay was printed in the *Colorado College Studies* in January 1975, later reprinted numerous times in various places, ultimately to appear as the lead essay in *The Voice of Liberal Learning* (1989).

Oakeshott electrified the audience with extraordinarily powerful, and beautifully conceived, formulations issuing from the mouth of a slight, unassuming man who might go unnoticed unless and until he spoke with you. Oakeshott was, of course, highly critical of the contemporary social sciences but he made his points with a grace

that led one of my colleagues in sociology to remark that he had never been so charmingly demolished. At the same time, his evocation of what liberal learning really is was so heartfelt, and expressed with such an effortless invocation of the great resources of the Western tradition, that he instantiated and made real to all present what, in lesser hands, would have seemed hopelessly romantic. Apart from his lecture, he spent much of his week in residence talking with students and faculty and I began to glimpse his greatness as a teacher. Later, when I witnessed Oakeshott performing in the general seminar of the History of Political Thought at LSE, I enjoyed another version of the same experience.

His visit to Colorado was the beginning of our friendship which lasted until his death in December 1990. I took him around Colorado to admire the skill of cowboys on horseback punching cows, to see the aspen groves turning to orange and gold, and to clamber about the hills of the Cripple Creek goldfields. I asked him why he had agreed to come to Colorado since, although my letter had made it clear that I knew something about him, he surely had never heard of me. This was not quite true because we had several mutual acquaintances who had vouched for me, as I later found out.

He told me that two things determined him to come: First, he had an uncle who had migrated to California at the turn of the century to grow tomatoes; this had excited in him an interest in the American West and he read widely on the topic from childhood. He had a lot of western literature at his disposal. Although he had been to the east coast of the United States, this was his first chance to see the west of his boyhood imagination. It seemed to him exactly like what he had read about. Second, he was charmed by the thought of an encampment of liberal learning nestled at the foot of Pike's Peak which, as he imagined it, had been founded by pioneers crossing the great plains in covered wagons bearing Shakespeare and the Bible. This was not quite accurate but not altogether wrong either. He endeared himself to us all when he began his now famous lecture by saying: "I have crossed half the world to find myself in familiar surroundings: a place of learning." We felt – and he felt – genuine kinship between ancient Cambridge and pioneering Colorado College. This quintessential Englishman had a romantic attraction to the "frontier experience."

We corresponded, and then in 1977 I began my annual pilgrimages to England to spend time with him. We arrived in London in August of that year and Oakeshott took us for a drink to the bar of the Ritz Hotel (introducing me to one of his favorite drinks, Campari and

soda) before going along to lunch with Shirley and Bill Letwin at 3 Kent Terrace which was to result in another extraordinary friendship and my entry into the most rewarding society of friends and companions I have known. Meeting Shirley Letwin for the first time could be a test of one's poise. If you got through the test satisfactorily, you could bank on a permanent commitment that taught me what fierce and devoted friendship really means. I did not yet know that, of course. Michael had alerted her about me and had shown her a seminar paper I had written about his thought. She started by telling me it was among the best things she had seen on Michael, but then went on to pummel me with questions about all the American political theorists whom she seemed to despise, many of whom were friends of mine. I managed to maintain myself until Michael, in his marvelously graceful way, turned the engagement to a more conversational topic. I owe to Michael the chance of such high, Aristotelian friendship with Bill and Shirley Letwin.

In 1979, I arrived at LSE to spend time as an Academic Visitor in the Government Department. Oakeshott had long since formally retired but he retained his room in Lincoln's Chambers and, as he only came to the School officially on Tuesdays for the History of Political Thought seminar, I was given the other desk in his room that had been before me that of Professor Pickles. On Tuesdays when he was to give his papers on the study of history, which were later published in *On History and other essays* (1983, 2000), he would spend the day at his desk rewriting the papers. He did this every time he presented them, refining them over a number of years before they finally were published. In the meantime, Xeroxes of various versions of them circulated among his devoted student followers. Unless he was to see a student, I remained in the office working back to back with him. He smoked continuously until it was time to leave our cloudy space for the seminar meeting at 4 PM. We often went out to eat together after the seminar, his two favorite places being Luigi's on Tavistock Street and Mon Plaisir on Monmouth Street. The latter especially remains a favorite of mine. It was during this time that I came to know well Bill and Shirley Letwin, Ken Minogue, Elie Kedourie, Wolfgang Von Leyden, Maurice Cranston, Robert Orr, John Morrall and John Charvet, and also Maurice Cowling at Cambridge. I still think of this as a golden era at the LSE, a time when most of my best students came to study in the History of Political Thought program.

Oakeshott could enchant students even when, as was often true, they understood him only in part. He was, at eighty, more attuned to the young than teachers half his age. He never forgot what it

was to be young, and he could forgive students for much because he loved the glorious, transitory inconsequence of youth. Like Socrates, he was young when old. He never imposed his ideas except so far as their natural force would take them. He would listen patiently to virtually any question students posed and would answer them by making them better questions than they started out to be. Study in the university, he famously said, is the gift of an interval: a liberation from the unavoidable drills of school and a momentary release before the limiting responsibilities of adulthood set in. He thought work should balance play, enjoyment ambition and conversation debate. He urged that we should be conservative with respect to the rules of the civil life in order to be radical in everything else. He was a Bohemian in the right way. He told students arriving at the university to think of themselves as strolling minstrels stopping off to perform before they were moved on by the local constabulary, and he encouraged them to think this far superior to occupying a niche in the social organization. He counseled students to be, as it were, irresponsible for a time so that liberal learning could enter in. And yet no one could doubt that what he was urging, and what he exemplified, was the profound seriousness of the life of the mind.

In the 1980s, Oakeshott decided to give up his flat at 16 New Row in Covent Garden to live year round in his Dorset cottage in the tiny village of Acton on the edge of the Purbeck marble quarries. His cottage was the combination of two quarryman's cottages which he had bought years before, knocking out the central partition to make one larger cottage. I first visited the cottage in the summer of 1977. In the decade of the 80s I visited him often there. There was no central heat, and, until late in his life, no telephone or indeed other elements of that modern life for which Oakeshott had little regard. The computer did not exist for him. He thought most modern inventions had done the human race little good. He wrote everything by hand. From his cottage one looked out on the Channel to the Isle of Wight in the distance. And, because of its situation in the Wessex country of Hardy, one felt oneself transported back before World War I, even to the 19th century, to a world where one might meet Jude the Obscure coming down the path. This is exactly how Oakeshott wanted to feel. Life was, to him, sweeter then.

Oakeshott kept most of his books at the cottage, including many rare volumes that he was able to collect in the good old days when old books were relatively cheap and mostly bought by people who would read them rather than treat them as collectibles, antiques or investments. The cottage had, at one end of the main room, a large fireplace that gave off much heat, at least at that end of the

room. I would often huddle at the fireplace while Oakeshott would roam the farther reaches of the room complaining that it was rather hot.

He was an excellent cook and gardener. One of his prized achievements was to have turned a deep cistern in his garden into a guest bedroom that one entered by climbing down a ladder about eight feet below ground where a bed awaited one. To me it seemed a little out of Edgar Allen Poe but I never had to sleep there; I always got the guest room inside the cottage. Oakeshott also owned a blue 1958 MG-B which he drove at excessive speeds through the hedgerows.

The cottage was a place of conversation that often lasted until late into the night. It was genuine conversation. It could be witty and frivolous, up to a point. It could be sophisticated and often philosophical. It could be literary or theological. It could be, but infrequently, about current politics for which Oakeshott had little taste even though he was well informed. If you posed a serious question to him, he would often sit entranced for a time, until you began to think he hadn't heard you and you started to speak to fill in the void or to repeat yourself when, of a sudden, a considered, precise and elegant response would come forth, and you realized that, in such moments, elapsed time had no significance for him.

In his learned brilliance, Oakeshott made shrewd judgments about people and arguments, but he was, in a way, the least judgmental of all people. He was an intellectual aristocrat, but his sense of the universal predicament of being human – what he called the ordeal of consciousness – was authentically democratic. He was a true individualist, and I mean really and truly. He spent no time worrying whether others had more or less than himself, he treated every encounter with another person as a unique circumstance, a potentially poetic experience. On the other hand, if an encounter was not fruitful, he went his way happily, awaiting another opportunity to present itself. He had the capacity, like Montaigne and Pascal, to sit alone in a room, to think and to write. He was certainly a companion to himself and, perhaps for that reason, he was a marvelous companion to others. When he found himself talking with someone of modest talent and little thought, he would look up at a corner of a room, jangling the coins in his pocket, and respond, "Oh, you think that! Do you? Do you?" His "do you's" were famous. And, at the Oakeshott memorial meeting at LSE in 1991, John Casey, a fellow of Oakeshott's Cambridge college, suggested that if God had spoken to Oakeshott rather than Moses,

saying "I Am that I Am," Oakeshott might have replied, "Are you? Are you?"

Oakeshott was a great teacher but he thought of himself as a learner, occasionally disclosing to others what he thought he had learned, inviting them to say what they might think of it. He was also a writer in the deepest sense. He wrote, so far as I can tell, every day of his life from his undergraduate days until well into his eighties. He kept notebooks in which he copied out quotations, analyzed what he was reading, tried various opening gambits for essays, and so on. As we all now know, he wrote numerous essays and lectures that he did not publish.

When he died he bequeathed his papers to Shirley Letwin to do with as she thought best. She and I went to the cottage in Dorset in May 1991 to remove the papers to the new Letwin house in London at 15 Arlington Road where, until not too long ago, they were kept before coming to the LSE. She and I worked together on the joint venture to publish some of these with the Yale University Press. Since most of this archive, with the exception of some private correspondence, is now accessible to all interested parties, I need say no more about it. I read all of it, but so can anyone else now. Rather, I want to remember him in terms of some of the most memorable things he had to say on the topics dearest to his heart.

Oakeshott was eloquent on youth, old age and mortality: "Everybody's young days are a dream, a delightful insanity, a sweet solipsism ... the world is a mirror in which we seek the reflection of our own desires ... urgency is our criterion of importance; and we do not easily understand that what is humdrum need not be despicable. We are impatient of restraint; and we readily believe, like Shelley, that to have contracted a habit is to have failed ... For most there is what Conrad called the 'shadow line' which, when we pass it, discloses a solid world of things ... each with its price; a world of fact, not poetic image, in which what we have spent on one thing we cannot spend on another; a world inhabited by others besides ourselves who cannot be reduced to mere reflections of our own emotions." (On Being Conservative, 1956)

He spoke of love and friendship as only one who has felt and considered both could do: "Friends and lovers are not concerned with what can be made out of each other, but only with the enjoyment of one another. A friend ... is somebody who evokes interest, delight, unreasoning loyalty, and who (almost) engages contemplative imagination ... Neither merit nor necessity has any part in the generation of love; its progenitors are chance and choice

– chance, because what cannot be identified in advance cannot be sought; and in choice the inescapable practical component of desire makes itself felt.” (The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind, 1959)

“In conversation,” he famously remarked, “thoughts of different species take wing and play round one another, responding to each other’s movements and provoking one another to fresh exertions ... There is no symposiarch or arbiter; not even a doorkeeper to examine credentials ... voices which speak in conversation do not compose a hierarchy... it is an unrehearsed intellectual adventure ... with conversation as with gambling, its significance lies neither in winning nor in losing, but in wagering ... It is the ability to participate in this conversation, and not the ability to reason cogently, to make discoveries about the world, or to contrive a better world, which distinguishes the human being from the animal and the civilized man from the barbarian.” Conversation is also the sign of liberal learning for “Education, properly speaking, is an initiation into the skill and partnership of this conversation.” (The Voice of Poetry)

Universities are places of learning ideally set aside to achieve conversationality: “A university will have ceased to exist when its learning has degenerated into what is now called research, when its teaching has become mere instruction and occupies the whole of an undergraduate’s time, and when those who come to be taught come, not in search of their intellectual fortune but with a vitality so unroused or so exhausted that they wish only to be provided with a serviceable moral and intellectual outfit; when they come with no understanding of the manners of conversation but desire only a qualification for earning a living or a certificate to let them in on the exploitation of the world.” (The Idea of a University, 1950)

Of course politics, the necessary evil, is always with us: “The pursuit of perfection as the crow flies is an activity both impious and unavoidable in human life. It involves the penalties of impiety (the anger of the gods and social isolation), and its reward is not that of achievement but that of having made the attempt. It is an activity, therefore, suitable for individuals, but not for societies.” (The Tower of Babel, 1948)

“In political activity, then, men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy; and the seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner



of behaviour in order to make a friend of every hostile occasion."  
(Political Education, 1951)

His views on politics resulted from considering politics philosophically: "Thinking is at first associated with an extraneous desire for action, and it is some time, perhaps, before we discern that philosophy is without any direct bearing upon the practical conduct of life, and that it has never offered its true followers anything which could be mistaken for a gospel. Of course, some so-called philosophers afford pretext enough for this particular misunderstanding. Nearly always a philosopher hides a secret ambition, foreign to philosophy, and often it is that of a preacher. But we must learn not to follow the philosophers upon these holiday excursions." (Experience and its Modes, 1933)

"Philosophical reflection is recognized here as the adventure of one who seeks to understand in other terms what he already understands ... It is, in short, a well-considered intellectual adventure recollected in tranquility." (On Human Conduct, 1975)

One can see how, in Oakeshott's disposition, the distinct activities of philosophy and poetry – it is hard to say which he came to value more – nevertheless will converge: "Poetry has nothing to teach us about how to live or what we ought to approve. Practical activity is an endless battle for noble or for squalid but always for illusory ends, a struggle from which the practical self cannot escape and in which victory is impossible because desire can never be satisfied ... Poetic activity has no part in this struggle and it has no power to control, to modify, or to terminate it. If it imitates the voice of practice its utterance is counterfeit. To listen to the voice of poetry is to enjoy, not a victory, but a momentary release, a brief enchantment ... Poetry is a sort of truancy, a dream within the dream of life, a wild flower planted among our wheat." (The Voice of Poetry)

Throughout, Oakeshott felt the pressure of the eternal on our temporality and he reflected on the resulting tension – the tension characterizing the civilization of which he was a loving voice – over the whole of his life: "Religious faith is the evocation of a sentiment (the love, the glory, or the honour of God, for example, or even a humble caritas), to be added to all others as the motive of all motives in terms of which the fugitive adventures of human conduct, without being released from their mortal and their moral conditions, are graced with an intimation of immortality: the sharpness of death and the deadliness of doing overcome, and the transitory sweetness of a mortal affection, the tumult of a grief and

the passing beauty of a May morning recognized neither as merely evanescent adventures nor as emblems of better things to come, but as adventures, themselves encounters with eternity." (On Human Conduct)