

## A Personal History

*A.J.P. Taylor*

March 1 - 6, 2011

A.J.P. Taylor was a leftist and a successful historian, especially when it came to popular success, something which no doubt was resented by his more academic colleagues, even more so than his political views. The latter may not have had an obvious provenience, after all his father had inherited a successful cotton business. Nevertheless both his parents developed strong leftist views as well as engaged in political activism. The suffragette movement played an especially important part, Taylor, the only surviving child, took after his parents, something which is very common, also when it comes to political views. More to the point, Taylor early showed scholarly promise, something that often estranges you from your peers even if it may earn you grudging respect. In particular he was a voracious reader, often finishing a book in a single day, a pace he seems to have sustained for most of his life, not always sticking to high-quality literature<sup>1</sup>. His early years involved a lot of moving around, his residence at Buxton in the Peak District being particularly congenial to him. He developed a taste for hiking which would serve him in good stead for the rest of his life. His school days were both happy and sad, as to be expected. Some school such as Downs was a nightmare, run by a sadistic couple, a subsequent - Boothham, was a heaven in comparison, and as he said made him as an individual, although he explains the latter at least as much as a consequence of his somewhat strange home life. His mother was infatuated with other men, while his father showed great tolerance and patience as to her emotional waywardness, something Taylor himself would display in his adult life. But as a compensation, his father developed a strange emotional attachment to a younger woman, whom he later would give away in marriage. All in all he seems to have been closer and more sympathetic to his father than to his mother. In 1924 he entered Oxford.

It turned out to be a strange place, the secrets of which he seemed unable to fathom. Take such a case as religion and the inexplicable rites going on in Anglican churches, which seemed to be taken for granted. Taylor had earlier developed an architectural interest in old English churches and spent many an hour visiting country churches; but what was really going on inside them, and to what purpose they had been erected had so far escaped him. But the real disappointment of Oxford was that it was not such an intellectual place as he had expected. The students went there not out of any commitment to learning but in order to be stamped for approval for future well-paid jobs in the civil service. Academic work was an irksome interference with beer drinking and football. Apart from some attempts to conform, such as joining a rowing team, Taylor went his own ways, made some friends and came into contact with some mildly interesting and eccentric people. His leftist political views he brought with him, adding further to his own eccentricity. Among his adventures was a trip to the Soviet Union in 1925. This was in the heyday of the NEP period, and the country was almost free. No organized tours but the possibility of looking around on your

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<sup>1</sup> He did not disdain detective stories, and found Henry James unreadable and incomprehensible

own. It would prove to make a deep impression on him. The flirtation with the Communist Party occurred early in his life, and so did the disillusionment. Thus in the thirties he was spared the soul-searching agonies of his contemporaries, such as those of Auden and Spender. As he put it. Having once had the measles, he was immune to catching it again. Yet he was to remain pro-Russian, and thought that the Five Year Plans were wonderful thing putting socialism in action. The problem with the Soviet Union was the dictatorship not the socialism. Of course Oxbridge life at the period strikes later observers as idyllic, but obviously not to Taylor, who in particular resented the dearth of women. The final examination at Oxford made him very nervous, he muddled through though, and got a First. For the money he was awarded as a prize he bought the collected works of Dickens, an author he strangely had ignored until then. He thought that he was through with Oxford at the time, maybe resenting a bit that he had not really savored what it had to offer, closed off as he was by his Marxist views.

So now he was ready for life. Except that Oxford had in no way prepared him for it. He made a short stint working in a solicitors office headed by his maternal uncle. It was not a success. A momentary return to Oxford and than an extended continental sojourn mostly in Vienna. It gave opportunities to meet women and have some short-lived affairs. One of them to which he was introduced by a friend, was a young English woman - Margaret Adams, studying English and the piano. Eventually they would marry, have four children, and prove to be in many ways as mismatched a couple as had his parents been. But of that there was at the incipency naturally no indication. Perhaps more significantly though, in 1930 he was offered a position at Manchester where he would stay for eight years.

His first assignment was to give a long lecture course on European History, forty-eight lectures from the end of the 15th century to 1815, and then another forty-eight to 1914. He knew some of this, but of course not all, and had to learn on the job. Not an unusual predicament. As he would later find out. He was always good at accepting assignments, of being told what to do, as opposed to find subjects on his own. This might at first seem a bit strange, although it is quite natural. The imagination is fired when there are a lot of constraints. If there are none, you are at sea, everything is possible and hence possible to be replaced by anything else. Manchester of 1930 was still an industrial city out of the 19th century. Grim, dirty and I guess gritty. In a way it must have suited his temperament. It was here he also met the great historian Lewis Namier who was to become the professor of history. To his great chagrin Namier has often been seen as his mentor and teacher, but Taylor claims that he was completely self-taught when he met Namier, and probably taught and instructed him, especially in the intricacies of the English university system. Relations between them would be good and mutually supportive until at the end, Namier betrayed him. Although in retrospect he admitted that the great man fun as he might appear was really a big bore, unless you happened to be particular interested in his current obsession in history. Nonetheless the man must have been important to him, as he would later compare him with Beaverbrook, that unlikely friendship which would be such an unexpected blessing to the later Taylor, and would not end in betrayal. It was also at this stage he married the above-mentioned Margaret, but not without serious trepidation. As usual in such circumstances it was a case of either marrying or breaking up. The latter

being more definitive than the former, even if at the time, marriage was considered a firm commitment, the former eventually turns out to be the lesser of two evils. Yet he found out that at his first attempt, he simply could not go through with it, she was naturally very upset left for a tour to Russia, and when she returned he got to have a second try.

The early marriage turned out to be a great success. Taylor was getting in gear, becoming both an effective teacher as well as an effective historian. No children, no cares, and with an apartment to be abandoned at a moments notice, they were free to go on various weekend trips. Later on Taylor would like to move out in the country side, meaning the Lake District. The search for a suitable abode was not successful which was in retrospect a blessing. Why live eighty-five miles from work. Instead he got the advise to look at the Peak District, and soon they found a place just outside Disley. two seventeenth century cottages knocked into one. It was a truly rural experience with the customary drawbacks. In the Peak District that meant a lot of snow and nowhere really to swim in the summer. More seriously though, as Taylor remarks, farmers are excellent and reliable neighbors, but do not provide much of an exchange when it comes to the mind. Public transport was another problem, but as Taylor at an early stage, even before it became mandatory to have a drivers license became an enthusiastic driver of cars. And indeed he drove his car in all kinds of weather commuting to Manchester.

What about work? There was perhaps some neglect, on the other hand he refers proudly to his 'The Italian Problem in European Diplomacy 1847-49'. As to the necessary research, he had first been apprehensive as he thought that would be unable to read Italian sources. On the contrary, as he remarks flippantly, anyone can read Italian, no previous study is necessary. The research on the subject actually taught him some valuable lessons, something he had not expected the study of History to provide. Still failing to take his doctors degree he was treated badly by the university, essentially doing the work of a professor but being given a measly salary. But of course being underpaid pays a moral dividend. More books would follow, and always as a result of assignments and suggestions. Taylor would pride himself on his special ability to combine sound scholarly work with being funny. In his opinion the writings of a historian are not good unless the readers get the same pleasure out of it as they do from a novel. This attitude of his was whetted and put to test with his sustained relation with the Manchester Guardian, which gave him an excuse to nourish the journalistic side of his personality. Something which later would blossom in radio talk and television appearances.

The end of the thirties displayed the rise of Nazism. The stand of Taylor was obvious. He suspected, and possibly rightly so, that the British Government was more anti-Communist than anti-Nazi, and that it was not above propping up German finances and maybe helping it to rearm. In fact that would it come to an attack of Hitler on Stalin, they would be predisposed to ally themselves with the former. Namier, as Jew, despised Soviet Russia, but otherwise the two of them looked upon the contemporary world in the same way. On a more personal plane, Taylor now came in contact with Dylan Thomas, a man whom he despised intensely. Thomas was cruel, a sponger, a liar, and of course also a serious drunkard, enhancing all his previous defects. That his wife Margaret would develop a crush and admiration for the wayward poet obviously did not help matter. As for his poetry he only had scorn as well. His method as a poet seemed to Taylor to be to at first

write something straightforward, then to tinker with it until it became incomprehensible, thus showing great contempt for his readers. Not a very pleasant topic, so much more pleasant was the birth of his first child - Giles, in 1937. More would follow. And his children would prove to be his closest and most trusted friends for the rest of his life, allowing him to weather the storms of his marriages. Soon thereafter in 1938 he returned to Oxford as a tutor at Magdalen College. He had applied for the position without enthusiasm and was as he wrote not at all gay at the news of having been accepted. Oxford had been at some level fun to be at during his youth, but had he not outgrown that? It meant selling their home in Disley, where he had according to his views had five very happy years, maybe the five happiest in his life. Happy in work, family, friends and surroundings. As he writes, five years of happiness may not be much, but surely better than nothing.

His second encounter with Oxford was in many ways similar to his first. True, this time he knew his way around the streets, but his feeling of being an outsider was as strong as before. Oxford struck him as a small provincial town unaware of the large world out there. The examination system was antiquated, a good tutor being one who was able to teach his students the best tricks for passing examinations. As to tutoring itself, Taylor was of the opinion that with a very able student there might be a point having a long individual session, with most students, however, having them in threes or fours was the most efficient way of handling them. As when it comes to colleagues, some gossip is provided. C.S.Lewis was a distinguished literary scholar with a curious combination of adult skills with adolescent taste. And although Taylor met him for many years he could never tell what was on his mind. For the philosopher Austen he had admiration. Surely someone whom he could never understand must be truly brilliant. And then there is a certain Dixon. A mathematician but too old to do any serious creative work. He, in Taylors opinion was the most cultured man in the college. He was fluent in French and German, and the only one able to converse with Gide on equal terms, when the latter came to visit. Still, as far as Oxford was concerned, I did not exist, Taylor laments. Then there are the acerbic jokes, as when a German couple going to East-Africa was confident that it would be soon German again, and Taylor reflects that they could very well be right, nothing would be beyond the Chamberlain government. And he remarks on Keynes unscrupulousness as being typical of a homosexual. Hardly politically correct, not even back in the early eighties.

And the war came, and Taylor was terrified that France and England would take the Finnish-Soviet war as an excuse to join forces with Hitler. According to him, he was right, they did their best to switch but were only saved by their incompetence. Subsequently he was not surprised by the French defeat, he had never expected them to fight. He worried slightly about a German invasion, but soon realized that it was unlikely. The War did not ruffle academic life too deeply. A certain Tizard was offered the post as head of Magdalen, as a compensation for having been sidestepped for a favorite of Churchill. A mots worthy fellow, able to lead a discussion and field a report better than anyone, as long as he did not encounter opposition. As Taylor notes, in spite of his obvious timidity, or because of it, he was returned to the post as chief advisor on defence when the war was over. As to the end of the war, he much preferred Russian domination of Eastern Europe to German, and expected them to be more and more independent. For the Poles he could

muster little sympathy, unlike for the Yugoslavs, of which he would remain very fond. Basically his assessment of the situation was that the Soviet Union sought security not world domination, thereby invalidating the major argument for the Cold War situation. According to him the most disastrous and mistaken event in his lifetime. As the Korean War unfolded, his position was that this was yet another instance of perpetual war for the sake of perpetual peace. Of course he was right, he writes in retrospect, but he was right too soon, and hence his points were not recognized. The Korean war, was in his words, a murderous folly that achieved nothing. As things would evolve, it became more and more clear, that to the West, democracy was the same thing as anti-Communism

After the war his first marriage broke up. His wife became passionately infatuated with a former student of his, and followed him around, much to his intense embarrassment. Her enthusiastic and unqualified support for Dylan certainly did not improve matters, on the contrary it humiliated him, especially as Dylan went around bragging about the help he got. That was in many ways the last straw. And perhaps more than anything else, she had renegaded on a solemn promise, and what Taylor had from his father was the notion of the sanctity of a contract.

As already noted, the best work of Taylor was never out of his own initiative but prompted by others. One particular example was his assignment to write on international relations between 1848 and 1914, suggested by Bullock and Deakin, to be included in their projected twenty volume series of 'The Oxford History of Modern Europe'. His contribution that came out in 1954 was for many years the only volume in the series, and at the time of his writing, thirty years after the launching, only six volumes were included. This was also the time in which he was enlisted by BBC, and later when proving to be too controversial in his views, engaged by independent channels. I guess something can be said for the abolishment of government monopoly, especially when it comes to the media. He also was at his height at the mature age of fifty when it came to academic history. Historians, unlike mathematicians, mature late; or so is the conventional wisdom. As a public lecturer, Taylor never read from a script, he was confident enough of his powers of extemporization. That certainly must have enhanced the natural spontaneity of his delivery, and the easy humor that inspired his expositions, and enabled him to keep as large an audience at the end as in the beginning.

The end of life is never as exciting as the beginning. Memoirs tend to engage the reader during the early years, apart from the customary treatment of parents and ancestors which seems to be felt as obligatory: This is not surprising. They make for easy identification. The subsequent years of glory tend to be less exciting, although fame may have its sweet compensations in later life to the one on which it is bestowed, but to read about it tends to be boring. Taylor had his triumphs and recognitions, but still there were some romantic interludes. There was a second marriage, which also resulted in issue, two children as a matter of fact. For strange reasons that is the only thing which is mentioned about it, the name of the wife is left in the dark. However, the third marriage to have been unusually romantic and satisfying to come so late in the day. It is as if he for the first time realized what a sexual reunion really meant. He waxes lyrically about the double bed. But another romantic adventure, if not of any at least overt sexual overtones, was his friendship with lord Beaverbrook, an unlikely 'bed-fellow' if any, but the two men seem in spite of obvious

differences have hit it off very well. This is not too unusual a phenomenon.

All in all the memoirs are eminently readable written with his usual flair. All memoirists try to come out sympathetic, after all this is in most cases the driving motivation for the exercise; but not everyone succeeds. Taylor certainly does. The cover picture on my copy is a delight. It shows an oil-painting of the man, in which he appears as everybody's favorite grand dad. A head of white hair, friendly eyes peering softly out of glasses. A small bow-tie, a wrinkled jackets, hands folded in his lap. Still the man was very outspoken when the need arose, not afraid of controversy, nor of opposition which tended to stimulate him rather than intimidate him. You could have a far worse grandfather.

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