

## Isaiah Berlin, OM

Sir Isaiah Berlin, who has died aged 88, was one of the foremost liberal thinkers of the 20th century.

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No one has written more convincingly or lucidly about the world of thought. In the estimation of Lord Annan, Berlin produced "the truest and most moving of all interpretations of life that my own generation has made".

Berlin came to prominence at a time when the world was divided by political ideology, and his most important work was in political thought. Perhaps his greatest achievement of all was to turn the attention of post-war philosophy, which was largely pre-occupied with esoteric problems of linguistics and logic, to the consideration of the political issues of the age.

Berlin saw the totalitarian advances of the previous decades in the East, and their intellectual apologists in the West, as an enormous threat to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of liberty and freedom. His passionate defence of J S Mill's view of liberty, and his attack on the Hegelian conception of it, in *Four Essays on Liberty*, became the starting point for any modern discussion on freedom, and also helped to revive a subject that had fallen into the doldrums.

The essay and the lecture were the forms in which Berlin excelled. Yet his reputation stretched far beyond, reaching those who had neither read his work nor heard his lectures. Rather in the 19th-century manner, his personal influence outstripped that of his scholarly output, which, though intensely stimulating, was not so extensive.

For most of his life Berlin's home was at Oxford, where he was a Fellow of several colleges and a luminary to generations of undergraduates. But he was a true cosmopolitan, as well-known in New York, Jerusalem and Paris as he was in Britain; and, though scarcely a socialite, he was prominent in many corners of society, with a quite remarkable array of friends and admirers.

Isaiah Berlin was born on June 6 1909 in Riga, Latvia, then part of the Tsarist empire. His father, Mendel Berlin, was a Jewish timber merchant who supplied sleepers to the Russian

railways. In 1915 the family left Riga for Andreapol, and two years later moved to Petrograd, where young Isaiah witnessed both the Liberal and Bolshevik Revolutions of 1917.

Of the events attending the Bolshevik Revolution in November, he recalled the fate of a Liberal newspaper called Day: "It reappeared as Evening, then as Night, then as Midnight, then as Darkest Night, and then, after four or five days or so, it was finally suppressed." Seeing a policeman dragged off to his death by the mob left Berlin with a lifelong horror of physical violence.

Having proved to the Bolsheviks' satisfaction that they were natives of Latvia, the Berlins were allowed to return to Riga, where, in order to keep warm, they were obliged to live in one small room. Isaiah's father was a fervent Anglophile, and in 1919 he brought the family to live in England.

Isaiah was educated as a scholar of St Paul's School and Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he began to read the great philosophers. He had already been interested in philosophy for some years - aged eight he had impressed a five-year old friend with some informal lectures on Schopenhauer.

As an undergraduate he edited a liberal, intellectual journal called The Oxford Outlook. His political views were not, he recalled, pronounced, except for a general support for liberal ideas and progressive forces.

After taking Firsts in Greats and PPE, he moved from one Oxford college to another, briefly teaching philosophy at New College before obtaining, in 1932, a Prize Fellowship of All Souls, where he remained until returning to New College as a Fellow in 1938.

From 1936, a group of Oxford philosophers met regularly to talk in Berlin's rooms. The group included Berlin himself, J L Austin, A J Ayer, Stuart Hampshire and Donald Macnabb. In later life, Berlin regretted that they had been somewhat inward-looking; once they had convinced each other of a proposition, they moved on, seeing no need to publish their results.

Although Berlin made a significant contribution to the ordinary language movement, and published several well-regarded papers on the logic of counterfactual conditionals, he clearly felt uncomfortable with many of the conclusions of the monolithic logical philosophy of the time.

For example, he later came to regard Logical Positivism, which holds that statements are meaningless unless they are capable of being subjected to scientific proof, as a disaster. Logical Positivism's verification principle dismissed entire areas of human experience out of

hand - statements about the arts, music and the world of the spirit under the theory were simply meaningless, a conclusion which Berlin found unacceptable.

Berlin's first book, published in 1939, was a study of Karl Marx. He was commissioned to write the book by H A L Fisher, but only (so Berlin claimed) after it had been offered to Harold Laski, Frank

Pakenham and Richard Crossman. The result, *Karl Marx*, has seldom been out of print.

During the Second World War, Berlin served as a British official in America, first with the Information Service in New York, from 1941 to 1942, and then at the Embassy in Washington, from 1942 to 1944.

Baron Guy de Rothschild (a kinsman of Berlin's future wife Aline) encountered Berlin in New York. "The most immediately striking thing about him was his unconventional appearance," de Rothschild remembered, "his peculiar air of seeming to float in his clothing."

In Washington, where he lodged in Dick Heathcoat Amory's basement, Berlin discovered - to his delight - that women found him attractive. Before going to America he had observed his contemporaries "in all kinds of emotional situations", but had himself "lived in a college like a monk".

At the Washington Embassy, Berlin assembled all the American political intelligence he could muster, and served it up in highly readable form. His weekly briefings to London commenting on the American scene became celebrated in Whitehall for their wit, insight and lucidity - suggesting to some who saw them that Berlin might have missed his metier as a journalist.

They were read with notable pleasure by Winston Churchill, and when, in 1944, a visitor from America named I Berlin (wrongly assumed to be Isaiah, but in fact the songwriter Irving Berlin) arrived in London, he was summoned to lunch at Downing Street to be closely questioned by Churchill on Roosevelt's chances of re-election for a fourth term.

After the baffled Irving Berlin had left No 10, Churchill, wilting from the long and ill-informed discourse on American politics he had just heard, pronounced that Mr Berlin did not seem to talk as well as he wrote.

That was anything but the case with Isaiah Berlin, who in half a dozen languages was one of the most spell-binding, and amusing, talkers of his time. His deep, sonorous voice and high-

speed conversational cascade, once likened to a running bath tap - and once clocked at nearly 400 words a minute - never failed to delight any gathering he attended.

From 1945 to 1946 Berlin served at the British Embassy in Moscow. The Foreign Office had told him that he should expect only to meet Russian officials, but in the event he met writers, including two whom he considered to be "poets of genius" - Boris Pasternak and Anna Akhmatova.

Berlin described his two meetings with Akhmatova in a touching essay, published in *Personal Impressions* (1980). "To know her," he said, "was one of the greatest privileges and most moving experiences of my life."

Akhmatova had not met anyone from the West since 1917, and she, too, was moved by their encounter; in her *Poem without a Hero*, Berlin appears as "the Guest of the Future". Stalin was furious that the meetings had taken place, saying, "I see that our nun now receives foreign spies".

A decade later, when Berlin returned to Moscow on a private visit, Pasternak entrusted him with the second typescript copy of *Doctor Zhivago* (the first was already with the publishers in Italy). Berlin read it, with great admiration, in a night, and later gave it to Pasternak's two sisters living in England.

During his wartime service in America, Berlin had a conversation with the Harvard logician H M Sheffer, which prompted him to switch from philosophy to the study of intellectual history and political theory.

Berlin always retained a highly modest view of his work as a pure philosopher. Discussing his decision to leave the subject, he commented: "Philosophy can only be done by very clever people. I didn't think I'd ever be good enough. In the end, I thought it wasn't for me because I didn't lie awake in bed at night thinking of solutions to agonising philosophical problems."

But he continued to consider philosophy vitally important. In the essay *The Purpose of Philosophy*, in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays* (1978), he wrote that "the goal of philosophy is always the same, to assist men to understand themselves and thus operate in the open, and not wildly, in the dark".

In 1950 Berlin went back to All Souls, and remained a Fellow there during his tenure of the Oxford University Chichele Chair of Social and Political Theory from 1957 to 1967.

Berlin was ideally suited to the Chair. Before the war he had read widely among the European thinkers of the past. As Chichele Professor he wrote about writers as diverse as Tolstoy, Machiavelli and Josef de Maistre with the vigour and clarity of a true member of the English empirical tradition, drawing profound insights from careful analysis of their lives and work.

Berlin's wide learning, intuitive empathy and elegant prose made his conclusions compelling. He praised Machiavelli for being the first writer to deny that there is one single truth which will solve the problems that have occupied philosophers for nearly 3,000 years. Berlin came to believe that the ends of life cannot form a unified whole, that there is no way of proving that one writer's vision of life is superior to another's.

To many philosophers this seemed suspiciously close to that much despised doctrine, Relativism; but to the liberal intellectual tradition the idea, especially when expressed so learnedly and elegantly, had much to recommend it.

An abiding love of Russian literature gave another string to Berlin's bow. In 1950 he published a translation of Turgenev's *First Love*, and when - unusually for a don of the University - he was asked to give the Romanes lecture at Oxford in 1970, he chose Turgenev's *Fathers and Children* as his subject.

Berlin used to say that there were two authors - both Russian thinkers - for whom he "made propaganda", Lev Shestov and Alexander Herzen. He considered that Herzen's *My Past and Thoughts* were the best memoirs written since Rousseau's, and possibly even better than them.

Of Berlin's collected essays, *Russian Thinkers* (1979), a volume of 10 essays on 19th-century Russian literature and thought, has a special appeal. It includes his celebrated essay *The Hedgehog and the Fox* (1953).

"The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing," is a line from the Greek poet Archilochus. In his essay Berlin divides writers and thinkers into two groups - those who relate everything to a single central vision or universal principle (the hedgehogs), and those who pursue many ends, unrelated by any moral or aesthetic principle (the foxes).

Berlin was also fascinated by the subject of freedom, which he considered best defined in negative terms. "The fundamental sense of freedom," he believed, "is freedom from chains, from imprisonment, from enslavement by others. The rest is an extension of this sense, or else metaphor."

Two Concepts of Liberty (1959), Berlin's inaugural lecture for the Chichele chair (later expanded in *Four Essays on Liberty* (1969) ) remains the most discussed essay on political theory written since the Second World War.

Berlin had used the occasion of his inauguration as Chichele Professor to attack "positive liberty", a Hegelian conception of liberty. It was then fashionable to denigrate J S Mill's view of liberty and to praise T H Green's definition of freedom as the freedom of being one's own master, with all members of society making the best of themselves.

Berlin elegantly demolished the latter concept by showing that the formulation could be used by a totalitarian ruler to justify the worst acts of oppression. The lecture, delivered only two years after the Hungarian uprising of 1956, and at a time when Marxism held sway in numerous universities all over the Western world, was a powerful blow for liberalism and helped to revive the fortunes of political philosophy as a subject.

In his personal politics, so far as they could be discerned, Berlin remained a man of liberal, mildly Leftish, opinions. In the days of apartheid, for example, he deplored a visit to Oxford by a South African cricket team. But it was probably true of Berlin, as of his revered Herzen, that while he disliked the Right, he feared the Left; and in Britain, he steered clear of party politics.

But there was another country to which Berlin also gave his heart. He had taken a keen interest in Zionism since his schooldays, and after the creation of Israel his involvement with it was close. For some time, in succession to Sir Lewis Namier, he acted as unpaid adviser to Chaim Weizmann.

Berlin was a Zionist, he explained, because he believed that, except in Israel, Jews feel a sense of unease and insecurity, however well they are treated, wherever they live. He felt there should be somewhere where Jews would not feel self-conscious, where they could lead "normal, unobserved lives".

No one, he maintained, should be forced to live as a minority. "The purpose of Zionism," he said, "is normalisation; the creation of conditions in which the Jews could live as a nation, like the others."

Berlin's support for the Jewish state never wavered, though like other liberal Zionists he was distressed by the retrogressive, inward-looking nationalism of Israel in recent years. One of his rare pronouncements on public affairs supported the Labour leadership against the Right-wing Likud.

Sympathetic portraits of both Weizmann and Namier appear, along with the essay on Akhmatova, Mr Churchill in 1940 and other essays on friends as disparate as J L Austin and Auberon Herbert, in *Personal Impressions*, the fourth of eight volumes so far published of Berlin's essays, edited by Henry Hardy.

The essays in *Personal Impressions* were described by Berlin himself as resembling 18th-century eulogies, "addresses commemorating the illustrious dead". Like his friend John Austin, who found few pleasures in life equal to that of being able to praise someone unreservedly, Berlin relished the chance to celebrate men and women whom he admired.

In 1991 came a collection of essays *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (the title comes from Immanuel Kant, "Out of the crooked timber of humanity no straight thing was ever made"). The essays address such diverse but interrelated topics as the decline of Utopian ideas in the West, European unity, and the origins of fascism.

In *The Magus of the North: J G Hamann and the Origins of Modern Irrationalism* (1995), Berlin revealed the importance of Johann Georg Hamann as the most radical counter-Enlightenment philosopher. According to Berlin, Hamann lit the fuse of the Romantic Movement, and was perhaps more important than his fellow-Germans Herder, Fichte and Schlegel.

Berlin's tenure of the Chichele Chair ended in 1967. The previous year he had become the first President of Wolfson College, Oxford; he chose to be known as the "President" because he thought that the "Master of Wolfson" would make him sound too much like the son of a Scottish peer. He proved a popular and successful choice, and presided over the college until 1975.

Berlin's other academic appointments and distinctions are too numerous to list in full. Between 1945 and 1982 he was a visiting professor at Harvard, as well as at four other American colleges. From 1966 to 1971 he also held the chair of Humanities at City University, New York.

He was an honorary Fellow of Corpus, St Antony's, Wolfson (Oxford and Cambridge) and New Colleges. From 1963 to 1964 he was President of the Aristotelian Society. He was a Distinguished Fellow of All Souls from 1975.

Berlin also played a part in the cultural life of the nation. He was a director of the Royal Opera House from 1954 to 1965, and again from 1974 to 1987; and a trustee of the National Gallery from 1975 to 1985.

He had a profound knowledge and enjoyment of music; he considered Verdi a "divine genius", Schubert's music "a miracle", and he had a passion for Beethoven's string quartets and Fidelio. He was a great admirer of the pianist Alfred Brendel, whose recitals he rarely missed - "I'm a groupie, you see," he would say. For Berlin's 80th birthday, Brendel organised a concert in his honour at the Royal Festival Hall.

Berlin was appointed CBE in 1946, and knighted in 1957. He liked to recall his old friend Sir William Hayter's puzzled reaction on hearing the news of the knighthood: "I wonder why?" In 1971 Berlin was appointed to the Order of Merit (on hearing the news of which Sir William "almost fainted"), and was elected to the British Academy, which he served as President from 1974 to 1978. He was also a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

In 1977 he was awarded the Jerusalem Prize for his defence of human liberty. He was awarded the Erasmus Prize in 1983 for his contribution to European culture, and the Agnelli Prize in 1987 for his writings on the ethical aspects of modern industrial societies.

"I have been over-estimated all my life," Berlin reflected. "I will not pretend that this has been a source of grave distress. As someone once said to me, it is much nicer to receive more than one's due than one's due, and I cannot deny it. All the same, I cannot deceive myself."

A bachelor until his forties, Isaiah Berlin married, in 1956, Aline Halban, a daughter of Baron Pierre de Gunzbourg. Attractive, chic, mondaine and warm-hearted, Aline Berlin has the distinction of having once been lady golf champion of France.

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