

On Writing Michael Oakeshott's Biography

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Note: Almost everything below is what I actually said. But I have tidied up the style a bit, inserted some clarifications and afterthoughts for a larger audience, and - only once or twice, the merest handful of words being involved - altered what I did say to what I ought to have said, and wish now to be understood as saying.

– RG

I'm afraid my title, 'On Writing Michael Oakeshott's Biography', is somewhat misleading, because I haven't yet started the actual writing. But as far as I know – and you really must correct me if I am wrong – I am still the only person to have offered at any length a single-handed, systematic account of his life. Admittedly it was of the utmost brevity, being the first chapter of my little book called simply *Oakeshott*. The book came out at the end of 1990, five days before its subject's death, and was tastelessly alleged by some wags to have hastened it. It sold very well, however, being greatly aided by the glowing obituaries which followed. And since Oakeshott's death, as we have seen from the growing secondary literature – of which many of us here are guilty – he has not only become quite big business but has also moved much nearer to the centre of modern political philosophy. It is no longer quaint to confess oneself an Oakeshottian – whatever that may mean, for as you know, Oakeshott didn't encourage disciples, at least not in the usual sense.

A disciple is there to spread a doctrine, and his doctrine was that there was no doctrine. This is not the stuff of political graffiti, nor a slogan to win elections. And if political realities prove elusive to the inquiring intellect, so equally must a man's life. Nobody now believes, in the glib fashion that once prevailed, that a personality can be exhaustively explained by its owner's genes, upbringing, social class, toilet training, sexuality, education or looks. We are coming round to a view quite close to that which, following the nineteenth-century anti-positivist Windelband, Oakeshott took of historical events, namely that they too are individuals, whose explanation lies, not in some hidden key or overarching law, but solely in their fullest possible description. But such a description requires imagination as well as factual knowledge. A biography cannot be a crude empiricist *collage* of the disaggregated evidential fragments of a person's life. It requires so-called *Verstehen*, and for that there is no formula.

However, when a man is as resolutely private as Oakeshott, his life, to the outside world, *is* very largely a collection of fragments or glimpses. Oakeshott was a private person

not merely by disposition, but partly because his romantic bohemianism obliged him to keep his life in separate compartments. No overall picture of him emerges that is not shot through and through with paradox. At least three people who knew him better than I have said to me, in those exact words, 'He kept his life in separate compartments.' Here, it seems, is an immediate parallel with his early modal philosophy, according to which life keeps *itself* in separate compartments, so that, for example, history, science and practice, being totally different worlds of meaning, can have no common ground and no authority over each other.

But we must avoid biographical reductionism. If it is wrong to reduce a man's life to a mere product of his toilet training, it is equally wrong to reduce his work to an epiphenomenon of his biography, both in principle, because his work stands or falls by its own merits, and because we could equally well say that the parallels between his life and his work could have a contrary causal explanation. Oakeshott's work was ideas; and there is much to suggest that, so far from those ideas' being a rationalization of the life he chose to live, the life he lived was the consequence of a principled and far from cost-free attempt to put them into practice. On the other hand, we should remember that for Oakeshott ideas are typically the precipitate of practice. This circularity obviously poses serious problems for his philosophy, but my guess is that they are not insoluble.

I am glad to see that we have a panel devoted to Oakeshott and religion. Oakeshott, it should not surprise anyone to hear, was always a religious person, albeit in some highly attenuated sense. Their father being an agnostic (and also a founding father of the Fabian Society), Oakeshott and his brothers were brought up orthodox Christians by their mother. Oakeshott then imbibed a Christianized, Wordsworthian-Hegelian pantheism from his secondary school headmaster, Cecil Grant. Having spent two university summer vacations in Germany studying theology and German literature, he was still a fairly orthodox believer when he married in 1927, as was his wife and former schoolmate Joyce Fricker, a graduate of the Slade School of Art. Together they collaborated on a little album of religious devotions, which is in the possession of their son Simon, and which I have seen. He chose the texts, while she calligraphed and illustrated them very ably in a style midway between the Aesthetic Movement (Walter Crane, Kate Greenaway, etc.) and Omega Workshops.

Both abandoned literal belief as their marriage began to falter. But the mystical sense – the conviction that there is another dimension to everyday existence than the merely visible – never left Oakeshott, as one might guess from the pages on religion in *On Human Conduct*. He told me, incidentally, that he always went to chapel on his regular return visits to Caius, Cambridge, of which he was a Life Fellow. The pleasant, monastic, non-denominational and non-dogmatic atmosphere of a college chapel will have suited his temperament ideally.

Nothing has struck me more in my recent months working at LSE than how radical and deep, like his romanticism, Oakeshott's mystical vein was. It permeates his literary, cultural and philosophical tastes, as those disclose themselves in his archived correspondence – which, I should say, overwhelmingly consists of letters to rather than from him. It was essentially a secularized 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. This is not a reward for virtue, but both virtue itself and an operation of grace. ('St Augustine is my great man,' said Oakeshott to me, and doubtless to many others.) Oakeshott defended capitalism, because it was an index (and up to a point a condition) of the freedom he valued, but no one was ever less materialistic or took less thought for the morrow. He was totally uninterested in money, giving it away lavishly, either in presents to friends or in cash to needy pupils, or in settlement of the various

obligations, which he willingly shouldered, incurred by his bohemian lifestyle. He died almost penniless, leaving only his Dorset cottage and a few thousand pounds to family and friends.

Since May I have photographed some five thousand pages of notebooks and letters, and (unlike my cervical vertebrae) am still not anything like finished. Oakeshott's second wife Kate's letters alone make a pile five feet high. Of these there are thirty-nine files, and it took me a week to read four. By 'reading', of course, I mean only skimming things to see whether they are worth photographing, taking away and studying at leisure. Other researchers will understandably be eager to benefit from my labours in this respect, and to them I say, just for the moment, be patient. I now have, in JPEG form, twenty-one notebooks from the archive, and in addition a crucial eight years' worth which are still in private hands, all on CD. These latter are earmarked for my exclusive use in the biography, and, as a condition of access, I have promised not to make them generally available.

I should add that I also had a list of about thirty interviews to conduct, of which I have completed, or at least begun, a third. Once the primary research is done and its lessons absorbed, the writing-up should not take long. What I shall then do is donate my entire stock of material (barring the private stuff) to the LSE, together with all Oakeshott's father's papers, the originals of which his grandson Simon Oakeshott has given to me to do with as I wish. I shall also encourage the owners of private material to donate it similarly, to be held, but only should they so wish, in closed files during their or other relevant parties' lifetimes. You may like to know that the notebooks, just as Oakeshott told me in 1987, contain almost nothing about politics, though they will be of great interest to literary and cultural historians. But as I say, if you want to save yourself months and months of work, not to mention what may be expensive travel and accommodation, just wait a bit, and everything that I have, copyright and confidentiality permitting, will be electronically yours for the asking. (Subject to the same provisos, I could also lodge duplicates with the MOA.) Should you wish to accelerate this process, supposing also (let us say) that you chance to head a vast educational foundation, some help with the primary documentation, which any graduate student could do under supervision, and which a team of research assistants could have completed in a month or two, would hasten the final delivery, and my own deliverance, no end.