

MICHAEL OAKESHOTT ASSOCIATION

**'Life and Works' by Robert Grant
(From Robert Grant's 'Introduction' and 'Life & Works'
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Michael Oakeshott is probably the greatest living political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. He is certainly the most original, the most cultivated, and the most wide-ranging. Nevertheless, though well-known in his own discipline, and to some extent also among historians, 'pure' philosophers, and academic lawyers, he has founded nothing so tangible as a school. No administration or political party has retained him as an advisor, or publicly identified itself with his ideas. Neither at home (the United Kingdom) nor abroad has he received any notable public honours. Unlike Professors Hayek, Friedman and Galbraith, and formerly Laski (to whose chair at the London School of Economics he succeeded in 1951), he has not become a global guru. As for the general public, even the general educated public, it has never heard of him.

There are a number of reasons for Oakeshott's low public profile. First, he is a modest retiring man, with an instinctive aversion to the limelight. A trenchant critic of the post-war collectivist consensus, he has nevertheless shrunk from open polemics against it, and has claimed none of the credit for its recent demise. The spirit of controversy, indeed, is radically alien to his outlook.

Secondly, though there is much of the classical liberal in his makeup, Oakeshott is also a conservative. Ever since Mill first identified it with 'the stupider party', conservatism – the creed also of Aristotle, Hobbes, Burke, T.S. Eliot and other notorious dunces – has been something of a bar to intellectual advancement. But Oakeshott's version, though broadly in tune with the tacit, unreflecting conservatism of the ordinary man, is also ill-calculated to appeal to official Conservatism, various though that may be. Too indifferent to establishment and hierarchy for the High Tory, it is also too sceptical for the moralist, too liberal for the populist, too principled for the mere pragmatist, and too divergent from whatever contradictory priorities (e.g. wealth-creation and moral restorationism – may be supposed fitfully to animate the current British and American administrations.

Finally, Oakeshott's is more a style of thinking than a set of articles or assumptions, still less (and unlike one of its major rivals, Marxism) a set of conclusions. Though for the most part clearly, forcefully, and even elegantly expressed, Oakeshott's thought cannot be reduced to a series of hard-edged, quasi-mathematical formulae. It is not a calculus, a method, or an ideology. It promises no short cuts to wisdom or right action. One of Oakeshott's central contentions, indeed, is that neither a man's thought, nor the social practices out of which it emerges, are properly susceptible of reduction. 'To know only the gist,' he has written, 'is to know nothing'.

It follows that, unlike Hobbes and Bentham, or most recently Rawls and Nozick, Oakeshott holds little appeal for the dialectician. Where there are neither axioms nor propositions, there can be neither refutation nor proof. Oakeshott's thought is less a self-conscious theoretic edifice than a slowly unfolding imaginative world minutely responsive to the contours of the collective human experience it purports to chart. It is a world which, because it contains few dragons, is apt to prove a disappointment to the dragon-slayer. To understand it demands patience, a willingness to suspend judgement, and a certain basic sympathy with Oakeshott's implicit aims and procedures. Much in it, inevitably, is open to criticism. Yet properly understood, it has a gravity and a gaiety, a depth and a delightfulness, a complexity and a coherence, and even an underlying, consolatory idealism of its own.

The second of three brothers, Michael Oakeshott was born in 1901, to parents of the unaffluent but educated and public-spirited middle class. His mother, a vicar's daughter, trained as a nurse; during the First World War she was commandant of a small military hospital. She took a lifelong interest in charitable work, and first met Oakeshott's father in that connection. He, the son of a Newcastle postmaster, was from the age of 16 a civil servant in the Inland Revenue at Somerset House, where he rose to the rank of Principal. Entirely without personal ambition, he devoted his life to bookish pursuits and above all, with his wife, to their children's education.

The boys and their mother would sing hymns round the piano on Sunday evenings. Oakeshott père, however, was an agnostic. He was also a friend of George Bernard Shaw, and a Fabian. He never imposed his views on his family. Nevertheless, it might be suspected that the younger Oakeshott's hostility to collectivism generally, and his dismissive references to Shaw and the Fabians, were in some way a reaction against his father's ideas. But to dispel any such notion, here is his own account, from a letter to the present writer:

My father . . . was as modest about his politics as he was about his agnosticism. We never talked politics at home; neither we nor my mother were interested . . . [He] was most conscientious in observing the convention that Civil Servants don't publicly take part in politics. He used to go to Fabian Society meetings; he wrote a Fabian Pamphlet on the Reform of the Poor Law. I don't think he ever took to the Webbs . . . He always voted Liberal (we were never in a constituency which had a Labour candidate) and I think, generally speaking, his politics were those of a JS Mill Liberal, though he didn't have much time for Asquith and had the greatest contempt for Lloyd George. The truth is that his interests were always more literary than political . . . He was never a 'party' man, any more than I am, and the only political issue I can think of where I knew where he stood was Votes for Women, but of course he would have nothing to do with the Pankhursts . . . [I do not think] that 'politics' at the level of opinion was a very significant part of his life, and it is certainly not with me.

Oakeshott and his father also shared a deep affection for the 16th - century French essayist and sceptic, Montaigne, whom Oakeshott often cites with approval. It was also in a book of his father's – *The Diversions of Purley*, by the eccentric Regency radical and philologist Horne Tooke – that Oakeshott, at about the age of 16, first perceived the germ of what later became one of his own central ideas, that thought is invariably the shadow or precipitate of practice.

The next major formative influence on Oakeshott was St George's, Harpenden, the co-educational school he attended from the age of 11, and in particular its founder and Headmaster, the Rev. Cecil Grant (d. 1946). To judge from an anthology of former pupils' reminiscences, both St George's and Grant himself were remarkable institutions. Grant was a classicist and a theologian, deeply pious in an undogmatic way, an art-lover of Pre-Raphaelite persuasion, a socialist (though he hated Shaw), a passionate believer in co-education, and a friend and admirer of the educational reformer Maria Montessori (who twice visited the school). He would devote his sermons, not to Christian doctrine (in which he apparently took little interest), but to such things as Kant's Categorical Imperative. On walking tours he would instruct 15-year-olds in Hegel's metaphysics.

The school was indelibly stamped with Grant's personality. Some pupils resented this. Most, however, and among them Oakeshott, seem to have been very happy.

From 1919 Oakeshott read History at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, taking the History of Political Thought option in both parts of the Tripos. He also attended an 'Introduction to Philosophy' by the Idealist McTaggart. Thematic rather than historical, this course was Oakeshott's own formal introduction to the subject.

Oakeshott had long been interested in theology, and, as a graduate student in the 1920's, twice visited the universities of Marburg (where, incidentally, Heidegger was lecturing) and Tübingen in order to pursue it further. Already well-read in German literature, there Oakeshott read Hölderlin, Nietzsche and Burckhardt, and went tramping off with the Wandervogel. This was an informal student movement dedicated to nature-worship, camping out, and (according to DH Lawrence) 'free love'. Though very much of its time and place (Weimar Germany), it also embodied a traditional vein of German Romanticism, harmless enough and even valuable in itself, which the National Socialists were later to exploit. Its main legacy to Oakeshott, however, seems to have been his taste for solitude and the simple life (even in later life he regularly wandered off on camping expeditions by himself). Typically of Oakeshott, however, this has been a taste by no means exclusive of its opposite.

After a brief spell as senior English master at Lytham St Anne's Grammar School, Oakeshott returned in 1927 to a Fellowship at his old College. He did a lot of teaching, especially in Modern History, and it was out of his lectures that his first book developed, *Experience and its Modes*. He was already reviewing works on philosophy and theology for the *Cambridge Review* and specialist journals, and produced his first independent essay, a pamphlet on 'Religion and the Moral Life', in this year. In both style and content, and like *Experience and its Modes*, it recalls the Oxford Idealist FH Bradley; its conclusions are Bradley's, to the effect that religion, rather than being the buttress or sanction of morality, is essentially its 'ideality' or 'completion'.

Experience and its Modes appeared in 1933, when Oakeshott was 31. It received enthusiastic notices from RG Collingwood in the *Cambridge Review* and TM Knox in the *Oxford Magazine*, a respectful review in *Philosophy* (which remarked on the author's 'truly high capacity for literary art'), and some tart, not to say sniffy, remarks from L Susan Stebbing in *Mind*. She found the section on Science 'peculiarly unsatisfying', and concluded by saying that 'those who have not been convinced by Bradley are not likely to be converted by Mr Oakeshott'.

History was to vindicate Miss Stebbing, at least in the short run. The first edition of *Experience and its Modes* took over thirty years to sell. The truth, however, was simply that the day of Idealism has passed, and that of Logical Positivism had dawned. Such are the vicissitudes of intellectual fashion, though, that *Experience and its Modes* has been reprinted three times since the 1960's.

Since his book had been admired by people he respected, Oakeshott seems not to have been greatly distressed by its fate. He has never aspired to join the philosophical establishment, and (he says) has communicated since then with only two 'official' philosophers, Gilbert Ryle and another Oxonian, the Hegelian GRH Mure. If Oakeshott's thought is radically opposed to that of the Logical Positivists, and hence to that of the earlier Wittgenstein, it has something in common with the later Wittgenstein. Nevertheless, though Oakeshott and Wittgenstein were at Cambridge together for nearly twenty years, they never met.

Oakeshott has always pursued his wide intellectual interests in his own way and at his own pace. In the 1930's he developed an interest in Hobbes, and has since become one of the world's leading Hobbes scholars. He wrote on Hobbes and (damningly) on Bentham for FR Leavis's journal *Scrutiny*. But once again, though (urbanity of mind excepted) Leavis and he had much in common, by his own account Oakeshott never once set eyes on him.

It may be wondered how Oakeshott contrived to be so much out of the swim. Some of his critics (not for the first time) will point to his *A Guide to the Classics, or, How to Pick the Derby Winner* (with GT Griffith, 1936), and imply that, while Europe was coming to the boil, Oakeshott (Nero-like) was lounging with the toffs at Newmarket. The truth is more prosaic. Fired by his co-author and Caius colleague, Guy Griffith, a keen racing man, Oakeshott did indeed make a serious and enthusiastic study of the sport. But having once thrown light into that far from unimportant corner of national culture (one recalls TS Eliot's bracketing-together of Elgar, the Derby, and pickled beetroot as typically 'English'), Oakeshott moved on. (He has not, he says, been to a race-meeting since the Second World War.) Nevertheless, *A Guide to the Classics* is a key exhibit for those who would write him off as a 'Tory dandy'. For others it will merely confirm that there is little terra incognita on Oakeshott's map of the world.

The 'Thirties – Auden's 'low, dishonest decade' – were marked by strident demands among the intelligentsia for intellectual and political 'commitment'. Oakeshott's final contribution to *Scrutiny* appeared in 1939, in a symposium called 'The Claims of Politics'.

Amid the clamour of his fellow-symposiasts, Oakeshott's piece is remarkable for its sublime, even breathtaking, aloofness. The much-trumpeted 'claims of politics', he thought, were inconsiderable compared with the cultural and intellectual life it was the business of politics to protect. In itself, politics is 'vulgar', 'bogus', and 'callous', not merely because it attracts people of that stamp, but 'because of the false simplification of human life implied in even the best of its purposes'.

Oakeshott, of course, was by no means ignorant of world events, as his brilliant, and to this day indispensable, anthology of *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* testifies. This (with Oakeshott's introduction and commentary) also came out in 1939, and was twice reprinted. The said doctrines, he wrote (totalitarianism being primarily in question), 'are striking mainly in virtue of their defects as doctrines and their remarkable success in subjugating whole communities.' He has some respect for political Catholicism, both on account of its intellectual coherence, and also because, though authoritarian, it is so 'without the capriciousness of the other authoritarian doctrines.' But for all its muddle and incoherence, it is Representative Democracy that Oakeshott finds the least unattractive. One of its 'central principles' (and also his own) is that 'the imposition of a universal plan of life on a society is at once stupid and immoral.'

Oakeshott joined the Army immediately on the outbreak of war, and eventually commanded a squadron, attached to the Canadian Second Army in Holland, of the GHQ Liaison Regiment, alias 'Phantom'. ('Phantom' was a freelance, quasi-Signals, intelligence-gathering force.) The journalist Peregrine Worsthorpe, who served under Oakeshott, has both spoken and written of his excellence as a commander: of his self-effacement, of the quiet efficiency of his administration, and of his mastery of everyday battlefield practicalities.

Military life, Oakeshott has said, always held a deep fascination for him, similar to that which it held for Alfred de Vigny (the author of *Servitude et Grandeur Militaires*). Yet, like Hobbes, Oakeshott is one of the most pacific of serious political thinkers. It is evident from his writings that, if the war had made a deep impression on him, it was by no means an altogether romantic one. First, the war seems to have convinced him of a key article in his post-war reflections, the inadequacy of mere technical knowledge, such as he himself easily acquired: 'the intelligent civilian,' he has noted, 'always remained at a disadvantage beside the regular officer, the man educated in the feelings and emotions as well as the practices of his profession'.

And secondly, it seems to have persuaded him that military organisation, being necessarily directed to a single overriding end, is the worst of all possible models for peacetime society, where the ends pursued are as various as those who pursue them. This view contrasts sharply with that of those 1945 socialists who, impressed by the 'efficiency' of wartime collectivism (which, Oakeshott says, was actually 'exceedingly uneconomical'), proposed to 'win the peace' by the same methods. And not only does war create collectivism, but the reverse also holds: 'large-scale collectivism,' Oakeshott writes, 'is inherently warlike: the condition of things in which it is appropriate in the end makes its appearance.'

Not normally clubbable, Oakeshott seems to have enjoyed the raffish company he found in the Army. 'He loved social life,' Worsthorne has said, 'but always as the amused onlooker.' Among his junior officers was the Hon. John Jacob Astor, whose father, the 2nd Viscount Astor, was immensely rich, proprietor of the Observer newspaper, and a Tory grandee. On leave, Astor would take Oakeshott to Cliveden, the family's house on the Thames near Maidenhead, notorious in the 1930's as the meeting-place of the allegedly appeasement-minded 'Cliveden set'. Here Oakeshott once more mingled in a world very different from the one he had been accustomed to.

Oakeshott's critics on the left have been quick to pounce on his sole reference to this way of life, as though he were laying claim to it as his natural element. But Oakeshott is merely, in the admirable Victorian phrase, 'a scholar and a gentleman'. When he likens the ignorant modern politician to 'a foreigner or a man out of his social class . . . bewildered by a tradition and a habit of behaviour of which he knows only the surface', and adds that 'a butler or an observant house-maid has the advantage of him', it is not inconceivable that he himself may have experienced some such Prufrock-like embarrassment at Cliveden. For, as Scott Fitzgerald said, the very rich are 'different from us', and not merely because, as Hemingway quipped in reply, 'they have more money'.

Oakeshott returned to Cambridge after the war, and in 1946 published his edition of *Hobbes's Leviathan*, with its well-known Introduction (now reprinted separately in *Hobbes on Civil Association*). In 1947 he and a few colleagues started *The Cambridge Journal*, a lively intellectual review of remarkably high standard for a monthly (it ran until 1952). It was non-partisan, and for the most part not even political in content; the journal *Politics and Letters*, however, with which the late Raymond Williams was associated, hailed it on its appearance as 'patrician fare'.

Oakeshott soon became the Cambridge Journal's star performer, and before long its General Editor. The earlier essays in his *Rationalism in Politics* appeared in it, as did 'The Universities', together with 'Scientific Politics', 'Contemporary British Politics', and 'Mr Carr's First Volume'. Many will have wondered, like me, how, among his day-to-day editorial, teaching, and (copious) ordinary book-reviewing commitments, Oakeshott found time for such things, which are conceived on the very highest intellectual level, and written, moreover, with great pith and elegance. They may be interested to learn that the last-mentioned, a substantial review article on EH Carr's *The Bolshevik Revolution*, was composed in a single night.

After a brief period at Nuffield College, Oxford, Oakeshott, now 49, moved to the Chair of Political Science at the London School of Economics. In many ways, his predecessor being the socialist Harold Laski, his appointment was a symbolic end to the Attlee era (which nevertheless survived in intellectual life for almost thirty years more). Oakeshott's inaugural lecture, 'Political Education', though widely recognised as a distinguished utterance, generated on a more public scale the same kind of incomprehension, discomfiture, and in some cases near-outrage among the enlightened classes as his essay 'Rationalism in Politics' had already provoked.

These essays were bound to offend many if not most of his audience on each occasion. Oakeshott attacked, not socialism specifically, but the whole post-Enlightenment style of thought – 'rationalism' – to which in his view it belongs. The Rationalist believes essentially that there is only one kind of 'reason', that is external to, and valid independently of, the activities to which it is applied, and that his possession of it gives him both the power and the authority to reorganise the world in accordance with its dictates. These dictates find articulation in an 'ideology': that is, in some comprehensive, self-legitimising, and (usually) pseudo-scientific programme of action. Rationalism, in short, is the 'planner's' mentality; while ideology is the 'plan', complete with justification.

Oakeshott's objection was not so much that 'planning' is a threat to freedom (though it is that), as that the whole Rationalist approach is misconceived. Because it is, and even makes a virtue of being, external to its objects, it can never acquire full knowledge of them. (Such knowledge is contained only in the unselfconscious traditions which have emerged from them and govern their constant evolution.) The Rationalist's 'plans' are bound in practice not only to fail, but also to destroy both future activity and its spring. The

'efficiency' of planning turns out to be a sham. So Rationalism is actually irrational.

No-one, and particularly not an intellectual, likes to be called a fool. For the most part Oakeshott's critics simply plunged deeper into the confusion between rationalism and genuine rationality from which he had been at pains to deliver them. In their view he had impugned, not the perversion of reason, but reason itself. He was guilty of irrationalism, and even of mysticism. (Doubtless they did not know that he had already argued specifically against these heresies in 'Scientific Politics'.) But ever since *Experience and its Modes*, his point had been that each activity generates its own, appropriate kind of rationality. The outcry against him was essentially that of the child deprived of his comforter, or told that he cannot have the moon.

Whatever hostility Oakeshott may initially have faced, he seems to have been a success at LSE. His lectures were packed with students from all disciplines. Non-specialists were especially impressed by the clarity and eloquence with which he laid bare the subtleties of Hobbes and Hegel, Mill and Green. Unusually for a good conversationalist, Oakeshott invariably read from a fully written-out script. He has said that he does not trust himself to speak from notes or think on his feet.

During the 'fifties Oakeshott produced a classic defence of the so-called 'autonomy of history' ('The Activity of Being an Historian'); a defence of conservatism, remarkable for dispensing with just about everything (bar the rule of law) that conservatives have ever thought important ('On Being Conservative'); and 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', a long essay on aesthetics, which not only introduces Oakeshott's novel and important conception of the human world as 'conversation', but also makes substantial claims for what is in essence the autonomy of the aesthetic.

All of these, together with his longer *Cambridge Journal* pieces, a new study of Hobbes, and an essay on 'The Study of Politics in a University', were finally incorporated in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* (1962). Oakeshott's corpus is often (though I think wrongly) regarded as somewhat slender. It is true that he has never been in a hurry to publish, and academically speaking, belongs to a far more leisurely (and cultivated) age than the present. Few readers of these ten essays, nevertheless, will deny that Oakeshott's reticence has paid off. Whether or not one agrees with them, it must be admitted that they contain enough material for several books, and more real, deeply-pondered thought than

hundreds upon hundreds of quotidian productions. The reader whose interest has been seriously engaged is likely to find that he can, over the years, return to these essays again and again with renewed pleasure and surprise.

Rationalism in Politics offers little advice to the practicing politician, except (the most valuable of all) that he should give up his nostrums and trust instead to taste, experience, and the power of institutions themselves to suggest the directions they should take. Probably no-one (except in Communist countries) will ever go armed with it to the barricades. But for all that (which is in any case a virtue) it is surely a classic.

Oakeshott retired in 1968, before the French student disorders of that year spread to LSE. The department he left behind had acquired a decidedly Oakeshottian cast, a fact which caused resentment amongst traditionally radical LSE staff in other departments, and later led to some unseemly public squabbles. In these Oakeshott himself took no part. He was in any case busy on his third book, *On Human Conduct* (1975). He also, between 1967 and 1975, wrote the three longest of the educational essays now republished in *The Voice of Liberal Learning*.

On Human Conduct is the most inspissated of Oakeshott's longer works, more so even than *Experience and its Modes*. In some ways it is a completely new departure, being the first book of his that can reasonably be expected to baffle, or even repel, the casual reader. (For that reason it is not a good one for the would-be student of Oakeshott to start with; *Rationalism in Politics* is far and away the best in that respect.) *On Human Conduct* depends for its intelligibility on the reader's having taken some trouble to master its novel terminology. The book consists of three long, interconnected essays. In the first, Oakeshott distinguishes physical 'processes' from human (i.e. intelligent) 'practices' or 'procedures', and divides action itself into two components, 'self-disclosure' (the advertisement of wants), and 'self-enactment' (the realization of character); in the second, he distinguishes 'civil association' (composed in terms of law) from 'enterprise association' (conceived in terms of purpose); in the third, he traces two correlative conceptions of the modern European state, identifying the 'civil' state with post-Renaissance 'individuality', and the 'enterprise' state (essentially the 'rationalist' state) with the 'anti-individual' or 'mass' man.

'The themes explored here,' Oakeshott writes, 'have been with me almost as long as I can remember.' This is true enough. But one might add that much in the first section of *On Human Conduct* was

developed from ideas first fielded in 'The Voice of Poetry' and Oakeshott's educational writings; much in the third from an essay (first published in German in 1957, and in English in 1961) called 'The Masses in Representative Democracy'; and much in the second which pertains to the 'rule of law' from 'On Being Conservative' and 'The Political Economy of Freedom' (the latter, also in *Rationalism in Politics*, is in part a defence of Chicago economics, which Oakeshott discovered a quarter of a century before Sir Keith Joseph).

Also in 1975 Oakeshott added a codicil to *On Human Conduct* called 'The Vocabulary of a Modern European State' (in the journal *Political Studies*, Vol. 23), and collected his various pieces on Hobbes bar the early *Scrutiny* essay in *Hobbes on Civil Association*.

His next wholly new book, *On History and Other Essays*, appeared in 1983. It consists of three thematically unrelated pieces: the title essay is the culmination of a lifetime's reflection on the historian's task; the second is an essay on the rule of law, an attempt (roughly speaking) to codify all Oakeshott's previous observations on the subject; while the third is an extended, and brilliantly imaginative, fable showing how authority in the 'enterprise state' must always be compromised by its engagement to do more for its subjects than merely rule them. It is in marked contrast with its companion pieces, which (like *On Human Conduct*) are tough going.

That, then, is the main Oakeshott canon. There is no reason to suppose it complete, for despite his great age Oakeshott continues to flourish in astonishing vigour of body and mind. Though an enthusiastic, unrepentant cigarette-smoker, and far from averse to a decent bottle of wine, he has always lived simply; his pied-à-terre during his LSE days lacked even a refrigerator. Staunch in his defence of civilisation and the subtle historic artifice by which it has been built up, he nevertheless has in him a great deal of the youthful, even innocent, bohemian and romantic. The simplest things have made him happy: a loaf warm from the baker's, a sunny morning, or (notoriously) a pretty face.

He now lives back in rural Dorset, amid an unpicturesque huddle of tiny, spartan, quarrymen's cottages. His own is heated by an open fire, furnished with a few odd sticks, and packed from floor to ceiling with books, in cases he has knocked together out of old floorboards. For decoration he has a few prints, and some paintings by his second wife (his first died in the 'fifties), whom he ferries daily, in his battered old sports car, to and from her studio in the nearest town. He still leads an active social life, making long journeys to spend weekends with friends and former pupils. In his

fisherman's cap, old mackintosh and balding Hush Puppies, no-one seems less the 'Tory dandy' than the great conservative philosopher of our time. It is only in his endearing warmth and civility, his conversability, his generosity of mind, that one catches a whiff of aristocracy; or rather, of that aristocratic spirit, shorn of all brutality, stiffness and arrogance, which the Renaissance humanists handed down to us in the form of liberal education, and which in truth, as Oakeshott would be the last to deny, is still to be found anywhere in society, from prince to pauper, that a tradition of moral education survives.