

PETER COLEMAN

ESCAPING PLATO'S CAVE

A PARABLE FOR POLITICIANS



*Reason had a pair of shoes
But quickly wore them out;
The uppers still looked very well
But underneath was doubt.*

*Of course that let the water in,
And then it let in stones;
They skinned her feet, the flesh was thin,
And soon she walked on bones.*

*Why not? But now, the trouble is
The joints are working loose.
At what point will the girl admit
You can be too abstruse?*

—C.H. Sisson, "Reason"

BERNARD LEVIN thought Michael Oakeshott's famous lectures on political philosophy were "dull and lifeless". Writing in 1954, he hid his opinion behind the improbable pseudonym, "A.E. Cherryman". A young man just starting in journalism and determined to make a name for himself, Levin did not mince words.

The lectures were, he said, "heavy" with absurd similes (about cooking, tin-openers and drowning men).

Lectures in the History of Political Thought,
by Michael Oakeshott, edited by Terry Nardin and
Luke O'Sullivan;
Imprint Academic, 2006, about \$100.

*Religious and Poetic Experience in the Thought of
Michael Oakeshott,*
by Glenn Worthington;
Imprint Academic, 2005, about \$80.

*From a "Necessary Evil" to an Art of Contingency:
Michael Oakeshott's Conception of Political
Activity,*
by Suvi Soininen;
Imprint Academic, 2005, about \$80.

They contrasted strikingly with those of Oakeshott's predecessor at the London School of Economics, H.J. Laski, whose lectures "coruscated with wit and passion". Oakeshott himself even *looked* ridiculous—bent and lanky "like a huge question mark". Needless to say, his principal work of philosophy, *Experience and its Modes*, was "unintelligible".

By the time Levin became a renowned columnist he had changed his mind on many political issues. But his

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early polemic is testimony to the scandal caused in 1950 by Oakeshott's advent at the LSE, then still regarded as a frontline fortress for orthodox lefties. His famous Inaugural Lecture in 1951 was bad enough in socialist England. Hundreds of us, sensing it would be a symbolic occasion, crowded the halls, corridors and overflow rooms. It was as if the whole of Houghton Street fell silent to witness the exorcism of Harold Laski and British socialism. You could hear a pin drop.

Sonorously and courteously, if sometimes acidulously, Oakeshott dismissed ideological politics and launched his legendary metaphor that politics is sailing on a boundless and bottomless sea without starting point or destination or safe harbour. The best hope is to stay afloat on an even keel. It was, the outraged Levin said, like shouting "No Popery" under the windows of St Peter's.

To make matters worse, Oakeshott then began his celebrated, learned, elegant and irresistible series of lectures on the history of political thought from the ancient Greeks to the moderns. He continued to give them—thirty each year—until his retirement in 1968. Attracted and delighted by the Inaugural Lecture, I enrolled at the LSE to attend the first series in 1951-52, always taking copious notes in the Sydney style.

They were a memorable performance. He would suddenly appear from backstage in the LSE's Old Theatre. Wearing a corduroy jacket, usually brown, he would peer good-humouredly for a moment at the packed auditorium. "I want this morning," he might begin, "to say

something about the death of Socrates”, or “I will now leave the Middle Ages with some regret ...” As he fell into stride, he would fold his hands behind his back, sometimes turning this way or that, or stepping back and forth, before settling again at the lectern. He appeared to have detailed notes or full texts. He conveyed the impression that his subjects—Plato, Epicurus, St Augustine, Marsilius of Padua or John of Salisbury—were friends and colleagues whose conversation was always a great pleasure. We were invited to join it. The lectures were a *tour de force*.

Now they—or the 1968 version—have been published posthumously. He had once agreed to their publication but changed his mind. It is easy to see why. Lectures to students are written for the young and ignorant, not for the general educated reader. Even when edited, as some of these *Lectures* have been, the most engaging of them cannot capture the mood or excitement of the original delivery. The element of performance does not appear on the printed page, nor the experience of a good teacher thinking on his feet.

Take, for example, John Anderson’s philosophy lectures now on the internet. Some ageing former students may recall those distant days at Sydney University when they thought they heard the music of the spheres. But to most readers, and certainly the young, the lectures on the net often seem flat, even at times pedantic. They are best read, like the Oakeshott *Lectures*, as raw material for later more polished or finished essays.

Some of Oakeshott’s 1968 lectures are broadly the same as those of 1951-52—for example the lecture on Stoicism and Epicureanism. Those philosophers will appeal, Oakeshott says, to the defeated or disinherited of all eras: you may lose your *polis* but you still have the *cosmopolis* (Zeno) or your ascetic soul in a nihilist world (Epicurus).

Some lectures are expanded and developed, for example, the one on St Augustine whose thinking, Oakeshott says, is pre-eminently Roman: “Were it not for Augustine the Romans produced no great philosopher.” (“He was my great man,” he once told his biographer, Robert Grant.) Other variations include the priority he gave in 1968 to Aristotle over Plato because Aristotle’s thinking was closer to Greek political experience than Plato’s.

A few of the lectures are entirely new. The 1951-52 version did not have his elegant interpretation of Plato’s parable of the cave—the prison of daily life from which the philosopher escapes into a world of truth, only to find, on returning to the cave, that he cannot convince the prisoners that there is Reality and Freedom out there.

It is at the beginning of Book VII of the *Republic*, and Oakeshott tells his students: “You should read it with care: every word counts.”

One overriding difference from the 1951-52 lectures is that by 1968 Oakeshott gave greater attention to the historical context of political philosophy. His emphasis moved, as the editors sum up, from texts to contexts. He would not distort key ideas by trying to make them relevant or contemporary. He enjoyed explicating concepts in their own historic terms—*polis*, *potestas*, *puissance*, *der Wille*, bringing out their unique meanings. His enjoyment was contagious. The editors describe the *Lectures* as “the most successful sustained piece of historical thinking” in all of Oakeshott’s works.

SINCE HIS DEATH in 1990 Oakeshott’s reputation has grown enormously, probably beyond the other major figure in recent British political philosophy—Isaiah Berlin. One result, or perhaps cause, has been the publication of the huge range of his unpublished papers as well as essays and reviews that appeared in inaccessible periodicals. (He wrote few books in his lifetime.)

Lectures in the History of Political Thought is the second volume of a proposed six volumes of Oakeshott’s *Selected Writings*. Volume 1 is *What is History? and other essays* (reviewed in *Quadrant*, June 2004). Still to come are the essays on jurisprudence, his notebooks and his correspondence. Luke O’Sullivan is editing them all (although sometimes with a co-editor—Terry Nardin for the *Lectures* and Robert Grant for the notebooks and letters). Imprint Academic is the publisher.

Imprint is also publishing seven volumes of “Oakeshott Studies”. Two have just appeared. One is *From a “Necessary Evil” to the Art of Contingency: Michael Oakeshott’s Conception of Political Activity* by Suvi Soinen—which examines sixty years of reflections on the nature of political activity. (The title alludes to F.H. Bradley, whom Oakeshott quoted at the end of his Inaugural Lecture: “The world is the best of all possible worlds, and *everything* in it is a necessary evil.”)

The other is *Religious and Poetic Experience in the Thought of Michael Oakeshott* by the Australian scholar Glenn Worthington—the first detailed study of Oakeshott’s mature but often neglected thinking about religion and poetry. He had been brought up an Anglican. At school he absorbed what Grant called a “Wordsworthian-Hegelian pantheism”, before studying theology in Germany. He and his first wife (an old schoolmate) produced an album of religious devotions.

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Worthington concentrates on the later more philosophic writings.

Oakeshott's "striking posthumous career" owes much to the Michael Oakeshott Association in London (and its website: www.michael-oakeshott-association.org). Suvi Soininen, for example, describes as "indecipherable" the help given her by the Association's Secretary-Treasurer, Leslie Marsh. The regular international conferences, arranged by the Association and hosted by the Colorado philosopher Timothy Fuller, have also played an important role.

Crowning the whole enterprise will be the forthcoming *Michael Oakeshott: An Intellectual Biography* by Robert Grant (of Glasgow University) who shows a lively—and essential—awareness of the paradoxes of his difficult subject. "A biography," he says, "cannot be a crude empiricist *collage* of disaggregated evidential fragments of a person's life. It requires *Verstehen*, and for that there is no formula."

There is certainly no simple formula for a philosopher who was at once conservative and bohemian, sceptical and pious, an anarchist who defended authority, an old soldier who opposed war, a practitioner of free love who respected tradition, a supporter of the free market who opposed (quoting D.H. Lawrence, one of his favourite novelists) "the plausible ethics of productivity".

Grant's biography will inevitably be a cultural his-

tory of the twentieth century, touching on an Edwardian childhood in a Fabian family, growing up in a "progressive" coeducational school, Bloomsbury, Cambridge, Weimar, war, religion, socialism, totalitarianism, conservatism. One hopes it will also answer the *Gretchenfrage*: Was Oakeshott right that our ideas are a residue of one's way of life or did he try, at some cost, to fashion his life on his premeditated ideas?

One theme stands out in Grant's reflections on his archival research at the LSE. He has been overwhelmed by the depth of the mystical vein in Oakeshott's life and work. The sense which he developed as a schoolboy that there is another dimension to life than the merely visible remained with him all his life. It boils down, Grant thinks, to a secularised Sermon on the Mount. One is saved not in the hereafter, but here, and now, by one's voluntary escape or deliverance from the things of this world, its pressures, its ambitions and its illusory imperatives. Escape from the world's follies is not a reward for virtue but is virtue itself and the operation of grace.

Curiously Bernard Levin/A.E. Cherryman caught something of this in his scornful polemic of 1954. Oakeshott, he said then, is a man "whose object is to run away, and whose belief is that there is nowhere to run to". He could not see that it was Plato's cave that Oakeshott was trying to escape. Robert Grant must tell us if he succeeded.

A PLACE FOR JESUS?

by Tom Frame

The Future of Jesus, by Peter Jensen;
ABC Books, 2005, \$22.95.

FOR THE FIRST TIME in over forty years, a cleric has been invited to deliver the Boyer Lectures. Dr Peter Jensen, the Anglican Archbishop of Sydney, not surprisingly made the life and death, and the words and works of Jesus Christ his subject. In an attempt to start a debate about the most influential figure in world history, Dr Jensen asks whether the Jesus depicted in the Gospels has any future in an affluent, self-assured and increasingly secular society like Australia.

Before one word was uttered there were, of course, the inevitable objections to both the lecturer and his topic in the letters columns of the national newspapers. The fact that the ABC Chairman, Donald McDonald, attends an Anglican Church led some to allege denominational favouritism. Others complained about another apparent intrusion of religion into public life.

But Dr Jensen does not write in a manner that offers

a particular advantage to the Anglican Church. Indeed, he is critical of institutional churches, despite heading the largest Anglican diocese in Australia. He also endeavours to examine Jesus in relation to national affairs, political life and personal choices. In the first lecture he claims not to be "a religious person" while resisting the charge that he is commending some private truth beyond public scrutiny. He believes that Jesus has had a profound and lasting influence on Australian institutions and popular culture, and that he remains a timely figure because "at a time when other cultures seem menacingly assured and powerful, we seem to have become very modest about our own past, very nervous about identifying who we are, very shy of receiving inspiration from some of the greatest words ever spoken".

In his six lectures (and an additional section headed "Jesus and the Question of Faith" that was not part of the broadcast), Dr Jensen's aim is "to inspire a widespread, adult reading of the New Testament Gospels" in the hope that his listeners will "see what a surprising man Jesus was ... and whether Jesus can speak with something like his old power about central cultural issues such as personal freedom, human relationships and the future of our country".

Dr Jensen presents a clear and concise case for belief in Jesus as more than a moral teacher and spiritual guide.