

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

'The Sin of the Academic'

The Background

When I read in last summer's LSE Magazine that an association had been formed to honour Michael Oakeshott it made me pause to reflect on my connection with the man. Unlike most of the people involved with the conference to commemorate him, I am far removed from the world of academia. Yet I too am an Oakeshottian. And I have a debt to pay. Let me explain.

I studied under Oakeshott when I attended Elie Kedourie's History of Political Thought seminar for my master's degree back in the early '70s. I was one of 16 students who met with faculty each week to discuss such worthy topics as "the identification of history as a mode of thought", "the emergence and nature of historical understanding" and "the interpretation of an historical event." Although he was just a guest at our get-togethers, Oakeshott dominated the seminar. From the word go, he set the highest standards for our philosophical discussions, either with his own erudite papers or with his incisive input on the pieces the rest of us presented. I can actually recall the moment when my mind was pushed over a threshold - somewhat akin to being led out of the shadows of Plato's cave and brought closer to the ideal form. It was an extraordinary cerebral experience. I know some very learned professors are attending the September conference to present papers describing his impact on the academic world. But there must also be a vast number of non academics like myself who have had little connection with academic life since they left the LSE yet who've felt the benefit of their studies with Oakeshott.

In my own case I've worked within the corporate world, been the development specialist for a non-profit and worked as a freelance writer on the side. In each job I've applied the intellectual training I received from my master of philosophical inquiry. Whether it be in creating a marketing strategy for a new product, planning a charity auction fundraiser or simply writing travel articles. I've used the same logical approach that Oakeshott drilled into us when we attempted to make sense out of those abstruse philosophical concepts. So when I learned of the Michael Oakeshott conference I realised the time had come to acknowledge my debt to the man.

Oakeshott was a frequent visitor to Elie Kedourie's History of Political Thought seminar where he presented a series of papers on the philosophy of history. Oakeshott collected three of these some 10 years later in his book *On History and Other Essays*. We corresponded after the book was published and he wrote me in October 1983: 'I am glad to hear what you are doing now and delighted that you have happy memories of that seminar . . . as for the book . . . in the first part you will find, rewritten and made less casual, something of what we used to talk about in the seminar. I wish I could have made it more readable, but I thought that if it were permitted I should make it more guarded.'

He was then living in Swanage: 'As you can see, I have now left London. At long last I retired from the fray and have come down here to live in the country. It is a lovely part of the world. I enjoy it, and would do even more if I could get rid of the attack of arthritis which has gone to my shoulders and hands. No doubt I shall do so, and I cannot complain because it comes after 80 years with hardly a days (sic) illness except for the childish complaints which nobody of my generation escaped.'

He wrote in a small, neat, legible script, and in spite of his age and arthritis it's not in the least shaky. His thoughts too are as clear as a bell - as clear as they had been in the seminar. In fact I can almost hear his precise tones as I read his words.

Oakeshott was a stickler for precision when it came to defining the key words of his special subject - the philosophy of history. I'll never forget my first encounter with him in the seminar when he picked us up, one after the other, for our slapdash use of the term history. 'When you casually use the word history you are actually talking about the past and that's the word you should be using.' Oakeshott then went on to spend the following three hours defining the correct use of the word history. In fact, if truth be told, we spent the following ten months defining it! Hence my parody. The 'erm-erm-erms', incidentally, are absolutely accurate. These were the vocal pauses he used to collect his thoughts.

Oakeshott was a small yet impressive man to look at, always well groomed and neatly dressed, with a sharp eye and an even sharper mind. I would go further and say he had the greatest mind I've encountered. I admired Michael Oakeshott tremendously. He was so clear, so precise, so brilliant.

The Sin of the Academic

'The sin of the academic is that he takes so long in coming to the point.' –

Professor Michael Oakeshott ('Rationalism in Politics').

If the historian is to talk about the past he must first understand the terminology of time: past, present, future, yesterday, the middle of next week, and now. Now-erm-erm-erm, now - and there's a word which many of us use, but do we know what we mean by 'now'? Many would stop here and ask what we mean by 'mean' or indeed by 'what', 'do' and 'by'. And excellent questions too. However, let us concentrate on the question in hand. Let us assume that when we ask what do we mean by 'now' that we are looking for a specific definition, that is to say that we are looking for the contexts in which 'now' could be appropriately used.

OOPS

Now-er-er-erm-oops there I go again erm-erm-erm-this word 'now' has three letters and that's a very important point. Before we go any further we must consider what we mean by 'letter'. Is it something that Mr Smith places in a pillar-box for Miss Jones? Or is it maybe a form of prophylactic that Mr Smith may intend using in connection with Miss Jones? Or I suppose 'letter' could conceivably be construed as being the components of the words which Mr Smith has written down in his missive to Miss Jones. Let us take this final - some would say far-fetched - definition of the word 'letter' for use in this context.

N.O.W.

That is to say, a letter composed of lines, angles and curves is itself a component of a word. In this case the word 'now' has three letters. In short, 'now' contains an N, an O and a W.

Er-er-erm having ascertained what this word is, namely that it is a literary phenomenon composed of the three letters N O W, and that it is spoken or written down either manually or by some perhaps more sophisticated typographical means, let us proceed to analyse it one step further.

'Now' gives us an impression of the immediate, of the present - in short, of the immediate present. But is this present as the historian would take it the same present as everyone else would understand by the word? For instance, if Mr Smith gives Miss Jones a gaily-wrapped parcel tied with some bright-coloured ribbon for her birthday, is this the kind of 'present' which the historian is talking

about? Or is he rather referring to the exclamation 'Present!' meaning 'I am here'? Or could he possibly be . . . ad infinitum.