MAJOR CONSERVATIVE AND LIBERTARIAN THINKERS

EDITED BY JOHN MEADOWCROFT

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Michael Oakeshott

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Michael Oakeshott

Series Introduction

The *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series aims to show that there is a rigorous, scholarly tradition of social and political thought that may be broadly described as 'conservative', 'libertarian' or some combination of the two.

The series aims to show that conservatism is not simply a reaction against contemporary events, nor a privileging of intuitive thought over deductive reasoning; libertarianism is not simply an apology for unfettered capitalism or an attempt to justify a misguided atomistic concept of the individual. Rather, the thinkers in this series have developed coherent intellectual positions that are grounded in empirical reality and also founded upon serious philosophical reflection on the relationship between the individual and society, how the social institutions necessary for a free society are to be established and maintained and the implications of the limits to human knowledge and certainty.

Each volume in the series presents a thinker's ideas in an accessible and cogent manner to provide an indispensable work for both students with varying degrees of familiarity with the topic as well as more advanced scholars.

The following 20 volumes that make up the entire *Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers* series are written by international scholars and experts.

The Salamanca School	by Andre Azevedo Alves and José Manuel Moreira
Thomas Hobbes	by R. E. R. Bunce
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Milton Friedman	by William Ruger
Russell Kirk	by John Pafford
James M. Buchanan	by John Meadowcroft
The Modern Papacy	by Samuel Gregg
Murray Rothbard	by Gerard Casey
Robert Nozick	by Ralf Bader

Of course, in any series of this nature, choices have to be made as to which thinkers to include and which to leave out. Two of the thinkers in the series – F. A. Hayek and James M. Buchanan – have written explicit statements rejecting the label 'conservative'. Similarly, other thinkers, such as David Hume and Karl Popper, may be more accurately described as classical liberals than either conservatives or libertarians. But these thinkers have been included because a full appreciation of this particular tradition of thought would be impossible without their inclusion; conservative and libertarian thought cannot be fully understood without some knowledge of the intellectual contributions of Hume, Hayek, Popper and Buchanan, among others. While no list of conservative and libertarian thinkers can be perfect, then, it is hoped that the volumes in this series come as close as possible to providing a comprehensive account of the key contributors to this particular tradition.

John Meadowcroft
King's College London

Series Editor's Preface

Michael Oakeshott was one of the principal political philosophers of the twentieth century. His work emphasizes the importance of tradition as well as practical knowledge and experience to civil society and political life. This has led him to be frequently interpreted as a conservative opponent of modernity. But his work also recognizes the pluralism and diversity inherent to in contemporary societies and the consequent need for the state to be organized as a somewhat loose 'civil association' that does not pursue a particular conception of the common good that would inevitably privilege of one group's values over others. This aspect of Oakeshott's work can lead to a reading that places him within the liberal or libertarian tradition.

Oakeshott, then, is a complex and challenging thinker whose work taken as a whole defies simple categorization or easy interpretation. Indeed, of all the thinkers collected in this series, Oakeshott could well be described as the most 'difficult'. Given this, Dr Edmund Neill of Oxford University has done a remarkable job in presenting Oakeshott's work in such a coherent and cogent manner. Neill provides a reliable and accessible account of Oakeshott's thought that demonstrates remarkable insight in synthesising the different aspects of his work into a cohesive whole. Readers of this volume will be left in no doubt that time invested in navigating Oakeshott's thought is time very well spent.

I am confident that this excellent volume will prove indispensable to those unfamiliar with Oakeshott's work, such as students encountering him for the first time, as well as more advanced scholars of political and social thought. As such, this volume makes a crucial contribution to the Major Conservative and Libertarian Thinkers series.

John Meadowcroft
King's College London

Contents

Chapter 1

Michael Oakeshott's Life

At the time of his death in 1990, Michael Oakeshott had at best an ambiguous status, even amongst the educated public. For some, he seemed to be the quintessential Tory philosopher in person, the man who had symbolically ended the Attlee government's intellectual hegemony when he replaced Harold Laski as Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics in 1951, had (along with Friedrich Hayek) undermined the intellectual plausibility of post-war planning and had even provided Margaret Thatcher with a political philosophy. Thus for Richard Crossman, the Labour MP and former Oxford philosophy fellow, he was a 'cavalier iconoclast' who was intent upon destroying the school 'dedicated by the Webbs to the scientific study of the improvement of human society' (Crossman 1951: 60–1); for Ernest Gellner, he was best described as someone who 'damned egalitarian and welfare do-gooding' (Gellner 1995: 3) and for *The Times*'s obituary writer, although he had had no direct influence on her, he 'more than anybody else . . . [had] articulated the real philosophical foundations' of Thatcherite policies (*The Times* 1990: 11). For others, even more negatively, the logical implication of Oakeshott's arguments seemed to be to eliminate the very possibility of political philosophizing altogether, so that one was either entirely at the mercy of whichever tradition one found oneself located, or, alternatively, simply

proceeded on a whim. Thus for Crossman, Oakeshott was guilty of heaping 'contempt and ridicule on Utopians and sentimentalists who believe that the individual can transcend his tradition and that principles are worth fighting for' (Crossman 1951: 60–1), something which the renowned political academic Bernard Crick thought should ultimately be put down to Oakeshott's personality – he was, for Crick, a 'sceptical, polemical, paradoxical, gay and bitter spirit', a 'lonely nihilist' (Crick 1963: 65). A little more positively, some of the academic community regarded Oakeshott respectfully, if somewhat warily, as advocating a particular view of studying politics which stressed the virtues of a particular version of political theorizing, one that deliberately shunned the possibility of quantitative scientific predictions, but also stressed the value of a certain kind of historical investigation of political texts. Unsurprisingly, such an approach tended to appeal to those of a generally conservative disposition, such as Noel O'Sullivan, Nevil Johnson and Kenneth Minogue, but Oakeshott's work had also appealed more widely to those who sought to uphold the value of history in political investigation. Nevertheless before 1990, only one book on Oakeshott had appeared (Greenleaf 1966), and it is only since his death that Oakeshott's work has begun to receive the kind of detailed attention it deserves, though many questions concerning it remain – hence the continuing need for such a book as this. Before going on to examine Oakeshott's work in detail in the remaining chapters, however, let us briefly examine the nature of Oakeshott's life and career.

The second of three brothers, Oakeshott was born in 1901 into a household that was not wealthy, but one which strongly valued education and had a definite interest in politics and culture. His father, the son of a Newcastle postmaster, was a

civil servant working for the Inland Revenue at Somerset House. A Fabian socialist, he was a friend of George Bernard Shaw, and wrote a Fabian pamphlet on the reform of the Poor Law and supported granting votes for women, though he disapproved of the more militant tactics of the suffragettes. Nevertheless, as Oakeshott himself stressed, his father took his role as a non-party civil servant very seriously, even to the extent of not enforcing his political views on his children – he was, Oakeshott declared, 'never a party man, any more than I am', and 'his interests were always more literary than political' (cited in Grant 1990: 12). He was also an agnostic, in contrast to Oakeshott's mother, who was the daughter of a London vicar and worked as a nurse. A woman who took a lifelong interest in doing charitable work, she met Oakeshott's father at the Hoxton Settlement, and later became involved with the Children's Country Holiday Fund, but it was arguably her religious faith that was most important to Oakeshott. Never doctrinally orthodox, religion was something that remained of considerable significance to him throughout his life, as his lyrical description of religion in *On Human Conduct* makes clear (Oakeshott 1975: 81–6). Equally, Oakeshott's religious interests were mediated by a lifelong interest in the work of the French essayist and sceptic, Michel de Montaigne, and this was a passion that he inherited from his father. So although it was only later that Oakeshott developed the arguments that made him famous, he nevertheless owed significant intellectual debts to his parents.

However, although the influence of his parents was important to him, arguably the education that Oakeshott received both at school and university was even more significant in his development. Rather than attending a traditional grammar school, let alone a well-known public school, Oakeshott

went to St George's, Harpenden, an innovative coeducational school which encouraged in Oakeshott a certain nonconformity and bohemianism, which remained throughout his life – though it should be mentioned that he was conventional enough to become Captain of the School. At the heart of the school was its headmaster, the Reverend Cecil Grant, who was a theologian, a socialist, enthusiastic about Pre-Raphaelite art, and a friend of the famous educational reformer, Maria Montessori. Liable to start explaining Kant's categorical imperative and Hegelian metaphysics to fifteen-year-old boys at the least provocation, he was nevertheless remembered by Oakeshott as a 'remarkably "undominating"' personality who sought to impart a 'style of life, rather than a doctrine' (Grant 1990: 119), and who eschewed intellectualization as a value, preferring to let his pupils roam relatively wild to develop themselves as individuals. (As will become clear in subsequent chapters, these were all values that were to be highly significant ones for Oakeshott later – Oakeshott was a determined believer in the importance of practical knowledge, individuality and the plurality of intellectual disciplines.) Subsequently, at Cambridge University, Oakeshott read history as a scholar at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, going up in 1920, narrowly missing having to serve in the First World War. There he read such classic historical authors as Maitland, Stubbs, Dicey, Acton and Ranke (O'Sullivan 2003: 31), but also took options in the history of political thought in both parts of the Tripos, and attended an 'Introduction to Philosophy' course taken by one of the last great Idealist thinkers, J. M. E. McTaggart. Still famous for his arguments concerning the nature of time, McTaggart argued that philosophy was something that aimed at the 'systematic study of the ultimate nature of reality', questioning premises that other

disciplines – such as 'theology' and 'science' – regard as ultimate (McTaggart 1934: 183). (Once again this theme was one that remained important for Oakeshott throughout his life, as we shall subsequently discover.) Having graduated from Cambridge, Oakeshott took the opportunity to pursue his theological interests further, by visiting various important German universities in the 1920s, notably Tubingen and Marburg (where it is possible he may have heard Heidegger lecture – though there is no real direct evidence of this). And as well as reading a wide range of theological literature while in Germany, Oakeshott also took the opportunity to immerse himself in Holderlin, Nietzsche and Burckhardt, tastes that are apparent in his early essays, but which remain as an important subterranean influence throughout his life.

After a short period teaching English literature at King Edward VII grammar school at Lytham St Anne's in Lancashire, Oakeshott returned to Gonville and Caius College as a history fellow in 1927. There he taught a great deal of history to undergraduates, but his writings tended to focus on rather more abstract questions – examining the relationship between philosophy, religion and poetry in particular (see Oakeshott 1993). Of particular significance is the 'Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality', which Oakeshott may have written to gain his MA, which was formally awarded in 1927 (O'Sullivan 2003: 39; Oakeshott 2004: 67–115). This essay identifies philosophy, as McTaggart had done, as the search – through questioning – for ultimate foundations, but also claims that poetry (by which Oakeshott essentially means 'rational intuition') can be a more direct route to ultimate reality, a position Oakeshott completely abandons later. So whilst it can be useful to look for early precursors for his later ideas, it is also important not to try and locate all of

Oakeshott's mature work in the writings of the 1920s: some of his early opinions were later completely abandoned. Arguably only with the publication of his first book, the well-known – if initially unfashionable – *Experience and Its Modes* in 1933 (Oakeshott 1933), did Oakeshott attain his maturity. An assured and sparkling work, this, as we will see in the next chapter, was importantly inspired by the Idealist F. H. Bradley amongst others, and also to some extent recalls the latter's coruscating prose style.

If *Experience and Its Modes* was at least greeted with a certain grudging respect in the 1930s – although it was utterly out of temper with the largely positivist type of philosophy being propagated at that time by professional philosophers – then Oakeshott's publication of a book concerning horse-racing in that decade encouraged a certain amount of sneering. *A Guide to the Classics, or How to Pick the Derby Winner* (Oakeshott and Griffith: 1936) seemed to provide ammunition for those who claimed that Oakeshott lacked intellectual seriousness, since being so 'frivolous' in an era when democratic regimes – and most notably Spain – were collapsing across Europe, seemed reprehensible. But the charge is at least partly an unfair one. For not merely did Oakeshott undertake to edit an – admittedly equivocal – anthology on *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe* (Oakeshott 1939) to which he added an interesting and perceptive introduction, he also undertook to fight in the Second World War, joining up in 1940. Eventually promoted to command a squadron of the GHQ Liaison Regiment, known as 'Phantom', Oakeshott apparently impressed his fellow officers with his quiet efficiency and lack of pretension (Grant 1990: 16). Despite his relative enjoyment of military life, however, Oakeshott returned to Cambridge with a firm and settled view that the procedures

in wartime offered little help if one sought a guide as to how to behave in peacetime, in contrast to many other post-war intellectuals, perhaps most notably Karl Mannheim. And although this was not especially his motive for helping to set up a monthly journal with some of his Cambridge colleagues to explore politics and letters in 1947, namely the *Cambridge Journal*, nevertheless it was in this context that Oakeshott published his famous polemical essays aimed against collectivism and rationalism more generally – most notably 'Rationalism in Politics' and 'The Tower of Babel' – for which he continues to be best known.

It was with this reputation, therefore, that, after an unlikely year's appointment at the 'rationalist' and technocratic Nuffield College, Oxford, Oakeshott ended up with an even more unlikely appointment as the Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics in 1951. For in contrast with his left-leaning 'activist' predecessors, Graham Wallas and Harold Laski, Oakeshott not only seemed to have little interest in influencing politics in practice, at that time he also seemed to be arguing that it was illegitimate for political theorists even to try to do so. Notoriously he claimed in his inaugural lecture, 'Political Education' that in politics 'men sail a boundless and a bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination', where the aim of the exercise was simply to 'keep afloat on an even keel' rather than to get anywhere in particular (Oakeshott 1991: 60). Unsurprisingly therefore, when not displaying overt irritation, contemporary political theorists and others working in political studies often tended to treat his work as a challenge to be overcome, a justification for tradition for tradition's sake, rather than as something particularly stimulating. Arguably they

should not have treated Oakeshott's work in this way, as I suggest in Chapter 3, but given Oakeshott's reticence in debate and lack of proper footnoting, a certain bafflement was quite understandable. (Readers will have to decide for themselves whether they find Oakeshott's habit of quoting poetry without a proper reference – such as Matthew Arnold in *On Human Conduct* [Oakeshott 1975: 23] – a charming eccentricity or merely annoying.)

During his tenure as Professor of Political Science, Oakeshott published nothing other than a collected version of his essays from the 1940s and 1950s called *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays* in 1962 (Oakeshott 1991) – though the lectures he gave at Harvard in 1958 were posthumously published as *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* (Oakeshott 1993a) – but he was actively involved in the life of the School through his teaching. As well as being an astute and conscientious doctoral supervisor, as Russell Price in particular has memorably recorded (Price 1991), Oakeshott also had an important impact at the School on both undergraduates and postgraduate students. For undergraduates, there were his lectures on 'The History of Political Thought from the Ancient Greeks to the Present Day', (Oakeshott 1960s), which devoted considerable time to Plato, Aristotle, Roman political thought and medieval political experiences, before turning to more modern topics, and for postgraduate students there was Oakeshott's famous seminar on the history of political thought (Minogue 1991). Set up around 1960, in response to a central fiat from the University of London, Oakeshott established a one-year MSc concentrating on the history of political thought, and a key part of this course was a stimulating (if challenging) seminar in which classic texts in the history of political thought and prominent methods used to study it were extensively discussed. Participants at this seminar included such LSE