

# MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

## Michael Oakeshott as a Character

That Michael Oakeshott was a remarkable philosopher is something we here will all agree upon. But what sort of man was he? Different portraits will no doubt be painted from different points of view. What I shall say makes no claim to be comprehensive or even intimate. Others were closer to him. But I was a colleague and friend of Michael's from 1956 till his death in 1990. I was familiar, as it were, with him in some of his most characteristic roles.

First, the physical: He was of medium height, slim and graceful in his movements. His voice was never loud, but it carried remarkably well to the back of a room. His dress was always stylish and original, constructed of relatively simple materials (sometimes from the Oxfam shop) but capable of any necessary formality – as when a bit of darkish corduroy and a bow tie made him completely at home on a formal occasion. He long looked young, and was taken for a student even when he was a tutor at Cambridge. He retained a youthful air all his life. He laughed easily.

He was a terrific friend to have. He remembered anniversaries, took care over presents and he sent them with witty notes. He had a special talent for finding as a present something appropriate to the receiver from a second hand bookshop. These talents reflected the fact that he responded deeply to a person's individuality. One of the epigraphs he toyed with for *On Human Conduct* was a sentence from a letter Machiavelli wrote to Soderini: "Each man according to his own imagination [la sua fantasia] guides himself." For Michael, to know someone was to enter in some degree into that person's own imaginative world. A human life was an adventure, and he was very considerate of his fellow adventurers.

On the other hand, during the time I knew him, he tended to be rather passive socially. This may have been in part because he had quite enough socially going on in his life – above all with his close friends the Letwins who provided a circle for him. It may also have been that as a university teacher, much of his time was taken up in accepting invitations to parties or drinks with students and colleagues. If in later life you said you were coming down to Dorset, he became an immensely considerate host, and many came to see him. If you asked him to a party, he and Christal would happily come. I remember being rather surprised that he had a taste for

sweet Cinzano. By the 1950s he knew a lot of people in the literary and academic world, and no doubt ran into them at College occasions, but he was not socially enterprising. No one was more indifferent to mixing with the fast set. And one might, I think, pose that as the problem from which we might begin.

The reason for it, I think, is that Oakeshott was a philosopher down to the tips of his toes. While he had an efficient grasp of the practicalities of life, the other side of his mind was always conscious that the world was a mystery. Another epigraph he toyed with for *On Human Conduct* (and used in other contexts) was the remark Cinq Mars made as he put his head on the block: "Qu'est-ce que ce monde?" He read voluminously and there was always so much going on in his head that he seldom felt an actual need for mere sociability. His manners were in any case polished and considerate. He was, in other words, easy meat for bores.

The fact that the centre of his existence was always his own thought meant that his doubts were always philosophical, and never (at least as I knew him) about his own competence, adequacy and identity. He took the world and human character, in which he delighted, as he found it, never concerned with the fact that many of the eccentricities that he judged captivating in others might well be an expression of pure desperation. He was considerate of any evident sufferings in others, without being highly empathic to the psychic problems which lay behind the sometimes amusingly eccentric face they presented to the world. Although he was essentially someone who found perfection in the life of a don, he did have slight yearnings for the road not taken. He once remarked jocularly to me that he didn't think he could bear to die without having taken part in a cavalry charge. But whenever he writes of scholarship and the university, he expresses such passion that there is no doubt that in academia he had found the niche in life that suited him perfectly.

This marvellous philosophical self-sufficiency was vital in his life because he had to put up with a simply immense amount of pretty gross misunderstanding of his philosophy. Sometimes this came from rather baffled admirers such as Bernard Crick, sometimes from intellectual enemies whom he found vulgar and gross, such as Ernest Gellner. Gellner proselytised for precisely the kind of rather uncritical belief in the superiority of the contemporary world that Oakeshott spent his life attacking. For Gellner, everything was practical, including philosophy, whereas Oakeshott was fighting a rearguard action for the independent and disinterested value of philosophy, history and poetry. In a world dominated by technocratic ideas, this looked like a familiarly old-fashioned

position. Hence, one of the problems he encountered in the intellectual world of his time was that his thought could superficially be identified with earlier writers. Susan Stebbing reviewing *Experience and its Modes in Mind* could remark that it was all in Bradley, and I remember mentioning Oakeshott to A.J. Ayer. "Oh it's just a rehash of Burke" he remarked. But these superficialities were perhaps less intolerable than the caricatures that came out in the special issue of *Political Theory* in which distinguished writers such as Hanna Pitkin and Sheldon Wolin made a complete hash of interpreting what he had to say. For someone who worked very hard to make himself transparent, these misunderstandings, not surprisingly, brought out the element of indignation which intensified in his character as he got older. The general problem was that his critics regarded as broad and challenging a fallacy he thought riddled modern thought: irrelevance, or fitting answers to the wrong questions. Another way in which he transgressed the rhetorical conventions of his time was a consequence of the widespread demand that any account of a problem should lead to concrete proposals for a cure. His inaugural lecture on political education provoked just this kind of storm. If our culture is rationalist, and that's bad, what must we do about it?

Mostly, however, Oakeshott was remarkably forbearing when he encountered ignorant criticism or the misunderstanding of students. He vouchsafed the soft answer, or took up some apparently peripheral question and changed the subject. Sometimes jangling coins in his pocket and looking up into the middle distance as he puffed at a cigarette, he would respond to a student making some absolutely banal remark with "oh you think that, do you?" My impression is that he was hardly ever shaken by criticism, and indeed the discussion of his papers usually degenerated into misunderstandings. It was not always easy to understand what he was getting at, and since he always began any investigation in the outfield, as it were, critics found it difficult to penetrate the core of his argument. The only way to develop a discussion with him was to press on into the meaning of whatever concept was central to his argument.

For this reason he was something of a fish out of (Cambridge) water at LSE. It lacked the ethos, the frivolity and the scholarly delicacy of Cambridge, where he really belonged. Why did he move? Shirley Letwin once suggested to me that he had personal reasons for staying out of Cambridge at that time; that may be. He had, of course, resigned his Cambridge post in 1949 and moved temporarily to Oxford. But there is also no doubt that part of him did respond to London life, and that in the middle fifties and early sixties, he did enjoy the company in the LSE Senior Common Room,

liking people like Paish, Firth, Devons, Smellie, Freedman, and of course Kedourie, and later Cranston, Schapiro, and many others. He got on well with people, but I think he found the patrician manner of Robbins a bit grand for his taste. And as a smoker, he hardly ever encountered Popper.

What does it mean to say that Oakeshott was essentially a philosopher? We are not, of course, talking of the Platonic notion that virtue is knowledge and that to be a philosopher is to ascend to higher planes of virtue. We now think that philosophers are no different from your common clay, and that the philosopher with a toothache will behave no better than another. We think of Bertie with his atrocious breath pursuing Lady Ottiline down the paths of Garsington. But in Oakeshott's case, being a philosopher seems to me to have infused his whole character. His mind was always preoccupied with one curiosity or another, such as how one can breathe and swallow at the same time. What simple people identified with reality seemed to him largely a construction of the imagination. Being essentially a philosopher meant not only that he found the world a mystery, but that he was self-sufficient to a remarkable degree. As to virtue, I hesitate to raise such an old fashioned expression. We now believe that there are many forms of virtue, and no one exhibits them all. Oakeshott had a reputation as a ladies man, and he had various affairs. On the detail of any of that I know nothing, but I think that he had a weakness for romance, and that he tended to see his latest love as a *princesse lointaine*. He was no doubt Bohemian in various ways, but this did not prevent him during the 1960s from being impatient with student rebellion. He did not bother to involve himself in the endless committees taking a stand against it. I think he simply had better things to do.

There may well be ground for criticising Oakeshott from a moral point of view, but one would have to say that he was a good man. He was conscientious, considerate, polite and honest. He enlisted as a private early in the war, and found himself billeted with (as the story has it) an illiterate cockney, for whom he wrote letters home. Some think that he resented the lack of recognition he tended to suffer till later years (though he was certainly a big celebrity in the 1950s). Against this, I remember Perry Worsthorpe's story about spending a year or two with Oakeshott when he was an officer in the special intelligence unit called "Phantom" during the war, and then coming back to Cambridge, finding to his astonishment that his old military comrade was a distinguished don, turning up to lecture him on the history of political thought. English upper class conversation, of course, is slow to spill the beans. Oakeshott continued to attend reunions of Phantom for many years. It must

have been an interesting lot. The actor David Niven was one of them.

His philosophical character comes out pretty obviously in the way in which he approached the task of philosophising. He always began way back, at the very terms of the question, as he did in *On Human Conduct*, where he starts, you will remember, with the question of what it is to theorise human conduct. It was perhaps because his life consisted in forever rethinking the questions that interested him that critics in seminars had little new to say to him. I remember getting a letter from him in the early seventies in which he said he was writing something extended, and discovering that things he thought he had got clear were "as clear as mud." A recent writer has been tracing the movement of his thought, from absolute to sceptical idealism. This is plausible, but I think the truth of the matter is that there was a continuing shifting behind the scenes of what he thought he could take for granted.

This world of thought in which he lived made him an elusive figure to deal with intellectually, and perhaps was responsible for familiar misunderstandings of his character. Some of his remarks in the essay "Rationalism in Politics" suggested a certain contempt for the parvenu but should actually be regarded as part of his dislike of pretentiousness. Remarks about "jumped-up kitchen porters deputizing for an absent cook" or "Like a foreigner or a man out of his social class, he is bewildered by a tradition . . . of which he knows only the surface; a butler or an observant house-maid has the advantage of him", suggest an attitude of *de haut en bas* in which everyone should know his place. Nothing could be further from Oakeshott's actual attitude.

A similar detachment marked his dislike of "politics". The term was coming to signify that everything should be judged in terms of power and utility. It was increasingly used to disseminate the kind of practical attitude to everything which he most detested. Similarly, he was pretty sceptical of the idea of political science, remarking once that the only thing mathematics can contribute to social understanding is what makes a society indistinguishable from an ant heap. The outcome of these features of Oakeshott's life was that many of his colleagues in the business of teaching politics rather thought that he looked down upon them. He always denied it.

There was nothing high flown about his conversation. He preferred understatement to bombast, and as Noel O'Sullivan has remarked, his philosophy dealt with many of the themes of existentialism, but without the angst and the melodrama. He respected Heidegger ("he understands about modes") but could

never understand the fuss about Sartre. Asked about Wittgenstein who had been around Cambridge in his time, he merely remarked that there were a lot of Austrian comedians around the place at that time. That the universe was totally indifferent to human concerns he took for granted. He knew all about cyclotrons but he tended to regard scientific experiments as simple contrivances put together with a few pulleys and some sellotape, while chemistry was just about combining things, like domestic science.

I remember him giggling once over Belloc's rhyme:

I'm sick of love and I'm tired of rhyme  
But money gives me pleasure all the time.

But in fact it didn't really. He took the view that he was fortunate in being able to spend his life in scholarly pursuits and that he did not need much in the way of money. He said he bought his first car for £2.10 shillings, and sold it for £1, to a circus. They wanted to transport lions in it. He was unworldly in his relations with publishers, and indeed his own books. He claimed to have left "The Masses in Representative Democracy" out of the Rationalism in Politics volume out of sheer inadvertence. (I sometimes doubt this, because I think the essay has problems.)

He didn't pay much attention to bargains, or indeed to price. As he expressed the position in relation to someone else, "he'd rather be bilked than bothered." There was a sense in which he was easily amused, and he had a charming giggle with which he would often respond to what was funny. He smoked a lot, though he seldom inhaled. At the end of seminars the room could be opaque from smoke, given that others (such as myself) were also smoking. He liked opera and played tennis when young, but did none of this when I knew him. He loved stories and was forever reading novels. Late in life, Shirley Letwin came across a copy of *Gone with the Wind* in a second hand bookshop and bought it for him. He loved it.

He was a superb after dinner speaker, though he avoided the task when possible. LSE had a distinguished but rather pompous professor of public administration called William Robson, and Michael gave the Departmental speech at his farewell, referring to such occasions as Willie coming to see him, and standing at the door of Michael's room in the manner of "Lord Curzon on the threshold of Woolworths." It was an image that perfectly caught the slightly disdainful sniff of the nose with which Robson (underneath a friendly man) seemed to respond to the world. When he spoke at the party for the festschrift Bhikhu Parekh and Preston King had edited, he organised his remarks around the idea that he as an

undistinguished figure, not even a proper scholar, had decided in life "to go misere", which in whist means that in order to win you must lose all but five tricks. Here in the Festschrift, said Oakeshott, was his misere hand being quite shattered by winning a trick he had never meant to have. His own retirement speech was a fantasy cast around the Hindu idea that the world rests upon an elephant supported on a tortoise "Some people say," he remarked "the world's the thing; and the rare glimpses of it I have had suggest that they might be right. I too have dabbled in it from time to time. But, on the whole, I have found it over-rated."

For all his unworldliness, he was a marvellous administrator, who ran the Government department at LSE quite brilliantly for nearly twenty years. There was never any question of his establish a school of right-thinking colleagues. It was typical of his lack of self-importance that he put up with having a secretary working at a desk which was in his own room. He was a remarkably uncomplaining man! He did not in fact use the secretary a great deal, preferring to communicate with the Department through short and elegant handwritten notes. There was one Departmental meeting each year, or occasionally two, but they did not last long. Oakeshott's reputation, lucidity and common sense were such that he generally got his way on committees and in School administration. He was not, and did not need to be, much of an academic politician. Occasionally he would take on tasks such as drafting instructions to students. This was the kind of material (I am thinking here of his remarks on what was involved in being a "moral tutor") that had to be revised every few years as the School went through one more agony of reform and improvement, but it was notable that Oakeshott's formulations commonly survived on the basis of their elegance.

He liked women, but he tended to value them for their charm rather than their intellectuality, except perhaps for his great friend Shirley Letwin. But perhaps one should not press this too far, since he was also supposed to have had an affair with Iris Murdoch in his Oxford days. Shirley had both charm and intellectuality, and had perhaps the best grasp of what he was on about of anyone. Michael was in large measure the model for her idea of the gentleman in her book on *The Gentleman in Trollope*. Certainly no feminist, he did remark in a review that women were at last rightly reclaiming a lot of activities from which men had long excluded them.

As he got older, a certain tendency to indignation developed, and he could almost roll himself up into a ball as he described something he had heard as "absolute rubbish." He thought that a lot of opinions politicians and academics had were "dishonest", by

which I think he meant that they were posturing rather than sincere. He came to dislike many features of the modern world, including paperbacks. Going into Bowes and Bowes one day he observed that the entire ground floor had been given over to paperbacks. "Where are the books?" he asked, and the assistant immediately knew what he meant and pointed upstairs. I can remember him in his eighties at an Honorary Fellows dinner agreeing with another aged son et lumiere about the problems of age, and saying: "I know: no day is long enough to do anything in." In 1967 he came to the funeral at Roehampton of a porter who had had a heart attack in the course of a student protest. The funeral was on a beautiful day at Roehampton, and he remarked: "it's the sort of day when you can believe in immortality."

It is not easy to convey quite the quality of the man, and this is only partly because (as he said in his retirement remarks) "like most people, I am more or less happy when being praised, not very uncomfortable when being abused, but I have moments of embarrassment when being explained." The point is, I think, that his view of anything happening would be different from one's own, and usually so surprising that one's own view would fade to the commonplace by comparison. It would never have occurred to me, for example, to regard socialism as a degenerate kind of knight errantry, a kind of Quixotism. He took over from Montaigne the Socratic view that philosophy is a preparation for death, a systematic detachment from the desires and passions of ordinary life. The great thing about the residue left in Michael Oakeshott after any such amputation of worldly desires was a charming and amused view of the (fortunately rather agreeable) civilisation in which he lived. And it is in exploring the charm of this philosophical world that we come together on this occasion.