



# Isaiah BERLIN

Flourishing

Letters 1928-1946



**Edited by  
Henry Hardy**

'The entrancing story of a brilliant man  
waking up to the world.' *THE TIMES*

# FLOURISHING

LETTERS 1928-1946

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ISAIAH BERLIN

Edited by Henry Hardy

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*Additional research* · Jennifer Holmes, Kate Payne

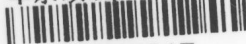
*Consultant Russianist* · Helen Rappaport

The compleat explanation of an author not systematick and consequential, but desultory and vagrant, abounding in casual allusions and light hints, is not be expected from any single scholiast.

Samuel Johnson [see page *xlvi* below]



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Isaiah Berlin was born in the Baltic city of Riga in 1909. When he was six, his family moved to Russia; there in 1917, in Petrograd, he witnessed both Revolutions – Social Democratic and Bolshevik. In 1921 his family came to England, and he was educated at St Paul's School and Corpus Christi College, Oxford. At Oxford, he was a Fellow of All Souls, a Fellow of New College, Professor of Social and Political Theory and founding President of Wolfson College. He also held the Presidency of the British Academy. His published work includes *Karl Marx*, *Russian Thinkers*, *Concepts and Categories*, *Against the Current*, *Personal Impressions*, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, *The Sense of Reality*, *The Proper Study of Mankind*, *The Roots of Romanticism*, *The Power of Ideas*, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, *Freedom and its Betrayal*, *Liberty* and *The Soviet Mind*. As an exponent of the history of ideas he was awarded the Erasmus, Lippincott and Agnelli Prizes; he also received the Jerusalem Prize for his lifelong defence of civil liberties. He died in 1997.

Henry Hardy, a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford, is one of Isaiah Berlin's Literary Trustees. He has edited a number of books by Berlin and other authors, and is the composer of *Tunes: Collected Musical Juvenilia* (2003).

For more information about Isaiah Berlin visit

<http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/>

15/12/15

*Praise for FLOURISHING*

'Unstoppably clever, perceptive, serio-comic . . . a great letter-writer – as almost every page of this fascinating book will show.' Noel Malcolm, *Sunday Telegraph*

'This is a substantial achievement and a contribution both to our understanding of Berlin's life and thought, and also to the history of ideas.' John McTernan, *Scotland on Sunday*

'Brilliantly chronicling the growth of a mind . . . edited with devotion, scholarship and verve.' Roy Foster, 'Books of the Year', *Times Literary Supplement*

'Both as a social document and for intellectual insights this is worth the money.' Eric Christiansen, 'Books of the Year', *Spectator*

'Berlin's correspondence has the wit and flow that friends prized in his conversation . . . It gives us the inimitable voice of a generous, magnanimous intellect.' Edmund Fawcett, *New Statesman*

'Full of insights about everyone and everything. He was an alpha-level gossip, the genius kind . . . a conversation of wit and substance that you never want to end.' Michael Pye, *Scotsman*

*For Jenifer Hart*

παντα αγαν

Isaiah Berlin, aged 16<sup>1</sup>

Nimiety – that's your weakness!

John Sparrow<sup>2</sup>

Surtout, Messieurs, point de zèle.

Charles-Maurice de Talleyrand<sup>3</sup>

- <sup>1</sup> 'Panta agan' ('Everything to excess') – a parody of the Greek proverb 'μηδέν ἄγαν' ('mēden agan', 'Nothing to excess') – written by IB in this unaccented form in the front of his 1925 St Paul's School diary. (For 'IB' and all other abbreviations see pp. xlv–xlviii below.)
- <sup>2</sup> Commenting on a draft typescript of IB's 'Richard Pares', an obituary published in the *Balliol College Record* 1958, and reprinted in PI. 'Nimiety' means (alleged) 'excess', i.e., in this context, over-enthusiasm in his judgements – for instance, describing Pares as 'the best and most admirable man I have ever known' (PI2 124).
- <sup>3</sup> 'Above all, gentlemen, no zeal whatsoever.' For bibliographical details relevant to this maxim, a version of which IB often identified as his personal motto, see L 92, note 2.

## A CALL FOR LETTERS

THIS IS an earnest entreaty, addressed to any reader who possesses, or knows of, any correspondence with Isaiah Berlin that I may not have already seen, to tell me of it.

I have been collecting Isaiah Berlin's letters, with this edition in mind, since late 1990, when I left my post at Oxford University Press to begin full-time work on editing his unpublished writings. Although I have pursued a great many leads, sometimes with an obsessive persistence that must have irritated those exposed to it, there are bound to be letters that I have not tracked down, of whose existence, indeed, I am unaware. Berlin's correspondents were so numerous that I must be ignorant of a large proportion of them; those who have died may have passed their papers to members of their families or to institutions without leaving clues that I have been able to find; letters may have ended up in unpredictable hands, or may still lurk unseen wherever they were first put aside.

My hope is that the publication of this volume will stir memories, so that future volumes can be more representative, and so that further letters which fall into the time-span of this volume can be added to its future impressions, or prefixed to the next volume. Hence this request for letters and information. Berlin did not keep copies of his handwritten letters, and his secretaries did not always keep copies of those in typescript; even when they did, there were often additions to and corrections of the top copy that were not recorded on the duplicate. So I am dependent on the generosity of owners for the chance to select from the widest possible range of letters, and to use their final texts (when these survive).

I undertake to treat whatever I am shown with due discretion; and I should naturally respect any wish on the part of correspondents that particular letters or passages should not be quoted or published at all, or not within a particular time-limit. I should be glad to receive (and cover the cost of) photocopies of letters if their owners prefer not to lend originals. Any originals sent on loan can be copied and returned quickly.

A second motive for this request is to accumulate as complete a collection of Berlin's correspondence as possible, now, before it is too late; and to deposit additional items (with suitable embargoes if necessary) alongside the archive of his papers now housed at – and owned by – the Bodleian Library in Oxford. Already, with the passage of time and the death of some of his correspondents, many of his letters have been lost or destroyed.

I take this opportunity of saying that I should also be grateful for other

archival material – for example, photographs, and (tape recordings or transcripts of) interviews or lectures not listed in the catalogues of such items in *The Isaiah Berlin Virtual Library*,<sup>1</sup> and anecdotal information about Berlin that may supplement what is already known to me.

My postal address is Wolfson College, OXFORD, OX2 6UD, UK; my email address [henry.hardy@wolfson.ox.ac.uk](mailto:henry.hardy@wolfson.ox.ac.uk).

H.H.

<sup>1</sup> The official website of the Isaiah Berlin Literary Trust – <http://berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk/> – hereafter 'IBVL'.

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CREDITS

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Invitation to Bella Schalit's party lent by Judy Sebba

*Maps*

Hampstead: detail from *Hampstead 1915* [Old Ordnance Survey Maps, London Sheet 27] (Consett, [2002]: Alan Godfrey Maps)

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Central Leningrad: detail from *Plan Leningrada 1939 g.* ('Plan of Leningrad 1939') ([Leningrad, 1939], Lenizdat); scan by the Anna Akhmatova Museum, St Petersburg, from their copy of the map

#### Photographs

- 4 J. Russell & Sons, Wimbledon, 1927/8
- 5 Postcard by Walker Photographer, 15 Pemberton Gardens, London N19
- 6 Postcard by Valentine & Sons Ltd, Dundee and London
- 7 Postcard
- 9 Thomas Photos, neg. 64703/All Souls College
- 10 George Leslie's Studio, Oxford
- 11 Photo lent by Dr Clarita von Trott
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- 24 Raphael, 1 Wilton Place, Knightsbridge, London SW1/Lucy Gaster
- 25 Ramsey & Muspratt, Oxford, 7 July 1943/Diana Hopkinson
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- 27 Photo lent by Sir Adam Ridley
- 28 Cressida Ridley/Sir Adam Ridley
- 29 Photo by Mary Fisher
- 30 Thomas Photos?/New College Library, from A. H. Smith, *New College, Oxford, and its Buildings* (Oxford, 1952: Oxford University Press)
- 31 Thomas Airviews, 1948/Rockefeller Centre Archive Center, image No 1163
- 32 Postcard by Haberman's Real Photographs, GPO Box 198, NY
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- 34 Photo owned by and scanned for Amanda Opinsky
- 35 Copy photo supplied by the *Daily Telegraph*
- 36 From 'The British Embassy - I Washington', *Country Life*, 14 January 1939, 38-42, at p. 39; new print supplied by *Country Life* from original negative

- 38 Taken in July or August 1950; from the collection of the Foreign and Commonwealth Photograph Library; © Crown copyright material is reproduced with the permission of the Controller of HMSO
- 39 Taken in 1920; photo owned and scanned by the Anna Akhmatova Museum in Fontanny Dom, St Petersburg

## PREFACE

### *Drinks before dinner*

I am always disappointed when a book lacks a preface: it is like arriving at someone's house for dinner, and being conducted straight into the dining-room. A preface is personal, the body of the book impersonal: the preface tells you the author's feelings about his book, or some of them. A reader who wishes to remain aloof can skip the preface without loss; but one who wants to be personally introduced has, I feel, the right to be.

Michael Dummett<sup>1</sup>

I FIRST BROACHED the publication of his letters with Isaiah Berlin after lunching with him in All Souls in the late 1980s. Over coffee, we were discussing my possible departure from Oxford University Press to work on his papers, and when the question of his letters came up I said that publication would have to be selective. I had in mind the large quantity of material, the likely views of publishers about what the market would stand, and the fact that some letters were less interesting than, or repetitive of, others, and so did not merit inclusion, at any rate in an edition intended for a general readership. His response, which came without any noticeable pause for reflection, surprised me, since it was so unlike his reliably self-deprecating reaction to suggestions about publishing his academic writing. He brushed aside my instinct for selectivity and said that, if the job was to be done, it should be done thoroughly. The edition should be 'full-bottomed', free of half measures.

Broadly speaking, I have since been guided by that clearly stated preference, though it would have been unwise to follow it too literally. All the reasons for selectivity just cited do indeed apply, even if they can be followed with a lighter or a heavier hand. A heavier hand would have fashioned the one-volume selection that some publishers argued for, but that outcome would have been unfaithful not only to Berlin's wishes, but also to the quality of the material. Even the present degree of selection has required strong doses of self-denial.

<sup>1</sup> Preface to *Frege: Philosophy of Language* (London, 1973), opening paragraph. Though Dummett writes as an author rather than an editor, the same applies, *mutatis mutandis*, to the present enterprise.

The present, provisional, plan is that there should eventually be three volumes. The foundation of Wolfson College in 1966, or perhaps Berlin's retirement as President in 1975, is likely to provide the break between the second and third volumes. But all options remain open until the time comes. Indeed, this first volume was originally to have ended when Berlin left England for the USA for the first time in July 1940, but the preference of all publishers for fewer volumes than I at first envisaged, together with the more rounded impression of Berlin that emerges if his wartime output is included with his pre-war letters, led me to extend its coverage.

#### CORRESPONDENCE AND CORRESPONDENTS

[Berlin] was internationally significant not only for his own achievements as philosopher, intellectual, teacher, writer and public figure, but also because he moved in so many different circles, corresponded with so many of the leading figures of his day, participated in so many momentous political and cultural events, was a beloved friend and mentor to so many others.<sup>1</sup>

Berlin, it hardly needs saying, was one of the most notable intellectual figures of the twentieth century. A leading liberal thinker of his time, indeed one of the most renowned English thinkers of the post-war era, he continues to be the focus of widespread interest and discussion, and the subject of conferences, books and other publications in many languages – not only because of his important ideas and the distinctive essays in which he recorded them, but because of the manner of man that he was. This is not the place to retell the story of his life – a biographical sketch giving the main details appears below,<sup>2</sup> and Michael Ignatieff's perceptive authorised biography<sup>3</sup> has already done the job splendidly – but something should be said about the correspondence.

Berlin was a prolific as well as an incomparable letter-writer throughout his life, and a very large number of his letters survive, which makes possible the publication of a selection fully representative of his multiple epistolary topics and personae. The first extant letter known to me was written in March 1928, by an eighteen-year-old St Paul's schoolboy, to G. K. Chesterton, asking him to contribute to a new school magazine, and the last at the end of October 1997 to Anatoly Naiman, Anna Akhmatova's friend and

1 Unnamed evaluator of the application by the Bodleian Library, Oxford, for funding to catalogue the Berlin Papers.

2 'A Personal Impression of Isaiah Berlin' (pp. xxxvii–xliv below), a slightly revised version of my obituary of Berlin, published in the *Independent* newspaper in London on 7 November 1997.

3 Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life* (London and New York, 1998).

(latterly) secretary, less than a week before Berlin's death.<sup>1</sup> Spread through the almost three score years and ten between, there are thousands of other letters, covering all aspects and stages of Berlin's long, active and productive life: his time in Oxford as undergraduate, researcher, teacher, lecturer, professor and founding President of Wolfson College; his many visits to North America, Europe, Palestine/Israel and beyond; his work during the Second World War in New York, Washington and Moscow; his activities as administrator, author, critic and broadcaster. Running through the correspondence are several recurrent themes: these include his relationship with his parents, especially his mother, until their deaths, and from the 1950s with his wife Aline; his enormous and diverse network of friends and acquaintances; his love of gossip and anecdote; and his increasingly numerous interchanges with students and critics of his work. The correspondence spreads far beyond Oxford and academe into many other worlds, especially those of the arts and politics, in many countries.

The list of his correspondents includes a roll-call of men and women prominent not only in academia, but in politics, journalism, society, literature, music and art: Joseph Alsop, Noel Annan, A. J. Ayer, Lauren Bacall, Cecil Beaton, Max Beloff, Violet Bonham Carter, Elizabeth Bowen, Maurice Bowra, Alfred Brendel, E. H. Carr, Noam Chomsky, Winston Churchill, Sibyl Colefax, Emerald Cunard, Abba Eban, T. S. Eliot, Margot Fonteyn, Felix and Marion Frankfurter, Stuart Hampshire, Jacqueline Kennedy, Teddy Kollek, Harold Macmillan, Yehudi Menuhin, Nicolas Nabokov, L. B. Namier, Karl Popper, Anthony Powell, Bertrand Russell, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, John Sparrow, Stephen Spender, Igor Stravinsky, A. J. P. Taylor, The Prince of Wales, Ava Waverley, Chaim Weizmann, Bernard Williams, Edmund Wilson and many more. But often it is the most unremarkable correspondents who receive the most remarkable letters: Berlin was scrupulous and generous in answering letters, no matter what their source; and of course he relished, above all, writing to his closest friends.

The vein of social comedy that runs through the letters and (hundreds of) postcards truthfully displays Berlin's ebulliently positive temperament: he was good company, a virtuoso in conversation, an essentially happy person, a lover of life in many of its various manifestations. Nor is he a stranger to self-mockery: 'I have always been prone to coloured descriptions of unimportant phenomena.'<sup>2</sup> What he writes is rarely drily academic: there

1 The letter is dated 31 October 1997; Berlin died on 5 November. Poignantly, he signed this last letter in Russian, with the diminutive version of his given name that his family and friends used in his early life: 'Шая' ('Shaya').

2 To Marion Frankfurter, 3 June 1936. More quotations appear in the IBVL under 'Quotations from Berlin'.

is, if anything, more about people – his supreme interest – than about ideas and events, especially in this first volume. Above all, he gossips: ‘life is not worth living unless one can be indiscreet to intimate friends’,<sup>1</sup> he once wrote; ‘destroy this letter’, he often directed, but, fortunately for us, the injunction was usually ignored.

During this initial period Berlin moved from St Paul’s School, then in the London borough of Hammersmith, to Corpus Christi College, Oxford, where he took firsts in Greats in 1931 and in PPE in 1932.<sup>2</sup> He took up a post as Lecturer in Philosophy at New College in October 1932, and soon afterwards won a Fellowship by Examination (or ‘Prize Fellowship’) at All Souls – he was the first Jew to be elected to the College. In 1938, after completing the biography of Marx that primarily occupied him at All Souls, he became a Fellow of New College. In early July 1940 he left for America with Guy Burgess, intending to proceed to Moscow, but stayed in the US, apart from visits home and his famous trip in 1945–6 to the Soviet Union, until early April 1946, at which point this volume closes.

The pre-war letters are handwritten, but in America he learns to use a secretary. The secretaries had to learn to work for him, too, as these extracts from letters written in 1952 by one of them, Lelia Brodersen,<sup>3</sup> to a friend testify:

He has an Oxford accent, a lisp, an inability to say r,<sup>4</sup> & the most inconceivably rapid “delivery” that I have ever heard outside of a patter song [. . .] On Tuesday, typewriter in hand & despair in heart, I arrived at the Deanery, where he is staying. [. . .]. I took his letters directly on the typewriter, which forced him to make pauses, since the noise of the machine forced itself upon him; he is happy to have things struck over, x’ed out, etc., & will sign literally anything; his letters are charming & occasionally pathetic; & he is movingly shy, polite, helpless, & apologetic. And – on Thursday, when I went again, & he was shortly called to the telephone, I started to read a reprint which

1 To Morton White, 7 May 1970.

2 ‘Greats’ is the colloquial name for Lit. Hum. (Literae Humaniores, now called simply Classics), or more specifically, at this time, for the study of ancient history and philosophy, which occupied the last seven terms of the degree course. The full first part of the course, Honour Mods (i.e. Moderations), covering Greek and Latin language and literature, lasted for five terms; but because of his comparative weakness as a classical linguist, Berlin opted instead for Pass Mods, which he took at the end of his first term, sitting the final examination after three years (as against four for the full course). PPE is Philosophy, Politics and Economics, normally a three-year course, but completed by Berlin in a single year.

3 Lelia Brodersen, later chief psychologist at Bryn Mawr’s child guidance clinic, worked briefly as Berlin’s secretary when he was lecturing at the College. She was doing graduate work there at the time, was therefore short of money, and was picking up earnings wherever she could. These letters to Sheema Z. Buehne are postmarked 2 and 17 March 1952. For the full texts see ‘Letters on Berlin’ in the IBVL.

4 The latter two deficiencies were later overcome.