Introduction

As soon as Michael Oakeshott succeeded Harold Laski as Professor of Political Science at the London School of Economics in 1951, he made it clear that he did not share his predecessor's views. He criticised 'ideological' politics, including socialism or Marxism of every hue, and rejected as an 'illusion' the idea 'that in politics there is anywhere a safe harbour, a destination to be reached or even a discernible strand of progress.'[1] The reception the Labour MP Richard Crossman, a former Oxford philosophy tutor and later editor of the *New Statesman*, accorded this inaugural lecture set the tone for the 'generally unsympathetic press'[2] Oakeshott received throughout his seventeen years at the LSE. Crossman described Oakeshott as a 'cavalier iconoclast' who was determined to destroy the 'School dedicated by the Webbs to the scientific study of the improvement of human society.' He was a 'Conservative' whose views led ultimately to 'relativism'.

Oakeshott, as Crossman understood him, left us with no standard 'by which [British Parliamentary government] can be said to be better than [the German militarist tradition]'. He had even unwittingly emulated the Marxist ideas he attacked; like Marx, he wanted 'to heap contempt and ridicule on Utopians and sentimentalists who believe that the individual can transcend his tradition and that principles are worth fighting for.'[3] Oakeshott clearly felt he had been misconstrued. He dismissed Crossman as a 'professional idealist' convinced of his own 'monopoly of sincerity'. Rather than trying to

[1] See Oakeshott's inaugural lecture on 'Political Education', reprinted in *Rationalism in Politics and Other Essays*, 2nd edn., ed. T. Fuller, Liberty Press, Indianapolis, 1991, p. 66. This edition of *Rationalism in Politics* is the one cited throughout this work.

[2] G. Feaver, 'Michael Oakeshott and Political Education', *Studies in Comparative Communism*, vol. 2, 1969, p. 162.

[3] R.H.S. Crossman, Review of 'Political Education', *New Statesman and Nation*, vol. 42, 1951, pp. 60–1.

establish a 'seminary for training political hedge-preachers in some dim orthodoxy', he retorted, he was trying to maintain 'the deservedly high reputation' of the LSE for teaching 'undergraduates . . . how to think for themselves.'[4] These categorical denials did not prevent Crossman's charges being echoed by Bernard Crick, to whom Oakeshott was a 'sceptical, polemical, paradoxical, gay and bitter spirit', unmistakably a Tory as well as a 'lonely nihilist'.[5]

After Oakeshott assented to Irving Kristol's request for a collection of his essays,[6] published as *Rationalism in Politics* in 1962, he received further public attention, again mainly hostile. Oakeshott, however, almost never replied to his critics.[7] Those who wished to describe him as a Conservative thinker could do so with little fear of his contradicting them. They could point not only to his inaugural lecture but also to the polemical essays and articles he had written shortly after World War Two ended. These essays attacked 'Contemporary British Politics' as the advance of despotism with the Labour Party in the vanguard. Oakeshott had outlined 'Stalin's Four Weak Points' in the *Evening Standard* (under the headline *Man Who Took Laski's Job Attacks The Communists*).[8] Yet he never explicitly proclaimed himself a Conservative — his essay 'On Being Conservative' was an examination of the conservative 'disposition' rather than a statement of allegiance to a Conservative political party, and nowhere did the author state that the essay was a self-portrait.[9]

On Oakeshott's death in 1990, *The Times* suggested that he 'influenced many generations of students and readers who became supporters of Mrs Thatcher', and that, though he had no direct influence on the then Prime Minister, he 'more than anybody else . . . articulated the real philosophical foundations' of her policies.[10] This view remained current even at the beginning of the twenty-first century; the wild claim that Oakeshott's ideas 'hold the key to reviving a

[4] Oakeshott, Letter to the Editor, *New Statesman and Nation*, vol. 42, 1951, p. 100.

[5] B. Crick, 'The World of Michael Oakeshott or the Lonely Nihilist', *Encounter*, vol. 20, 1963, p. 65.

[6] See the letters from I. Kristol, then senior editor at Basic Books, to Oakeshott dated 26 April and 14 September 1960 at LSE 11/4.

[7] D.D. Raphael was the only reviewer of *Rationalism in Politics* to draw a public response from Oakeshott. See Oakeshott, 'Rationalism in Politics: a Reply to Professor Raphael', *Political Studies*, vol. 13, 1965, pp. 88–92.

[8] Oakeshott, 'Stalin's Four Weak Points', *Evening Standard*, 20 November 1950, p. 9.

[9] *RP*, p. 407.

[10] *The Times*, Editorial, 22 November 1990, p. 11.

beleaguered Tory Party' received an airing in the usually sober *Times Higher Educational Supplement* in 2002.[11]

The fortunes of Oakeshott's reputation, however, had begun changing some years before. Although some still dismissed him as a devotee of a Burkean 'romantic historiosophical [sic] communalism' who 'damned egalitarian and welfare do-gooding',[12] others increasingly praised him as a political philosopher of the first rank. His *On Human Conduct*,[13] published in 1975 after his retirement, was to be spoken of in the same breath as Hobbes's *Leviathan* or Hegel's *Philosophy of Right*.[14] In the 1970s and 1980s he began to acquire a following; at provincial English universities like Hull and Durham, 'people . . . subscribe[d] . . . to the philosophical ideas of Oakeshott', including his ideas about politics.[15] And doubts were being aired as to whether he really was best regarded as a Tory propagandist. The confusion was reflected in the coverage given to him in 1984 by the French magazine *Le Figaro*. On the one hand, Oakeshott was 'le gourou qui inspire encore toutes les grandes décisions de Margaret Thatcher'; on the other hand, 'au moins n'est-elle [Thatcher] pas socialiste et a-t-elle renoncé à intervener dans l'economie, mais selon Oakeshott, elle fait preuve d'une certaine brutalité dans ses manières, étrangère á l'esprit conservateur'.[16] Oakeshott publicly disclaimed all pretensions to guru status,[17] and it is not at all clear that 'conservative' is the best label for his philosophy, at least not without considerable qualification.

In 1985, Coats argued that Oakeshott's political philosophy aimed at 'a restatement or reformulation of liberalism'.[18] Significantly, when Oakeshott was sent the article containing this description of him, he paid it a handsome compliment, writing to a friend that it 'makes better sense of . . . what I have written than I managed to

[11] D. Walker, 'A Traditionalist with the Eye', *Times Higher Educational Supplement*, 18 January 2002, pp. 20–21.

[12] E. Gellner, Review of R. Dahrendorf, *LSE:A History of the London School of Economics and Political Science*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 June 1995, p. 3.

[13] Oakeshott, *On Human Conduct*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1975.

[14] K. Minogue, 'Oakeshott and the Idea of Freedom', *Quadrant*, vol. 19, 1975, p. 83.

[15] D. Boucher, *Texts in Context: Revisionist Methods for Studying the History of Ideas*, Martinus Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1985, pp. 258–9.

[16] G. Sorman, 'C'est le maitre a penser des conservateurs britanniques', *Le Figaro*, 27 October 1984, pp. 110–12.

[17] Oakeshott, Festschrift Speech, LSE 1/3.

[18] W. Coats Jr., 'Michael Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist', *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, vol. 18, 1985, p. 411. Cp. the article with an identical title by P. Franco in *Political Theory*, vol. 18, 1990, pp. 411–36.

make myself.'[19] Since Oakeshott rarely gave such an enthusiastic reception to his critics, it is worth explaining what Coats thought Oakeshott's liberalism involved. The dangers of anachronism in positing a 'liberal tradition' extending back to the seventeenth century (or even further) are well known.[20] Nevertheless, students of history and politics have rarely been deterred from speaking in these terms by the possible pitfalls involved. For Coats, one may 'use "liberal" . . . to indicate a view of the state as subordinate to, and arising from, the freedom of individual conscience — or sometimes individual appetite — regardless of whether or not the claim is grounded in some "natural right"', which J.S. Mill's "liberalism", for example, was not.' This allows that liberalism is at any rate 'modern', for 'ancient writers like Plato and Aristotle . . . saw political association as a means for habituating nonphilosophic citizens to moral virtues, regardless of individual judgement and choice.'[21]

The 'fundamental assumption of liberalism', which Coats argued Oakeshott shared, is that 'value is individual'. For the liberal, 'All judgements of good, bad and worth must be made and judged for individuals as individuals, not parts of wholes.' In liberal political thought, then, 'the state may functionally comprehend the individual in some respects, but is good or bad for individuals considered as such . . . rather than . . . as contributors to . . . some sort of whole . . . political, social, natural, cosmic and so forth'. This assumption, 'explicit or otherwise', Coats argues, is shared by 'accounts ranging from the Hobbesian and Lockean states of nature to modern defences of economic freedom', and indeed, Oakeshott himself described liberalism as 'one of the most notable idioms of European political experience and reflection'.[22] Coats's argument also has obvious implications for those who see Oakeshott as an 'organic' conservative bent on submerging the individual in a romantic communalism.[23]

Despite these changes in reputation since the 1960s, discussion was for a long time largely restricted to Oakeshott's writings on political philosophy. For example, if we examine books not exclusively devoted to him, but in which he is treated as a major figure, it is almost invariably in the context of political theory that he makes

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[19] Oakeshott, Letter to N.K. O'Sullivan, 8 February 1986, private collection.

[20] See, for example, the contributors to *Traditions of Liberalism*, ed. K. Haakonssen, Centre for Independent Studies, St Leonard's (Australia), 1988.

[21] Coats, 'Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist', pp. 773–4.

[22] Oakeshott, Reader's report on F.A. Hayek, *The Constitution of Liberty*, LSE 1/2/3.

[23] Coats, 'Oakeshott as Liberal Theorist', pp. 774–5.

his appearance.[24] Authors grouped him with Strauss, Hayek, and Schmitt as a member of the 'intransigent right';[25] they 'revisited' his critique of 'Rationalism'; they have discussed his response to 'post-modernism'; and so on.[26] Similarly, Greenleaf's *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*,[27] the first study entirely given over to Oakeshott, concentrated, as the title suggests, mainly on Oakeshott's political thought. For over twenty years, this remained the only introductory volume available. The title of a longer work by Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*,[28] published in 1990, reveals the same focus. Even Gerencser's *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, published ten years later, though it rightly identified scepticism as a permanent theme in Oakeshott's work, mainly examines its implications for his political philosophy.[29]

By the mid-1990s, though, Oakeshott was beginning be regarded as one of the most significant thinkers to emerge from Cambridge in the century.[30] Grant's *Oakeshott*, the first comprehensive introductory study, described Oakeshott as 'probably the greatest living political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition'.[31] The increased acclaim was accompanied by a recognition that Oakeshott's frame of reference had little to do with recent incarnations of the English conservative party. Coats's *Oakeshott and his Contemporaries*, for example, argues that Oakeshott's thought is best understood in relation to

[24] Covell linked Oakeshott with 'contemporary Conservatism' in *The Redefinition of Conservatism: Politics and Doctrine*, Macmillan, London, 1985. Devigne's *Recasting Conservatism: Oakeshott, Strauss and the Response to Postmodernism*, Yale UP, New Haven, 1994, offered a comparison of his political ideas with those of Strauss. Even feminist theorists have discovered Oakeshott's political philosophy, as witnessed by Mouffe's *The Return of the Political*, Verso, London, 1993. The literature in periodicals and learned journals reveals the same concern with political thought. H. Wells's examination of the *Social Sciences Citation Index* and the *Arts and Humanities Citation Index* demonstrated that in the early 1990s *Rationalism in Politics* was cited more than twice as often as *On Human Conduct* between 1975 and 1990: see 'The Philosophical Michael Oakeshott', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 55, 1994, p. 130.

[25] P. Anderson, 'The Intransigent Right at the End of the Century', *London Review of Books*, 24 September 1992, pp. 7–11.

[26] P. Franco, 'Oakeshott's Critique of Rationalism Revisited', *Political Science Reviewer*, vol. 21, 1992, pp. 15–43.

[27] W.H. Greenleaf, *Oakeshott's Philosophical Politics*, Longmans, London, 1966.

[28] P. Franco, *The Political Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Yale UP, New Haven, 1990.

[29] S.A. Gerencser, *The Skeptic's Oakeshott*, St Martin's Press, New York, 2000.

[30] R. Grant, 'Michael Oakeshott' in *Cambridge Minds*, ed. R. Mason, Cambridge UP, 1994, where Oakeshott rubs shoulders with the likes of Frazer, Russell, Wittgenstein, and Leavis.

[31] R. Grant, *Oakeshott*, Claridge Press, London, 1990, p. 9.

the ideas of those thinkers who had the greatest impact upon him, including St Augustine, Montaigne, and Hegel.[32]

One might expect that every aspect of the writings of a man belonging in such eminent company would have been thoroughly explored. Yet of all the books on Oakeshott's philosophy, only one has given significant space to his writings on history, Nardin's *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*.[33] Nardin rightly locates Oakeshott's philosophy of historical understanding within a broader debate on the nature of understanding in the human sciences that can be traced back to the first half of the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, the historical context of Oakeshott's ideas on history and the history of their development was something he deliberately eschewed, organizing his discussion thematically 'rather than treat Oakeshott's writings individually and chronologically'. As he acknowledges, his approach carries a certain cost 'from the standpoint of the intellectual historian'.[34] The approach taken here is precisely the one he decided to eschew, and is intended to complement his.

Oakeshott began his scholarly career with the study of history. He went up to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, in 1920, to study history, and he remained at Cambridge, employed as an historian, for over two decades thereafter. Indeed, the historian of his College and of the University[35] has portrayed him as one of the leading figures in history in Cambridge in the 1940s. He even became Director of Studies in history at Caius for a brief period after he returned from military service in 1945. A historian by profession before he became known as a political thinker, he combined interests in history and politics at Cambridge from the start. Throughout his career, he worked to formulate a comprehensive vision of European political history that has never been thoroughly explored.

The speculative temperament Oakeshott displayed from a very young age ensured he was not only interested in Europe's political past. He was also fascinated by the status of our knowledge about that past. The question of what it is that we know (or even whether we can really be said to know anything) when we claim to know about historical events had already been posed, but he did as much as anyone in the twentieth century to supply an answer. His writings

[32] W.J. Coats, *Oakeshott and his Contemporaries*, Susquehanna UP, Pennslyvania, 2000.

[33] T. Nardin, *The Philosophy of Michael Oakeshott*, Pennsylvania State UP, Pennsylvania, 2001. This work is now the starting point for those seeking a detailed critical overview of Oakeshott's ideas.

[34] *op. cit.*, p. viii.

[35] C.N.L. Brooke, *A History of the University of Cambridge*, vol. 4, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1993, p. 327.

on the philosophy of history are addressed not only to the sceptic who denies that historical knowledge is possible, but to the problem of what makes history a distinctive form of thought. And his estimation of the importance of history in his own life and thought is put beyond doubt by his declaration that 'I am more grateful for having been brought up to read history than for almost anything else'.[36]

Oakeshott's writings on these two distinct senses of 'history', 'events' and 'enquiry', have not been entirely ignored, although critics have usually engaged with what he had to say about history as *disciplina* rather than as *res gestae*. The historians and philosophers who have discussed Oakeshott's philosophy of history in passing include Postan, Cobban, Forbes, Elton, Pocock,[37] Collingwood, Mandelbaum, Dray and Walsh. There are also a few pieces devoted directly to Oakeshott's philosophy of history. Himmelfarb has an essay on the subject in her book *The New History and the Old*.[38] Boucher has published instructive articles examining the influence of the later nineteenth century British Idealists on Oakeshott's philosophy of history, and comparing it with Collingwood's views. He has also briefly addressed Oakeshott's treatment of the history of political thought.[39] Nevertheless, the discussion of Oakeshott's ideas on history in both these senses has been brief, and only a handful of books and scholarly articles have treated 'Oakeshott on history' as a subject in its own right. There is no full length study of the topic, but there is reason for thinking that the time is now ripe.

In recent years, as one reviewer observed, it has become possible to speak of an 'Oakeshott industry'.[40] As well as the proliferation of secondary literature, we must mention the appearance of much rare or previously unpublished material. In 1989 there came a collection of essays on education, *The Voice of Liberal Learning*, followed by an expanded edition of *Rationalism in Politics* in 1991.[41] Almost immedi-

[36] Oakeshott, address to the LSE history society, LSE 1/3.

[37] All of whom have been associated with history at Cambridge.

[38] G. Himmelfarb, 'Does History Talk Sense?' in *The New History and the Old*, Harvard UP, Cambridge Mass., 1987.

[39] D. Boucher, 'Overlap and Autonomy: The Different Worlds of Collingwood and Oakeshott', *Storia, Antropologia e Scienze del Linguaggio*, vol. 4, 1989, pp. 68–89; 'The Creation of the Past: British Idealism and Michael Oakeshott's Philosophy of History', *History and Theory*, vol. 23, 1984, pp. 193–214; 'Politics in a Different Mode: An Appreciation of Michael Oakeshott, 1901–90', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 12, 1991, pp. 717–28.

[40] R. Grant, Review of Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* and *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 15 April 1994, p. 31.

[41] Oakeshott, *The Voice of Liberal Learning: Michael Oakeshott on Education*, ed. T. Fuller, Yale UP, New Haven and London, 1989.

ately after Oakeshott's death, two more volumes went to press. *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life* assembled many of Oakeshott's early theological writings and some previously unpublished pieces on political philosophy:[42] *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe* contained lectures on the history of political thought that Oakeshott gave as a visiting lecturer to Harvard in 1958.[43] In 1996, another posthumous work (which appears to date from the 1950s), *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, appeared.[44] In it, Oakeshott argued, as he had at Harvard, that modern European political history was the product of the interaction of two contrasting political styles, a position which he had first arrived at the end of the 1930s and would continue to refine and develop for the rest of his career.

The most recent development is the establishment of an Oakeshott archive at the LSE, which contains a significant amount of unpublished manuscript material, some of which provides the sources for the publications just alluded to. While this collection may not revolutionise our knowledge, it definitely enlarges it considerably, not only respecting Oakeshott's life, but also his intellectual development, and his place in the history of ideas. The series of twenty-one numbered notebooks stretching from 1922 to 1981, in which he recorded his reading and jotted down his thoughts, would do so by themselves.[45] However, the archive also contains over fifty boxes of papers, including manuscripts, correspondence, photographs, press cuttings, and even military records, all of which will no doubt be invaluable to future biographers.

General impressions are that Oakeshott appears to have worked harder and more methodically than perhaps he would have liked to let on, and that he knew more people than the image of him as a retiring philosopher insistent on the gulf between theory and practice would suggest. One area in which he was undeniably conservative in his published works was the use of footnotes, so it is now far easier to trace not only what he called the 'rambling path' of his footprints in life but also the course of the intellectual 'conversations' he was involved in. These mostly turn out to have begun early and ranged

widely. Some of the additions to the existing picture were hardly

[42] Oakeshott, *Religion, Politics and the Moral Life*, ed. T. Fuller, Yale UP, New Haven and London, 1993.

[43] Oakeshott, *Morality and Politics in Modern Europe*, ed. S. Letwin, Yale UP, New Haven and London, 1993.

[44] Oakeshott, *The Politics of Faith and the Politics of Scepticism*, ed. T. Fuller, Yale UP, New Haven and London, 1996.

[45] Oakeshott, Notebooks, LSE 2/1/1–21.

unsuspected. Written proof of a distinct interest in Epicureanism, and repeated perusals of Nietzsche, will surprise few,[46] though it is nice to know he read some of Foucault's *Histoire de la Sexualité* (aged 80 or so),[47] and the rumoured notes on Heidegger's *Being and Time* have finally surfaced.[48] Other items provide more circumstantial evidence. Oakeshott's reading of Hobbes can now be traced reliably back to 1921, when he declared (in what was actually a commonplace of the time) that 'the seventeenth Century is the key to the whole history of England.'[49]

There are genuinely important items; for instance, without the previously unknown long essay from 1943 on the principles that ought to govern a settlement with Germany,[50] there might be no evidence that the war that brought a temporary stop to his academic career had not stopped Oakeshott from writing altogether between 1940 and 1946. This essay bridges the pre- and post-war eras, and shows clearly the philosophical and historiographical importance the dramatic idea of character was taking on for him. Oakeshott was one of the few English thinkers who took the unfashionably 'Victorian' idea of character seriously, though it might be said to have undergone a minor revival since.[51] Other items in the collection are just hilarious material for a life lived to the full. What price could one put on the correspondence with Roper and Roper, solicitors, regarding a charge of indecent exposure after Oakeshott was seen bathing naked in Dorset in 1955, accompanied by his own account of the incident (complete with map), and an enthusiastic letter of support from a committed Canadian nudist who sent him ten shillings towards his legal expenses?[52] No such escapades marred the life of Kant, although Oakeshott was one of his philosophical descendants.

Sadly, the nude bathing incident does not figure in the present book, though its contents are undeniably affected by this opening of the archives. For example, there are four papers on the philosophy of history from the 1920s and 1930s, the existence of which was hitherto unsuspected. They allow us to trace the development of Oakeshott's

[46] See Notebook 11, LSE 2/1, and the Notebook at LSE 2/4/4 for Epicureanism; Notebooks 2, 6, 8, 10, and 12, LSE 2/1, for Nietzsche.

[47] Oakeshott, Notebook 21, LSE 2/1.

[48] Oakeshott, Notes on Heidegger, LSE 3/5.

[49] Oakeshott, 'Thomas Wentworth first Lord Strafford', LSE 1/1/1.

[50] Oakeshott, 'Peace with Germany', LSE 1/1/11.

[51] See, for example, John Casey, *Pagan Virtue An Essay in Ethics*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1990, esp. chapter one, 'Persons'.

[52] Oakeshott, Correspondence, LSE 11/3.

philosophy of history up to the time of the publication of *Experience and its Modes* — as, of course, does the existence of the manuscript of the book itself,[53] and the correspondence relating to it.[54] There is also a complete set of the last lectures he gave at the LSE on the history of political thought, familiar only to those who heard them.[55] This is not to mention a substantial amount of correspondence which includes other major twentieth-century thinkers such as Popper and Hayek.

It is the ideal time, therefore, to set Oakeshott's work on political philosophy to one side, and focus on his work on the philosophy of history and the history of political thought. Before we begin, however, we must state yet again that these writings fall into two entirely different categories. It cannot be emphasised enough in all that follows that Oakeshott's writings on 'history' addressed two distinct meanings of the word. His writings on the philosophy of history were philosophical, not historical. They discuss 'history' as a form of enquiry and examine what is sometimes called 'the problem of historical knowledge' — how we can know, if indeed we can know, 'what actually happened' in the past. By contrast, his writings on the history of political thought are *not* philosophical. They purport to represent knowledge of 'what actually happened' rather than to enquire into the form and status of such knowledge.

Let us take Oakeshott's work on the history of political thought first. The very category 'the history of political thought' has provoked much debate. Some of the leading scholars of Oakeshott's generation, such as Strauss, Voegelin and Arendt, have been criticised for fostering 'the myth of the tradition', the idea that a 'conventional chronology of classic works including at least those of Plato, Aristotle, St Augustine, St Aquinas, Machiavelli, Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau and Marx' was an 'actual historical tradition' rather than a pedagogical convenience no older than the expansion of higher education in the later nineteenth century.[56] Oakeshott, however, did not subscribe to this 'myth'. Ancient, medieval and modern political thought, on his view, did not constitute a single tradition of enquiry. Moreover, the study of the history of political thought as he con-

[53] Oakeshott, Experience and its Modes (MS version), LSE 1/1/9.

[54] Oakeshott, Correspondence, LSE 4/4/1.

[55] In a course that covered the entire academic year, Oakeshott would give ten lectures on Greece, five each on Roman and medieval politics, and ten on the modern period. Two sets of these lectures are preserved at LSE 1/1/21, with slight variations. The present work treats them as a single series of thirty lectures, listed individually in the bibliography.

[56] J.G. Gunnell, *Political Theory: Tradition and Interpretation*, Winthrop Publishers, Cambridge Mass., 1979, p. xx.

ceived it was not confined to the great texts. He treated 'political theory' and 'political thought' as categories which included policy statements and manifestos as well as abstract philosophical works. Finally, he believed that the study of political thought must also involve the study of political actions and events.

By an extension of Coats's interpretation, the unifying theme in Oakeshott's work on the history of modern political thought can be described as a concern with the history of 'liberal' thought and practice. This was a common element in his writings on such seemingly disparate topics as twentieth century ideologies, Thomas Hobbes, and the development of the modern European state. Throughout his career, he produced numerous overviews of the course of European political history, encompassing the mediaeval and classical eras, in which the emergence of the modern state, and of the kind of person most suited to it were amongst the chief events. In doing so, he was deliberately challenging other influential large-scale views of the historical process. For example, one reason the Marxist scheme of successive feudal, bourgeois, and capitalistic stages of production was unsatisfactory was because it over-emphasised the economic aspect of modern individualism. C.B. MacPherson's interpretation of Hobbes's philosophy as a justification of the new 'possessive individualism', for instance, neglected Hobbes's emphasis on law, obligation and authority in making him the advocate of a new capitalist society.[57]

Turning now to the philosophy of history, Boucher has argued that throughout his career Oakeshott was concerned to show that historical enquiry is 'an activity built on postulates and capable of generating conclusions appropriate to itself.'[58] In the vocabulary of *Experience and its Modes*, historical enquiry is an 'autonomous mode of experience'. Because Oakeshott's writings on the nature of historical knowledge are not directly related to those on the history of political thought, there would be no contradiction in holding his views on one of these subjects while holding quite different ideas on the other. Yet there are similarities of a kind. As Boucher has pointed out, the emphasis on individuality in Oakeshott's work on political philosophy and the history of political thought is reflected at the epistemological level in his views on historical enquiry.[59] For example, Oakeshott regarded the objects of historical study as individual and therefore unique. In contrast to scientific enquiry, which he

[57] See chapters three and five, below.

[58] Boucher, 'The Creation of the Past', p. 213.

[59] *op. cit.*, p. 212.

believed dealt only with the generic aspect of events, historical study was concerned with 'concrete universals', as his Idealist predecessor F.H. Bradley called the objects of historical knowledge — uniquely individual mixtures of particularity and genericity.

Oakeshott's contrast of history with science locates him within a broader debate, for the philosophy of history in the twentieth century has been dominated, numerically at least, by supporters of the view that history is or at any rate ought to be like a natural science. The positivistic view of thinkers such as Ayer that all genuine propositions were either analytic or empirical was made to include historical enquiry.[60] Ayer himself had not wanted to deny significance to propositions about the past, making an historical statement a kind of empirical proposition so that 'some possible sense experience should be relevant in the determination of its truth or falsehood' in a manner analogous to the propositions of natural science.[61] Oakeshott's rejection of the positivistic conception of historical enquiry made him a dissenting voice and lent his writings on this subject a high degree of continuity as he sought again and again to find arguments that would establish an alternative position.

The relatively unfamiliar nature of Oakeshott's work on both the philosophy of history and the history of political thought, and the availability of much unknown and unfamiliar material, provide powerful justifications for approaching the history of the development of his ideas on these subjects through the close study of the texts he produced; these constitute the 'events' in a history of his thought. Of course, we shall not ignore contextual considerations. To do so would be particularly inappropriate given Oakeshott's belief in the 'conversational' character of knowledge,[62] the more so because in the last quarter of the twentieth century, historical and contextual understanding became almost synonymous. Thanks not least to the efforts of a later generation of Cambridge historians, there has been a heightened awareness of the need to inquire into the intellectual background of a text as well as the intentions of the author. As Haakonssen argues, however, neither context nor authorial intention suffices for the historian of ideas, who must seek 'an understanding of the logical possibilities in a theory'. We must

[60] Oakeshott's rejection of the positivistic account of history does not mean that he was hostile to positivism in all areas of thought. In many ways his own account of the philosophy of science is analogous to positivistic views current in the 1930s. What he objected to was the extension of this positivistic account into inappropriate areas.

[61] A.J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and* Logic, 2nd edn., Victor Gollancz, London, 1948, pp. 31, 37, 39.

[62] Cp. Oakeshott, 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind', in *RP*.

recognise that 'the historian has to understand . . . ideas, not just as mental, social and linguistic events, but as intellectual phenomena with their own logic'[63] and, to expose this logic, close attention to the words in which their authors expressed their ideas is necessary, though no doubt not sufficient, in any attempt at intellectual history.

Another difficulty stems from the inescapable element of reflexivity in writing an historical essay on the ideas of a sometime historian and philosopher of historical enquiry. It seemed best to preserve the distinction, by no means unique to Oakeshott, between the two senses of history, alternating chapter by chapter between his discussions of the history of political thought and the philosophy of history. Some coming and going between the different senses of 'history' is necessary in each of these chapters, but if done too rapidly it produces confusion. Keeping them as separate as possible has the additional virtue of reflecting the fact that they represented two quite different subjects in Oakeshott's own mind. He insisted that his philosophy of history did not provide any method for historians to use; it did not represent the 'theory' behind his writings on the other sense of 'history' with which he was concerned, the events and ideas in the history of political thought. Unlike Hegel or Marx, Oakeshott did not see the philosophy of history as concerned with identifying the hidden, 'inner' dynamic to events which would give overall meaning to the past.

The assertion that there is no connection between Oakeshott's views on the two distinct senses of 'history' must immediately be qualified in several respects.[64] Oakeshott's view of historical enquiry did not, he believed, enjoin any particular views on historical events, or particular methods of studying them, or ways of writing about them. At the most, he seems to have thought he could provide a method of identifying certain *kinds* of statements about the past (such as the Marxists') as non-historical — but not therefore necessarily meaningless or worthless on those grounds alone. Furthermore, Oakeshott's philosophy of history argued that the assumption of agency, or 'human conduct' as he came to call it, was integral to historical understanding, and that the idea of 'character' had a crucial part to play in the understanding of action. As well as investigating the presuppositions of the ideas of character and agency in his philosophy of history, he made use of them in his writings on historical events, constituting a formal link between his philosophy of history and his view of the past.

[63] *Traditions of Liberalism*, p. xv.

[64] We have already remarked on the fact that individuality is a theme common to both.

We shall see the early importance of the idea of character in Oakeshott's thought in chapter one. Three little-known essays written during the 1920s on Thomas Wentworth, Lord Acton, and 'Shylock the Jew' employed the vocabulary of 'character', a common feature of Victorian-Edwardian thought.[65] This was quite self-conscious on Oakeshott's part; his early essay on Lord Strafford approaches seventeenth-century English history as a conflict between various character types. Another group of three unpublished manuscripts provides some useful insight into his early ideas on the history of political thought, and on the nature of history and philosophy more generally.

The first is 'An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry and Reality'.[66] This establishes the early influence of Spinoza in the context of a discussion of two contrasting paths to knowledge of Reality, at this time conceived of very much in the upper case. In it, Oakeshott outlined a conception of philosophy which in some respects was overshadowed by the importance he attached to 'poetry', which at this time was his term for both artistic and even religious experience at large, but is nevertheless recognisable in important respects as unchanged into the 1930s. The second is Oakeshott's generally dissatisfied response to the political science papers he had sat for the Cambridge History Tripos.[67] The third is 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy'. Long enough to be considered in effect Oakeshott's first book, it attempted to provide the positive conception of political philosophy he felt the political science papers in the Tripos had lacked.[68]

The broader context of the two latter essays was Oakeshott's belief that the nineteenth century had witnessed the reduction of society to a confrontation between a mass of individuals, on the one hand, and the state, on the other. Hence he was sympathetic to those of his contemporaries with 'pluralist' ideas, particularly the Cambridge historian F.W. Maitland, but also some more surprising names, such as Durkheim and Laski (in his pre-Marxist days), all of whom could be said to fear 'state omnipotence'.[69] He also leaned heavily on the work of British Idealists such as Bosanquet in his efforts to show that, far

[65] See S. Collini, 'The Idea of "Character" in Victorian Political Thought', *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, vol. 35, 1985, pp. 29–50.

[66] Oakeshott, 'An Essay on the Relations of Philosophy, Poetry, and Reality', LSE 1/1/33.

[67] Oakeshott, 'The Cambridge School of Political Science', LSE 1/1/2.

[68] Oakeshott, 'A Discussion of Some Matters Preliminary to the Study of Political Philosophy', LSE 1/1/3.

[69] D. Nicholls, *The Pluralist State: The Political Ideas of J.N. Figgis and his Contemporaries*, 2nd edn., MacMillan, London, 1994, p. 55.

from being antagonistic, 'the state' and 'the self' implied one another. In Platonic fashion, he saw the *persona* of the individual as a reflection in miniature of the nature of the state,[70] a connection he would later explore in historical terms. At this stage, however, he contrasted historical knowledge quite unfavourably with philosophy.

Oakeshott's writings on religion are relevant to a study of his ideas on history because he inherited the nineteenth century debate about the relationship of historical scholarship to Christian belief. The question was whether Christianity could be preserved in the face of increasingly detailed historical study. In the later 1920s, Oakeshott, this time following F.H. Bradley, tried to separate Christian belief from a historical knowledge of Christianity and the life of Christ. Both senses of history are important here; on the one hand, he addressed the respective limits of religious faith and of historical knowledge; on the other hand, he was concerned with the history of the church and of types of Christian personality.

In the 1920s, Oakeshott had been something of an optimist, hoping despite the recent war for a moral and religious transformation of society. In the 1930s this mood faded rapidly, mirroring the changes in Britain and Europe at large. He believed that he was witnessing the end of a particular kind of liberal thought and practice, a prospect he viewed with mixed feelings. Nineteenth-century liberalism had plainly been a failure; the war had shown that. The attempt to revive and transform it into a more genuinely popular phenomenon that would integrate what E.H. Carr called, in the title of a work Oakeshott later reviewed, the 'New Society', also seemed to be failing by the early 1930s.[71] In Germany and Italy, it seemed to have failed conclusively. Essays on Locke and Bentham, part of an ongoing attempt to grasp the situation, identified these thinkers as having contributed to a liberal orthodoxy which the radical doctrines of communism, fascism and national socialism were now challenging.

Oakeshott was, however, unhappy with his explanation of these doctrines in terms of phenomena such as secularisation and nationalism, and complained, much as he had in 1925, that he did not really feel he had got to the bottom of the matter. A hint of the idea that was

to result in a fundamental change of direction can be found in the

[70] Cp. *Republic*, Bk. VIII. 544 d–e.

[71] Oakeshott, Review of E.H. Carr, *The New Society*, LSE 1/2/1.

documentary reader he edited on *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, published in 1939. In a note, he claimed that all modern European political ideas and practices fell into one of two categories. On the one hand, there were those who favoured the 'total' planning of society by the state, so that the individual was absorbed into the collectivity. On the other hand, there were those who preferred the state to provide a framework of law within which individuals and groups retained as much discretion as possible in the handling of their own affairs.[72] Although Oakeshott came to think only the latter sort properly deserved the name, he contended that the term 'liberal' had been applied to thinkers of both kinds, and even to thinkers with a foot in both camps at once. Historic liberalism, he always maintained, was an ambiguous doctrine with a complex history.

The history of this tension between the planned and the unplanned society interested Oakeshott in one form or another for the rest of his career, but his approach to it was always marked by the use of the same large-scale, relatively short analysis. The longest essay he ever published on the subject, 'On the Character of a Modern European State', was less than a hundred and fifty pages. Given that his philosophy of history identified the use of evidence as a condition of critical historical enquiry, including the concept of evidence, it seems almost a paradox that Oakeshott appears to have done very little historical research himself, in the sense that he appears to have spent little time consulting archives and the like. We have noticed his claim that his philosophical theories about the nature of historical enquiry implied no 'method'. Yet the way he wrote about the past did imply a certain method, or lack thereof. He eschewed the critical apparatus of footnotes and bibliography that few modern professional historians would dare omit, in favour of reading various texts in the history of political thought and the works of historians, then producing a synthesis, a 'grand narrative', dealing with several centuries at a time.

We cannot escape the question of whether Oakeshott's writings on the past were in fact 'history' at all. An unequivocal answer is not offered here, but any answer must depend on the criteria of judgement employed. It must be said in Oakeshott's defence that his own thought often supplies us with the means of criticising them. We shall argue that *when judged by his own standards*, his essays on past

[72] *The Social and Political Doctrines of Contemporary Europe*, rev. edn, ed. Oakeshott, Cambridge UP, New York 1950 (1939), pp. xxii–xxiii.

events more than once violated the conditions of historical enquiry, and do not really deserve to be considered 'historical' in genre, certainly not exclusively. Chapters four and five, for example, show that Oakeshott sometimes viewed the past from an aesthetic perspective which he himself had identified philosophically as non-historical. Of course, that recognition has not deprived his ideas on European political history of all interest. Historians such as Black have acknowledged Oakeshott's work when conducting their own long-term surveys of the European past.[73]

Whereas chapter one is predominantly concerned with Oakeshott's early ideas on historical events, chapter two is devoted to the first formation of his philosophy of history. The philosophical debates over the nature of historical enquiry in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries are vital for understanding the problems he tried to face at this time. A clear distinction had barely yet emerged between 'philosophy of history', in the sense of attempts by thinkers such as Kant, Hegel, Marx, and Spengler to discern an overall pattern in past events, and 'philosophy of history' which investigated the assumptions of a type of enquiry exclusively devoted to the study of past events. The story is partly of how Oakeshott came to make it part of his mission to establish this distinction on a firmer footing.

Those who did make a philosophical study of historical enquiry can be divided for our purposes into three groups. Some, such as Buckle in England, believed that history was the study of a realm of law-governed causality, and that it should resemble a natural science as closely as possible. Others believed that history could not be scientific in this sense, and that it was therefore insignificant, such as Schopenhauer in Germany. Finally, others still believed that historical study implied a form of knowledge quite different from that found in natural science, and that the task of the philosopher of history was to give an account of the peculiar conditions it entailed. Dilthey and Bradley in the later nineteenth century, and Croce and Collingwood in the early twentieth, all took this view.

That Oakeshott could be quite disparaging about the value of historical enquiry for the study of politics as compared to philosophy did not mean that he was not interested in the logic of historical enquiry in its own right. There are three papers written in the later 1920s which indicate this decisively. Drawing on Bradley and Croce,

[73] A. Black, *Guilds and Civil Society in European Political Thought from the Twelfth Century to the Present*, Methuen and Co., London, 1984, p. xiv.

Oakeshott advanced a view of history as an independent form of enquiry, neither an art like poetry nor a science like physics. However, he also struggled unsuccessfully to overcome scepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge. He could find no way of bridging the gap between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge, between the historian and an ever receding set of past events.

Seen in this context, *Experience and its Modes*, at one time the point of departure for the study of Oakeshott's philosophy of history, now appears to have involved significant alterations to his earlier ideas. His presentation of history as an autonomous form of experience was an implicit rejection of his own earlier scepticism about the possibility of historical knowledge as such. Nevertheless, readers of the book have often been confused by the fact that, thanks to lingering traces of philosophical rationalism, Oakeshott still tended to contrast history (and all other forms of experience) unfavourably with philosophy. For example, Himmelfarb and Meiland have both been misled by Oakeshott's description of history as a defective mode of experience from the point of view of the philosopher. Both misinterpreted this as a claim that historical knowledge was unsatisfactory simply as such.

An integral part of Oakeshott's approach to the philosophy of history was to ask how history was related to other forms of human activity. In addition to philosophy, *Experience and its Modes* identified 'practical' and 'scientific' attitudes to experience. We will pay close attention to the discussion of both of these 'modes', as he called them, for an understanding of Oakeshott's philosophy of history must grasp what that philosophy was intended to exclude, as well as what it included.

In 'practical' experience the world was the object of will and desire; the organising principle of this 'mode' was the tension between the real and the ideal, the present and the future, the world as it is and the world as it ought to be. Practical experience also entailed a different relation to the past to that found in historical experience. It was characteristic of the practical past, Oakeshott argued, that it was useful. The past was used as a source of religious, moral or political instruction for the present and the future. The distinction between practical and historical views of the past is not unique to Oakeshott (it can be found in Schweitzer's *Quest of the His-*

torical Jesus,[74] which he admired,) but he was the first to develop it in detail.

'Scientific' experience meant the world as understood by the natural sciences. Although this was Oakeshott's longest discussion of the philosophy of science, he dealt with it mainly to sharpen the contrast with history. For the dominant school of logical positivism, science was an extension of ordinary 'common sense' thought. Ayer's *Language, Truth and Logic*, published three years after *Experience and its Modes*,[75] expressed this view. Oakeshott, though, regarded ordinary and scientific thought as exclusive of one another, and historical thought as exclusive of both. The scientific model of experience understood the world *sub specie quantitatis*, under the category of quantity. This gave a unique view of experience. It was not, however, to be taken as a model for other modes to emulate. This view placed Oakeshott at odds with philosophers of history such as Mandelbaum who endorsed the view that history was analogous to a natural science.

Oakeshott's philosophy of history proper discussed the postulates which he believed differentiated history from other modes of experience. We have already noticed one of these postulates, a distinctively historical conception of a 'useless' past free from didactic, moral considerations. Other postulates included distinctively historical conceptions of 'fact', 'truth', and 'reality'. This enumeration of the conditions of the possibility of historical knowledge, however, was still frequently confused by Oakeshott with arguments about the relative inferiority of history to philosophy.

By the mid- to late 1930s, there are signs that Oakeshott had begun to unravel this confusion. He ceased to make such large claims for philosophy and became less interested in trying to establish that history was an inferior means of access to reality. In a 1936 debate with a fellow Cambridge historian, M.M. Postan, over the relation between 'History and the Social Sciences', Oakeshott did not even raise the relation between history and philosophy.[76] This impression is confirmed by a 1938 piece on 'The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence' in which he discussed the relationship of historical and legal studies.[77] Furthermore, ideas usually associated with his

[74] A. Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*, tr. W. Montgomery, Adam and Charles Black, London, 1910.

[75] Oakeshott, *Experience and its Modes*, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1933.

[76] Oakeshott, 'History and the Social Sciences', in *The Social Sciences*, Le Play House Press, London, 1936, pp. 71–81.

[77] Oakeshott, 'The Concept of a Philosophical Jurisprudence', *Politica*, 3, 1938, pp. 203–22, 345–60.

post-World War Two work, such as 'tradition', were beginning to appear.

Chapter three returns to the history of political thought. It begins with another unpublished essay, Oakeshott's wartime consideration of the conditions of a peace settlement with Germany. This revolved around an analysis of the German character, and involved another vehement condemnation of National Socialism. It would be interesting to know how far his experience of the war was responsible for stimulating his interest in Hobbes, which first became noticeable in the 1930s. Under the influence of Leo Strauss and what he called a 'revolution' in Hobbes studies,[78] Oakeshott conceived an admiration for Hobbes which marked a departure from his early Idealist and pluralist sympathies. Oakeshott wrote more on Hobbes than on any other author, but his essays on the seventeenth century philosopher have not generally been integrated with his other writings on the history of political thought.[79] We shall see, however, that it was Oakeshott's work on Hobbes that led him back to the history of morals.

Oakeshott read Hobbes as attempting to recast the Christian myth of the Fall to reflect a new conception of human individuality, presaged in the medieval period by theological changes in the understanding of personality. Hobbes was presented as the first modern philosopher to examine the 'morality of individuality' which first appeared with the Italian Renaissance. Oakeshott claimed that in *Leviathan* itself, Hobbes had been concerned with the character who expressed this morality. The type of the 'just' or 'proud' man, he believed, was one of the means by which Hobbes sought to solve the problem of obligation. He went further — Hobbes's philosophy of the state as an association in terms of civil, 'positive' law made him, in effect, a liberal before liberalism. His interpretation of Hobbes had begun to affect his view of the history of political thought at large. It also had certain methodological implications for the history of ideas, relying as it did on the controversial view that Hobbes had both an esoteric and an exoteric doctrine.

Oakeshott's contemporaneous writings on Rationalism and the figure of the Rationalist attracted far more attention than his writings on Hobbes. We saw above that during the immediate post-war years, Oakeshott entered the debate on national reconstruction with polemical attacks on creeping collectivism in 'Contemporary British

[78] Oakeshott, 'Thomas Hobbes', *Scrutiny*, vol. 4, 1935, p. 269.

[79] An important exception is the essay by I. Tregenza, 'The Life of Hobbes in the Writings of Michael Oakeshott', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 18, 1997, pp. 531–57.

Politics'.[80] His essay on 'Rationalism in Politics' has much the same polemical flavour. Indeed, M.M. Postan dismissed the character of the Rationalist as a 'straw man',[81] a peg on which Oakeshott could hang all that he disliked about the modern world. There is some truth in this. Oakeshott's 'history' of Rationalism bore several of the hallmarks that he had described as characteristic of the practical attitude to the past. For example, his description of how early modern theories of knowledge had led to a Rationalist conception of politics and the role of the state was as much a diagnosis of present ills as an explanation of seventeenth century epistemology. Like Hayek and Popper, though for different reasons, he feared peace-time totalitarianism.

Although Oakeshott's writings on Rationalism are among his best-known works, they have not usually been read in conjunction with his writings on Hobbes. When we place them together we can see that both were concerned with the tension he had identified before World War Two between the planned and the unplanned society. Hobbes, on Oakeshott's reading of him, saw the function of the state as the maintenance of an authoritative framework within which citizens could pursue their affairs. The Rationalist, by contrast, was a believer in planning, insisting on using 'social engineering' to render everything conformable to a predetermined notion of the good life. Behind Oakeshott's attacks on Rationalism there lay a version of English history in which Rationalism was an alien, continental European phenomenon which had already had a pernicious hold on English life.

As the 1950s wore on, however, Oakeshott's work was no longer dominated by the two figures of Hobbes and the Rationalist. He became more interested in how the contrary dispositions they represented fitted into the history of morals in medieval and modern Europe. Just as each had represented a certain manner of governing, so each represented a corresponding character type. Hobbes and the Rationalist blended into a story of the disappearance of a morality of 'communal ties'[82] in which people knew themselves primarily as members of a group and the rise of a morality which valued the self-determined individual above all else. Hobbes's character of the just man typified the new morality; the Rationalist, many of whose features would shortly be incorporated into the new characters of

[80] Oakeshott, 'Contemporary British Politics', *Cambridge Journal*, 1, 1947–8, pp. 474–90.

[81] M.M. Postan, 'The Revulsion from Thought', *Cambridge Journal*, vol. 1, 1947, p. 153.

[82] *RP*, p. 365.

the 'mass man' and 'anti-individual', was contemporary with a reaction against it.

Chapter four deals with the philosophy of history between 1945 and the publication of *On Human Conduct* in 1975. Oakeshott's concern with the relation of history to other forms of knowledge was as keen in this period as it had been when he wrote *Experience and its Modes*. In fact, despite the abandonment of some of his earlier terminology, certain of his opinions on the subject had changed little. For example, he still considered science and history as mutually irrelevant forms of explanation. In other respects, however, there were significant changes. The most important was the shift to a more modest view of philosophy. In essays such as 'The Voice of Poetry in the Conversation of Mankind' and 'Work and Play', he modified the intellectual map put forward in his earlier work. Philosophy was now simply one voice amongst others. Consequently, history was no longer described as defective by comparison.

Between 1947, when Oakeshott reviewed Collingwood's work on *The Idea of History*,[83] and 1975, when he published *On Human Conduct*, the philosophy of history continued to be dominated by the view that history shared the logic of the natural sciences. Philosophers like Hempel defended this thesis; historians like A.J. Cobban agreed with them, believing that if they could not describe their work as a search for causes then all hope of finding an intelligible relationship between events was lost. Oakeshott became increasingly interested in finding a relationship between historical events which was not causal but which allowed them to remain significant. He believed he had found it in the idea of 'contingency', which appears to owe more than a little to the Machiavellian notion of *fortuna*.

In *Experience and its Modes*, Oakeshott had criticised Bury's conception of contingency in historical explanation as meaning nothing more than 'chance' or 'accident'. By 1975, however, 'contingency' had moved to the forefront of his philosophy of history. It is one of the most difficult parts of his work to grasp, and the present study cannot claim to have explained it fully. We may safely say, however, that he thought it was a relationship employed not only in history but in fiction and in daily life. He called it a kind of event-making, in which one event is explained by an immediate relationship to other

[83] Oakeshott, Review of R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, *English Historical Review*, 62, 1947, pp. 84–6.

events.[84] This view has similarities with the 'narrativist' philosophies of history of Danto and Gallie. Oakeshott used it to challenge the view that history was like a natural science, emphasising instead that historical explanation and analysis relied on something similar to the relationships found in stories.

The 1960s saw a period of widespread scepticism in the humanities and historical studies were no exception. J.H. Plumb, another Cambridge historian, claimed that historical study had been the discipline most deeply affected by a general 'crisis of the humanities' and had 'lost all faith in itself as a guide to the actions of men'.[85] Given Oakeshott's belief in the impractical nature of historical enquiry, it is unsurprising that he did not share this concern. He remained outside the circles affected by the 'ordinary language' philosophy of the 1950s which had done much to precipitate the 'crisis' by emphasising the importance of 'separating . . . factual from merely normative or metaphysical assertions'.[86] 'Normative assertions' were precisely what Plumb hoped historical study might provide. Nevertheless, we may still detect something of a 'linguistic turn' in Oakeshott's work that reflected changes about him. There were even certain similarities with those of the new generation of historians such as Skinner — both emphasised the contextual nature of historical knowledge.

Alongside new, linguistic concerns, older debates, over such issues as the place of moral judgement in historical study, continued to flourish. Oakeshott's view that moral judgement (as distinct from the recognition and explanation of moral conduct) had no place in history led Cobban to accuse him of maintaining a distinction between 'fact' and 'value' which produced paralysis of the moral faculties. The traditional view was that historians ought to be judges of character.[87] Oakeshott had originally argued against this on the grounds that moral judgements of the past belonged to the practical mode and were therefore non-historical. He maintained this position, but altered his reasoning somewhat. He now claimed that the inadequacy of moral judgements about the past as *historical*

[84] History was distinguished by insisting that the historical understanding of an event be exclusively in terms of its relationship with antecedent events; in fiction and daily life no such postulate is required.

[85] *The Crisis in the Humanities*, ed. J.H. Plumb, Penguin, London, 1964, p. 8.

[86] *The Return of Grand Theory in the Human Sciences*, ed. Q. Skinner, Cambridge UP, Cambridge, 1985, p. 4.

[87] T.H. Green remarked in his *Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation*, intro. A.D. Lindsay, Longmans, London, 1960, p. 199, that historians 'would have fewer readers if they confined themselves to the analysis of situations . . . and omitted judgments on the morality of individuals.'

explanations[88] was due to the fact that describing past doings as right or wrong says little or nothing about why they occurred. This, for Oakeshott, was the real focus of historical understanding.

Oakeshott also introduced a new ‘mode’ or ‘voice’, which he took to include all forms of aesthetic activity and enjoyment. This too had to be distinguished from historical knowledge. In particular, Oakeshott suggested that although the relationship of historians to their characters was analogous to the relationship novelists had to theirs, there were still categorial differences between an historical novel and a work of history.

Chapter five is our final chapter on the history of political thought. Oakeshott’s later writings on that subject covered a vast area and wove political events and political ideas very closely together. For analytic purposes, we will separate his treatment of political events and political ideas. We will begin with a discussion of the significance he believed that earlier periods of political history had for the modern era. Here we will be basing ourselves mainly on his LSE lectures, as these are the only place in which he gave extended discussion of Greek, Roman and medieval politics. The attitude a thinker adopts to such earlier periods can be very revealing. For example, Oakeshott admired the Greeks as the inventors of politics, but he was even more impressed by the achievements of the ancient Romans in legal practice. This distinguishes him from Leo Strauss, for example, who was far more of a Hellenist, believing that modern politics needed to recover the tradition of active citizenship he found in the ancient *polis*.

As Oakeshott’s interest in Rationalism declined, he concentrated more and more on linking his history of morality to the history of the modern state. These themes permeated his later writings on the past, from the lectures he gave at Harvard in 1958 to the essay ‘On the Character of a Modern European State’ in *On Human Conduct*. They were also recognisably continuous with his earlier efforts. ‘Civil association’ was the name he now gave to the liberal understanding of the state; the character-type of the ‘individual’ was his latest version of the liberal *persona* most suited to civil association. We should not allow this continuity to be obscured by several changes in vocabulary. In the later 1950s, Oakeshott drew a contrast between ‘individualist’ and ‘collectivist’ styles of governing. In the 1960s he used

[88] There was, of course, no suggestion that such judgements were illegitimate in themselves. Indeed, Oakeshott recognised that in some circumstances (a criminal trial, for example), a judgement of guilt or innocence was exactly what was required.

'*telocracy*' and '*nomocracy*' and in the 1970s he employed two Latin terms, *societas* and *universitas*.

All these terms, however, referred to the same distinction. On the one hand, the state had been thought of as a purposive, 'goal-directed' association whose members were united in the pursuit of a certain enterprise, be it the pursuit of salvation or of wealth. On the other hand, the state had been understood as an association in terms of non-instrumental law, the business of which was to maintain a framework of legal rules leaving members of the association free to pursue their own ends, individually or in groups. This was clearly a more precise restatement of the tension in modern European politics which Oakeshott had identified before 1939, between the belief in 'planned' and 'unplanned' societies.

Such a dualistic structure for the history of modern European politics was not novel. Black has remarked that Hegel, Gierke, Tönnies, and Durkheim all suggested binary oppositions which together made up European political life. All of these thinkers assumed that 'medieval man until at least the thirteenth century . . . identified himself with the norms of his community, whereas modern . . . "European" man is an individualist'.[89] All opposed a tradition of community to a tradition of individualism. Gierke, for example, contrasted the medieval Germanic folk-community which he tried to revive in the modern world with the liberal, contractarian, individualistic view of society that had increasingly dominated the West since the Reformation. In turn, Oakeshott, like Gierke, argued that both the medieval and the modern world were characterised by a dualistic tension between two classes of beliefs about the nature of the state and the place of the individual within it.

It is for this reason that Oakeshott wanted to use the concepts of *societas* and *universitas* in combination. Each entailed a different notion of the *persona* appropriate to the new form of government they were intended to describe, the modern state. In a *societas*, the 'individualistic' associates wished only to be ruled; in a *universitas*, 'anti-individuals' expected guidance and management from the state. Neither concept, however, gave an adequate understanding of the modern state by itself. Although Oakeshott's preference for 'civil' over 'enterprise' association was quite clear, he believed that the historic states of modern Europe had always been a balance of both. The terminology may be unusual, but it should not distract us from realising Oakeshott was discussing a well-established theme in the history of political thought, and one which survived his death. A

[89] A. Black, 'Society and the Individual from the Middle Ages to Rousseau', *History of Political Thought*, vol. 1, 1980, pp. 145–66.

later generation of scholars has made *The Individual in Political Theory and Practice* one of the main factors contributing to 'The Origins of the Modern State in Europe' between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries.[90]

We then turn to Oakeshott's discussions of particular thinkers according to whether they had favoured the analogy of *societas* or that of *universitas* for understanding the modern state. These must also be seen in the context of his own earlier work. For example, most of those whom he had regarded before World War Two as theorists of 'representative democracy' in the liberal tradition now reappeared as philosophers of the state as a *societas*. There was also considerable overlap between Oakeshott's selections and the choices of other scholars such as Plamenatz when compiling a list of 'canonical' liberal thinkers. Nevertheless, some of Oakeshott's connections were unusual and surprising. For example, he made Hobbes and Hegel stand together as theorists of 'civil association'.

Chapter six is devoted to Oakeshott's final work on the philosophy of history, in particular the three essays which make up the bulk of his last book, *On History*, published in 1983.[91] The essays it contains had been developed in the seminar he held at the LSE after 1964, meaning that much of *On History* was being prepared at the same time as *On Human Conduct*. However, the two books have rarely, if ever, been considered together as complementary elements of a single enterprise. This chapter begins, therefore, by considering the relationship between *On Human Conduct* and *On History*. The former devoted more attention to the status of history in relation to philosophical, scientific and practical activity. The latter gave more detailed attention to the postulates of historical enquiry itself, chiefly to the ideas of 'Past', 'Events', and 'Change'. Each of these postulates was the subject of a separate essay in *On History*, and since that work has yet to receive any lengthy discussion, it is appropriate to attempt a detailed examination of Oakeshott's handling of them.

The essay on 'Past'[92] took up once again the argument that there is more than one kind of past and the historical past was a kind of past distinct from all others. The new twist Oakeshott gave to this argu-

[90] See *The Individual in Political Theory and Practice*, ed. J. Coleman, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1996. This volume is the sixth of seven in a series dedicated to the theme of 'The Origins of the Modern State in Europe'.

[91] Oakeshott, *On History and Other Essays*, Blackwell, Oxford, 1983.

[92] Late in his career, Oakeshott tended to drop the definite article and speak simply of 'past' rather than 'the past', presumably to underline his argument that 'the' past was never understood in an unqualified way but was always seen from an historical or practical or fictional perspective.

ment was that historical enquiry postulated a distinctive relationship to the present as well as to the past. The argument that the historian could never escape the present now posed no obstacle to historical understanding. What was important was how objects encountered in the present were regarded — the same item could be understood as historical evidence of a vanished past or in some other, non-historical fashion, perhaps with regard to its utility. In his attempt to establish this point, Oakeshott confronted the pragmatic view, which he associated with Heidegger, that the adoption of an historical attitude in the present was in fact impossible.

Oakeshott's argument that the historical past exists only in historical writing as the conclusion of evidential reasoning also implied a certain view of historical events. In the essay on 'Historical Events', he tried to provide an ideal model of the levels of complexity through which historical reason passes, from static situations of the sort he believed Namier and Braudel had constructed to dynamic, changing events. He then developed the argument of *On Human Conduct* that the relation between these events was a contingent one, returning for the final time to the debate with 'scientific' philosophers of history such as Hempel.

The essay on 'Historical Change' attempted to distinguish a distinctively historical mode of change from other conceptions of change such as the teleological and the organic, with which, Oakeshott claimed, it had often been confused. By his own account, his arguments were inspired by the account of change and continuity in Aristotle's *Physics*. Aristotle's discussion, he claimed, had helped him to the conclusion that in historical understanding, a changing individual, be it a person or an institution, maintains an identity exclusively through continuity.

The essays in *On History* discuss only some of the problems in the philosophy of history that Oakeshott was considering between the late 1960s and early 1980s, and we will conclude by placing them in the broader context of his thought at the time. We can do so by examining two unpublished papers from this period, on 'The Emergence of the History of Thought', and 'Political Thought as a Subject of Historical Enquiry'.[93] Why Oakeshott did not work these two essays up for inclusion in *On History* when it was published in 1983 is something of a mystery, but they provide useful insight into his own understanding of the significance of his final book. It is time now,

[93] Oakeshott, 'The Emergence of the History of Thought', LSE 1/1/23, and 'Political Thought as a Subject of Historical Enquiry', LSE 1/1/27.

however, to turn back to the beginning of the century, and look at the young Oakeshott.