

## Beyond the Shadow Line

### *Michael Oakeshott (1901 – 1990)*

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In the last letter I had from Michael Oakeshott – the English philosopher who died in December just after his 89<sup>th</sup> birthday – he rebuked me good-humouredly for having reprinted in *Quadrant* a “profile” of him (perhaps the only one ever written) that had first appeared, anonymously, in *The Spectator*. I ran it because I had wanted to give wider circulation in Australia to the conflict it summarised between Oakeshott’s civilised conservatism, his sceptical, even debonair Toryism, and the philistinism of some Free Enterprise apparatchiks who were making a barbarous noise then as now.

The trouble was that the article also included some personal details – Oakeshott’s bohemian dress, his fondness for women, his physical beauty, his habit of drinking until all hours with the young – which such a self-effacing man would have found journalistic and distasteful. In any case he described it as an “ill-informed caricature” and he added: “I can tell you who wrote it. John Casey, an intelligent eccentric who just now is trying to extract damages from *Private Eye*. A somewhat dangerous but also an engaging friend.” I quote his judgement here because its spirit, both critical and generous, firm and idiosyncratic, personal and detached, is so characteristic of this remarkable and elusive man.

He did indeed shun publicity. One of John Casey’s anecdotes was of a Cambridge don<sup>1</sup> who had been urging a baffled Mrs. Thatcher to confer some honour on his colleague, the great Conservative philosopher. Mrs. Thatcher stared at him blankly and finally, if improbably, replied: “Yes, he was so helpful.” In due course a knighthood was conferred – on some other academic named Oakeshott.

By the time of his death he was certainly famous, but he remained as little known in the 1990s, in England and elsewhere, as in the 1920s when he attended Martin Heidegger’s lectures in Marburg (with Hannah Arendt whose dazzling if sometimes obscure studies of totalitarianism and history he was one of the few in England to respect) and published his first learned articles (on Christianity).

His publications in the 1930s could only have further confused his reputation. They included his first major philosophic work, *Experience and its Modes*, which R. G. Collingwood said was “so original, so important, and so profound that criticism must be silent until his meaning has been long pondered” (and it may well have been, since

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<sup>1</sup> Editor’s Note – Casey admitted in the course of reviewing Robert Grant’s book *Oakeshott* (*Times Literary Supplement*, 29 March 1991, p. 3) that the don referred to in this anecdote was himself

it took more than 30 years to sell the first edition of 1000 copies); his *Dandy's Guide to the Classics* (that is, of racing: its subtitle was *How to Pick the Derby Winner*); a dull anthology *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (produced to help qualify him for the Cambridge chair of political science, which in the event went to Denis Brogan); and his 1935 essay on Thomas Hobbes (the first of many on a philosopher whose *Leviathan* was, he believed, "the greatest, perhaps the sole masterpiece of political philosophy written in the English language").

It was not until the 1940s that he began to engage the interest of a wider public when after five years in the British Army he returned to Cambridge to edit *The Cambridge Journal*, the best of the post-War English journals until, like *Scrutiny*, *Horizon* and *Penguin New Writing*, inflation destroyed it (Oakeshott always remained a stable currency man). In its pages he published the first of his famous polemics, written in the grand manner of the Tory pamphleteers of an earlier, more rugged age, exposing the intellectual squalor of the *New Age of Socialist Planning*.

In 1951 he succeeded Harold Laski as professor of political science at the London School of Economics. I was one of the hundreds who, sensing a symbolic occasion, crowded the halls, corridors and overflow rooms to hear this son of a founder of the LSE deliver his Inaugural Lecture on "Political Education" and exorcize the ghost of his predecessor. In it he presented for the first time his legendary metaphor of politics as sailing on a boundless and bottomless sea without starting-place, destination or harbour, in which the enterprise is only to keep afloat on an even keel. His scepticism rejected ideological politics of both Left and Right – the dreariness of the wimps and the claptrap of the blimps – yet his liberalism also welcomed enthusiasm in such non-political activities as religion or art. It is not at all inconsistent, he said, to be conservative in respect of government and radical in respect of almost every other activity.

It was a heady mixture, having just arrived in London from Sydney. I decided to enrol in his course immediately. I was not disappointed. His lectures on Western political thought since Plato, and in particular those on the majesty of St. Augustine's *City of God*, were among the most unforgettable experiences of my student years.

The 1950s saw several of his other famous essays ranging from *The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind* (a new and better Apologie for Poetrie) to "On Being Conservative" which says that politics is unsuited to the young:

"Some unfortunate people, like Pitt (laughably called 'the Younger'), are born old, and are eligible to engage in politics almost in their cradles; others, perhaps more fortunate, belie the saying that one is only young once, they never grow up. But these are exceptions. For most there is what Conrad called the 'shadow line', which when we pass it, discloses a solid world of things, each with its fixed shape, each with its own point of balance, each with its price, a world of fact, not poetic image, in 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. And coming to be at home in this commonplace world qualifies us (as no knowledge of 'political science' can ever qualify us), if we are so inclined and have nothing better to think about, to engage in which the man of conservative disposition understands to be political activity."

One of the most important of all his essays was published in Holland in 1961 – "The Masses in Representative Democracy" (the "in" could have been "versus") which indicated his vision of modern Western history.

With the break-up of the medieval community, two new characters, with corresponding moralities, emerged. The first was, and is, the individual, the *uomo singolare* of Italy whom Petrarch dramatized at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Later, north of the Alps, as his domain spread from Scotland to Bohemia a host of writers – Rabelais, Cervantes, Pascal, Montaigne, Kant: the list seems endless – expressed the new individuality's disposition in all fields from religion and politics to architecture, trade and industry. Even when vulgarised into a banal, liberationist individualism, authentic individuality continued to be the strongest strand in the moral convictions of the West.

The other was the mass man, the anti-individual who found individuality and freedom to be painful. Dreaming of security and certainty, he looks to Leaders to make his decisions, to mass movements to give him a fake substitute for the lost medieval community, and to ideologies to settle his doubts. (Often an intellectual, he may loudly declare that "ideas matter", meaning illusions, legends, or even lies.) He is natural fodder for totalitarianism.

But Oakeshott contemplates the great drama of Western history with a basic optimism: the anti-individual will not triumph. The mass man senses his own inadequacy, his derivative and parasitical character, and secretly acknowledges the superiority of individuality over ideology. If some critics find all this being over-optimistic in our age of aggressive, radical ideologies, Oakeshott would reply that he never expected an easy, early or even eventual victory for Right Reason; the struggle of the two moralities will continue indefinitely.

His last philosophic book, his last attempt to redefine political liberty, was *On Human Conduct* (1975) – of which one may repeat Collingwood's admonition of 40 years ago (about *Experience and its Modes*) that critics should ponder long before debating it. Ken Minogue's review-article on it in *Quadrant* remains the best appreciation yet of its position in intellectual history. (Minogue places it with Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*). Oakeshott's final and recent book, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, is an elegant counter-blast to the cruder New Right idea of universities as training institutes.

Michael Oakeshott was one of the great political philosophers of the century. He was however no restless activist. Whenever he did a broadcast for Radio Free Europe, his subject would be an abstract one; it may not have encouraged any rush to the anti-communist barricades, but it would still have raised the hopes of free spirits still

surviving behind the Iron Curtain. He would not and could not bang a drum but few played the intellectual folk-music of Europe so well.

In his later years he developed a following in America where he was widely honoured. But he never visited Australia. When I asked him why, he said that no-one had ever invited him.