

# Isaiah Berlin

*A life*

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I first encountered Berlin in the pages of the New York Review around 1980. What I specifically remember is a report on a visit of his to the Russian poet Akhmatova in Leningrad just after the war. The name must have stuck, because when I in the summer of 1983 bicycled through England and stayed overnight at the quarters of the young mathematician Donaldson, I recall the nameplate of Berlin on the apartment below. What is so great about Berlin, besides being a kind of high-level cultural journalist?

The book is not exactly a hagiography, but it is the outcome of ten years of labour by the author, seeing the great sage, teasing out of him episodes out of his life, in order to stitch together a kind of biography, because the great sage himself would not be bothered by writing one himself. Friendship and veneration, may not be the ideal qualities that you look for in a biographer. A life lived should be viewed unsentimentally, not to say harshly, because every biography is in the nature of an exemplary tale, in which the shortcomings of the subject are often as instructive as the very virtues, that may have been the original impetus for the biography itself.

Berlin was born and brought up as a single child in the household of a Jewish merchant and his wife. The single child is often pampered, being the exclusive beneficiary of parental attention, a position as privileged as it may also be lonely, often with great expectations added on. Berlin turned out to be a very precocious boy, and as a precocious boy he would live most of his life. It was a charmed life, colored by an exotic initial setting, including life during the Russian revolution, a setting and background that would stand him in good stead in his subsequent career. He came to Britain as a child, late enough not to have forgotten his native tongue and culture, but early enough to allow a successful assimilation in his adopted country. And his career would be that of a fairy-tale, secluded in an elitist academic milieu, that of Oxford in the late twenties and thirties, to which he was early on introduced to the inner circles, through his election to All Souls College at a tender age. He started out as a philosopher, but the exacting discipline of analytic philosophy did not really suit his temperament. His forte was talking and social thinking, his conversation being legendary and as such the foundation of his reputation; not secluded thinking of a sustained technical variety. Gradually he drifted into the history of ideas, nebulous enough to fit his genius for association and acquisition, social enough to give full scope for his craving to talk and think out aloud. As a scholar he was an anomaly, not much publication, mostly talk and talk. This was a perennial source of discomfort to him, was he really up to par, maybe only an impostor, sooner or later to be exposed for the bluff he really was. Two curses haunt the mind of an academic. The first is the frustration of not being appreciated enough; the second, far more common, of being thought too highly of, living on borrowed time on an inflated reputation, sooner or later to be punctured. Berlin

was born under a lucky star, the moment of truth, as dreaded, never struck him, at least not while still alive.

To many of us, living in a College of Oxford or Cambridge, strike us as close to heaven, as one may realistically expect this side of death. Such sequestered existences are often disparaged as being imprisonments into Ivory towers. Like most clichés this certainly contains a grain of truth, but basically it is very misleading. A purely intellectual life is often a life of total irrelevance, but it could also be a life close to power and influence. The select company to which he was elected, opened many a door, as the members did not only consist of other-wordly academics, but also politicians. During the war we find our hero, courtesy of his friends in high places, in the midst of Washington sending dispatches of the political situation, with particular focus on American attitudes towards the British. The situation suited him perfectly. Those dispatches were written with enough verve to get the attention of Churchill, to whose presence he was admitted a few times. Churchill being just one of the names dropped in this biography, which at times tends to reduce to a cavalcade of famous men (and occasional women) who happened to cross the paths of Berlin, and through whom the reader may vicariously experience the thrill of brushing with celebrity. Celebrity being a mixed bag, including Greta Garbo (who found that he had beautiful eyes), Albert Einstein (whom he thought had the inhumanity of a child), Pablo Picasso (who did not take lightly to his funny story about the dying Spanish sage admitting that he found Dante boring) and John F. Kennedy (whom he met on the very same day that precipitated the Cuban Missile crisis, and found listening to him almost disturbingly attentively). His involvement with the Zionist Weizmann, was more to the point, and his social skills allowed him to keep on at the same time friendly relations with the rival Ben Gurion. Berlin was a reluctant Zionist. As a Jew and a displaced one, he was certainly in sympathy with creating a Jewish homeland, which would allow them the freedom to finally be able to chose the ordinary; yet his identification with Britain and the life he led there, was stronger, leading him into conflicts of loyalty, as the Zionist cause was in collision with the interests of the British. Being a Jew was something inescapable, it was a fact, like the deformity of a hunchback, that simply could not be willed away. Religion certainly played a part in it, but disavowing the Jewish religion in particular and religious faith in general, did not make you a non-Jew. There was culture, and its concomitant expectations, as well as simple ties of blood to account for. Berlin was not a believer, but he had a fondness for ritual, and thus took exceptions to attempts to displace Orthodox Judaism with a lighter variant. After all, and here I am in full temperamental agreement with him, the point of tradition is its very authenticity as manifested by its irrational nature that is simply bequested to us by the past, not something that is designed as yet another option.

Berlin was not a very deep or original philosophical thinker. Few are, and those who are can usually be counted on your fingers. His philosophical credo was that human values are in conflict with each other, each with their own irreducible character, but mutually incommensurable and incompatible. Liberty being one of the prime values for reasons to be seen below, yet conflicting with justice among others, and when liberty is compromised in the interest of say justice, it means a loss of liberty that can never be compensated by the increase in justice. They are simply incommensurable, there are no exchange rates.

Thus any choice, and Berlin was adamant about free will and the possibility of choice, because it is only the possibility of choice that enables an individual to be human; involves an inevitable loss. Politics, Berlin argues, is a necessity of life, just like eating and sleeping; but it is not an emancipatory activity, it has no value by itself, and man should be allowed to be apolitical. Although Berlin was sympathetic to colonial emancipation, he wanted it to be seen for what it was, not liberation per se, but simply a desire to be seen and recognized. If it was presented as a liberation, it only meant that it would be making promises that could not be delivered. A prescient remark that has been proved true in much of post-colonial experience. Politics, Berlin argued, cannot, pace Marx and others, relieve man from his inner conflicts and turmoils. In other words politics is not about the absolute, it should be confined to a limited sphere.

Much of what Berlin proposed had of course precedents. He was after all a historian of ideas who reveled in reading. Philosophy as well as literature is a question of influence, borrowing from the past, but putting your own touch to it, and the test of Berlin's philosophy is not so much its originality as the further clarifications and ramifications he presents. He chose to contrast the ideas of the Enlightenment with those of the Romantics. The Enlightenment had many virtues, the rejection of authority and the guiding light of reason being the most obvious one. But to the Enlightenment belongs the illusion that every problem has a solution, and that man should always be rational. To the latter he could trace the tendencies in progressive political thought to interpret the true interest of man, to impose on him what he should think and desire, stamping out any irrational behaviour. But by doing so, Berlin argued, you simply remove the option of choice, and without this option, man becomes a mere machine. The great contribution of the Romantics, he pointed out, was that they rediscovered choice and free-will, than man creates himself and his values, and as such they are not perennial but subjected to times and circumstances. There are no best ways, values do conflict, and choice means loss as well as gain. But the danger of the Romantic idea was the emphasis on the individual and his need to belong to a specific context, thus neglecting the universal nature of Man, that there are in fact some basic values, transcending the accidents of race and culture, and whose rejection also would mean rejection of humanity itself. Without this caveat, Berlin would have put himself in an untenable position; because if values are too consistently relativized, anything that would survive would go. In personal matter Berlin thought of himself as a man of the Left, although he often find himself most at home with those of the Right. In his writings and lectures he tended not to mention the Holocaust, although as many Jews he had been personally affected by it, concentrating his criticism instead on the excesses of Stalin and Communism rather than those of the Nazis. This might have been fine in the early years of the Cold War, but as Holocaust studies expanded in later decades, such a position earned him censure. To his defence one may add that the atrocities of Nazism belonged to the past, and that it took no courage, nor had any practical consequences to denounce it; while the threats and dangers of Communism were here and now and had to be addressed in real time. As Cold Warriors Berlin may be compared with Kennan, although the former lacked the focus of the latter. Thus Berlin thought that American involvement in Vietnam was wrong, yet once they were there they could not escape their responsibility, particularly in the view of the Dominion theory, to which he adhered. Berlin's attitude of the Student

revolts of '68 was one of derision, and he despised those of his colleagues who pandered to their antics<sup>1</sup>. Yet his refusal of political commitment did not prevent him from having many Marxist students as well as enjoying their high regard.

There are few piquante features in Berlins life, the only exception being his sex-life. Oxford and Cambridge were hotbeds of both intensive and deviant sex-life during his decades of manhood. He certainly was privy to much of it, his gossipy nature leading him to view it with fascination tempered by the distaste due to his priggish and fastidious temperament. He thought of himself as physically unattractive, somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy, eagerly confirmed by women, who thought of him as asexual, charming but totally undangerous. This did not prevent some of them to get emotionally involved with him, which moved him out of his depth<sup>2</sup>. His sexual debut did not occur until the mature age of forty-one, when he uncharacteristically seduced a married woman known for her adventures. Her name is tactfully not mentioned in the biography, nor that of her husband, ostensibly a friend and colleague of Berlin. An exciting affair followed for a few years to be terminated by another affection, also with a married woman, leading to a divorce and subsequent re-marriage. For obvious reasons her identity cannot be hidden, as they lived happily thereafter for forty odd years. Conflict and anguish are interesting to read about, success and happiness is not, and thus the latter half of the book becomes inevitably somewhat tedious. Married life turns out to be ridiculously happy and fulfilling, soon to be complemented by real fame resulting in a knighthood<sup>3</sup>. One peculiar interlude is Berlins Presidency of creating a new College in Oxford, where his excellent contacts proved him to be an effective fund-rasier. Once again showing that knowing the right people is the key to success. Networking in modern language<sup>4</sup>. Still the fund-raising was not without its drama, the mood of the country at the time was egalitarian, and anything Oxbridge was suspicious, but in the end, as in all good fairy-tales, it came out all right.

Happiness is not a charm against death, not in the long run anyway. Every reflective person fears death, although there are a variety of subterfuges. One that appealed to Berlin was the old Epicurian saying, to the effect that where death is you are not, and where you are, death is not; or in modern garb as formulated by Wittgenstein 'death is not an event in your life'. Those are easy to lean against when health is good, and death is still an abstraction and an exotic possibility. Harder it is to draw real comfort when the inevitable approaches, although the very act of struggle, may then be enough of a distraction to ward off the existential angst. In the summer of 1988 he had his first brush, hospitalization followed, but as usual at an advanced age, recovery is less of an option than temporary postponements. The one crises tends to come closer on the other, until the near death events follow in quick succession, converging to that limit that borders life,

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<sup>1</sup> Especially Marcuse comes in for some harsh words

<sup>2</sup> One woman getting infatuated with him, subsequently lost her mind

<sup>3</sup> Berlin first wanted to reject the offer as so much a funny hat, but was easily persuaded to accept, not at least by his mother

<sup>4</sup> A natural question is to what extent Berlin simply was a social climber? Any man engaging in an active social life invariably makes many useful contacts. It is not so easy to separate the strains of purpose and ambition, from those of simple exuberance and charm. Whether intended or not, and it is hard to wholly attribute his success to pure disinterest, the effects were the same.

but yet is not part of it. Following a desperate operation, the patient chokes and dies.

So what is his legacy? Not much was published, a few books, more like essays than sustained efforts of synthesis<sup>5</sup>. But once again he was lucky, out of nowhere a certain Henry Hard showed up, and eventually decided to make it his lifes ambition to be the literary executioner of Berlins estate, even while the writer was still alive. He was given free hands with the papers, and salvaged incomplete works, written down but unpublished lecture notes, and even rescuing old documentation by dictaphone<sup>6</sup>, and thus in the end producing a respectable oeuvre, which Berlin had been to careless and lazy to collect himself.

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<sup>5</sup> In fact Berlin tried for many years to work out his lectures on Romanticism and the Enlightenment to an overarching book, but eventually lost faith and got overwhelmed by all his notes and simply gave up.

<sup>6</sup> Necessitating detective works in museums to unearth the appropriate reading equipment