

A Huge Unsorted Heap

Isaiah Berlin's Papers

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'It is utterly impossible to persuade an Editor that he is nobody.'

Thus Hazlitt. Nevertheless, there is occasionally a glorious opportunity for an editor to contribute. The great Oxford man of ideas Isaiah Berlin was an author in need of an editor if ever there was one. A reluctant publisher, he wrote and said a huge amount that he did not print, and needed intellectual impresarios to help him realise his full potential.

I am lucky enough to have been accepted in such a role in 1974, since when thirteen volumes have emerged. Berlin always maintained that this series of books transformed his reputation: it deserved transforming, for Berlin's liberal pluralism has never been more relevant.

The two latest volumes have just appeared – *Freedom and its Betrayal* (radio lectures from 1952) and *Liberty* (an expanded edition of Berlin's most important and famous book, *Four Essays on Liberty*).

My editorial experiences have sometimes been strange and exciting. Perhaps the best moment was the near-miraculous restoration of a large chunk missing from Berlin's vivid study of the obscure Prussian thinker J. G. Hamann, forerunner of romanticism. One day I found a typescript that ended mid-chapter with these words: 'Why are we here? What is our goal? How can we allay the ...'. Later, in Berlin's cellar, I came across a dusty envelope containing several 'Dictabelts', red plastic recording devices from the 1960s. But I found no corresponding Dictaphone machine, and in any case the belts had become too brittle to play.

The National Sound Archive agreed to help. First they tried unsuccessfully to buy Agatha Christie's Dictabelt player at auction. Then they discovered a machine at the Science Museum, but it didn't work. They borrowed it and restored it. The belts were warmed in an oven until

they became pliable, and painstakingly coaxed through the player.

After prolonged delay and suspense, cassette copies of the extremely crackly sound were produced. I listened, trembling; finally I heard Berlin say 'How can we allay the ...', and held my breath. The remainder of the missing chapter followed, plus a large section of the next chapter that I hadn't missed ...

The raw material for my editions, and for Michael Ignatieff's wonderful biography, is in the Berlin archive at the Bodleian Library. When Berlin's friend Lady Gore-Booth asked whether his papers might eventually come to the Library, Berlin replied that he had never thought of himself as possessing any. He left all decisions about the 'huge unsorted heap' to his Literary Trustees – his widow Aline, his stepson the publisher Peter Halban, and myself. After his death we gave the 'heap' to the Bodleian, as the most appropriate home for the papers of one who was nowhere more at home than in Oxford.

Though no hoarder, Berlin was also no thrower-away, and the bulk of his papers is exceptional. Gathered room by room from his home and Colleges, housed at the time of transfer in 250 boxes and several filing cabinets, they range from a dramatic short story about a revenge killing in the Russian Revolution, written in 1922, to his last letter, dated less than a week before his death, to Anatoly Naiman: this refers, appropriately, to their mutual friend Anna Akhmatova, whose famous meeting with Berlin in 1945 was so formative for them both.

Every stage of Berlin's long life is documented: his childhood in Riga and Petrograd, his time in Oxford as undergraduate, professor and founding President of Wolfson, his war work in New York and Washington, his teaching, administration, writing and broadcasting. A wealth of correspondence, which I am slowly editing, reveals his wide circle of friendships and contacts, from Eliot to Russell, from Churchill to Stravinsky, from Margot Fonteyn and Lauren Bacall Bogart to Cecil Beaton and Jacqueline Kennedy. The letters are full of insight and charm, sometimes at his own expense: 'I have always been prone to coloured descriptions of unimportant phenomena'; 'no town has ever taken itself so seriously with so little reason' (of Washington). There are some fine pen-portraits, too, where one comes upon gleams of wit, such as his description of Clarissa Eden as 'very downright and upright'.

Cataloguing began in July 2001. While this is in progress, the collection will not be accessible in its entirety, but individual sections will be opened as soon as work on each is completed. The finished catalogue will make possible the expansion of the existing official Isaiah Berlin website – <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/> – into a major research resource on Berlin and his times.
