



This modest man: Oakeshott argued that the job of politics was “to keep afloat on an even keel”

BOOKS

Not work, but always love

The conservative thinker who went beyond politics

By Jesse Norman

Michael Oakeshott: Notebooks (1922-86)

Edited by Luke O’Sullivan

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Who now reads Michael Oakeshott? Until recently, very few people indeed. It took 30 years for his first book, *Experience and Its Modes* (1933), to sell out its initial print run of 1,000 copies. Nor was its author well known even towards the end of his life. The possibly apocryphal story goes that after her election in 1979 Mrs Thatcher was keen to celebrate the conservative intellectuals who, as she saw it, had helped make victory possible. “Let’s give that man Oakeshott a title!” she cried. A knighthood was duly produced . . . but for Walter Oakeshott, the (no less deserving) former vice-chancellor of Oxford and specialist in medieval literature.

It is unlikely that his distant cousin will have minded, for Michael was, by all accounts, the most unassuming of men. During the Second World War the young Peregrine Worsthorne, a future editor of the *Sunday Telegraph*, found himself sharing a tent for six months with another recruit to the Phantom special reconnaissance unit. Having recently won a scholarship to Peterhouse, Worsthorne lost no time in favouring his new companion with his wide-ranging views on politics, history, philosophy and other topics. One can hardly imagine his embarrassment, on arriving at Cambridge, to attend the university’s lectures on European political thought and discover the same tent-mate delivering them.

Yet at his death in 1990, aged 89, Michael Oakeshott did not lack public recognition. The *Daily Telegraph* described him as “the greatest political philosopher in the Anglo-Saxon tradition since Mill – or even Burke”. The *Guardian* called him “perhaps the most original academic political philosopher of this century”, and he was marked as a brilliant interpreter of Hobbes, a generous teacher and a highly effective chair of the department of government at the London School of Economics. There ensued a warm, unbidden exchange of reminiscences across the Atlantic, between friends, pupils and admirers.

There is now a rapidly burgeoning field of “Oakeshott studies”. Virtually everything he wrote has been published or is in the course of publication, and the same is true of his lectures and broadcasts – with the exception (so far) of *A Guide to the Classics* (1936), the book he co-authored on horse racing. The great university presses of Oxford, Cambridge and Yale have taken him up. He has been the subject, or perhaps the victim, of numerous studies, companion volumes and collections of essays, including five since 2012 alone.

In *Experience and Its Modes*, Oakeshott had written:

Philosophy, the effort in thought to begin at the beginning and to press

to the end, stands to lose more by professionalism and its impedimenta than any other study. And it is perhaps more important that we should keep ourselves unencumbered with merely parasitic opinion than that we should be aware of all, or even the best, that has been thought and said. For a philosophy, if it is to stand at all, must stand absolutely upon its own feet and anything which tends to obscure this fact must be regarded with suspicion.

As these *Notebooks* show, he managed to keep himself almost entirely free of “merely parasitic opinion” for his entire working life, some 60 years. More than that: they show how deeply he was imbued in “the best that has been thought and said”. They are profound, provocative, moving and endlessly quotable. And they cast further light on his life and thought, and on the human predicament.

On the face of it, the body of intellectual work published during Oakeshott’s long lifetime is slender: two monographs, separated by some 40 years, and two rather more accessible collections of essays on politics and history. Most of his readers come to him through the first of these collections, *Rationalism in Politics* (1962). This set out a vigorous but elegant philosophical attack on the postwar consensus in favour of planning and technical expertise within government. In a favoured metaphor of the time, politicians were seen as officers on the deck of the ship of state, steering the vessel under expert guidance and yanking civil-service levers to increase or reduce speed.

Oakeshott shows how such an enterprise is fated to end on the rocks. As a philosopher, he takes aim at the deepest point: not at specific plans and schemes but at the assumptions underlying them, in particular the belief that skilled activities such as that of governing can be reduced to a set of explicit rules or instructions. The effect of this view, one might note, is to denigrate political understanding and exalt youth and inexperience, for its implication is that the tacit, inarticulate knowledge built up over time by the craftsman has no place in politics.

To the contrary, Oakeshott suggests: “In political activity . . . men sail a boundless and bottomless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel.” A modest and fastidious aspiration it is, and quite out of keeping with the post-war drive for jobs, homes and prosperity. And yet that modesty and fastidiousness feel strangely liberating today, now that we

have seen the rationalistic excesses of totalitarian societies; as politicians are forced to acknowledge both their own limitations in power and those of the state; and while western societies wrestle with the social effects of our highly materialistic and narrowly economic cultures.

As political reflection, this vision owes more to Edmund Burke than Oakeshott was perhaps prepared to acknowledge. But Oakeshott was undoubtedly a more purely philosophical thinker, who joined a Humean scepticism with a desire to interrogate the deepest aspects of human activity and experience in the tradition of Spinoza and Hegel. His eye is always a conditionalising one: for him philosophy has no absolutes, except that all human experience is corban to its presuppositions. Only through an awareness of this can philosophy “stand on its own feet”. It follows that the modern yearning for objectivity, for a suppositionless authority underwriting human action through claims of science or religion or national identity, is as intellectually spurious as it is disastrous in practice.

He has only one subject, and it is *the* subject: human experience

The very idea of rationalism is thus one expression of a much deeper analysis by Oakeshott of human experience as divided into different “modes”, or organising conceptual frameworks, through which we encounter the world; it is what occurs when the quantitative categories of science are confused with the very different categories to be found within history and practice. But these modes are marked by their internal consistency, and they develop an institutional basis within society: indeed, Oakeshott came to see them as distinct voices, and the interplay between them as constitutive of culture and civilisation, the “life *inter homines*”. For him, then, education is not a technocratic process of creating future workers, or even a simple transfer of knowledge. It is an adventure, an initiation into what he called “the conversation of mankind”. It is how we learn to be human.

But this modal analysis was revised and refined over time. The result was Oakeshott’s late masterpiece, *On Human Conduct* (1975). Gone is the seductive smoothness of the essays. The style is dense and intricate, and Oakeshott does not shy away from creating a formidable technical vocabulary in his search for the utmost clarity of expression. Moreover, the book moves from philosophy to history, as he recasts

and generalises an understanding of human practice, uses that understanding to explore the classical idea of civil association, and then locates that idea in the ambiguous emergence of the modern European state.

The result is philosophically profound in at least three ways. It gives new depth to the idea of civil association – as the association of equals not bound by any governing enterprise or purpose. It allows Oakeshott logical scope to extend his thought to embrace the rule of law, conceived modally in its own right, as he did in his final work, *On History* (1983). And it enables him to bring these two strands together in a rigorous and original philosophical grounding for modern ideas of limited government, personal freedom and the basic legitimacy of the state. It is in this sense that Oakeshott is, ultimately, a “conservative” philosopher.

So far, so solid, so massive and marmoreal. To those who have gazed in wonder at this complex intellectual edifice, it is a profound shock to turn the corner and discover something very, very different.

We have seen Oakeshott as a thinker from another age, one who delights in metaphor and disdains the modern fashion for isms, and the minutiose and argumentative logic-chopping by which so much of today’s academic philosophy talks past itself. He has only one subject, and it is *the* subject: human experience, in all its pain and joy and glory. This is, in its own way, subversive enough. Yet it is precisely for this reason that in the end what mattered to Oakeshott was not work but life, and specifically love. Philosophy was, it seems, an antidote.

The present volume has been culled from a vast array of journals written by Oakeshott between 1922 and 1986. These include his own reflections, quotations and passages transcribed from other writers, as well as mini-essays and purely personal *cris de coeur*. They were not written for publication, and have not now been assembled into anything remotely resembling a single line of thought (how could they be? Oakeshott described them as “a *Zibaldone* – a written chaos”). Their editor, Luke O’Sullivan, has worked wonders to bring them to book.

The result is a treasury of apothegm, ideas and wisdom. Nearly every one of its more than 500 pages contains some pungent and arresting thought: “Citizenship is a spiritual experience, not a legal relationship.” “To lose youth, vitality, power, love, a friend – all are deaths & they are felt & suffered as deaths . . . these lesser deaths, the mortal material of our life – are the worst.” “In love is our existence made intelligible. For in love are all contraries reconciled.” And, no less ▶

► in character, “In pretty girls moral qualities are not so awfully relevant.”

As these snippets hint, the *Notebooks* place Oakeshott in a European aphoristic tradition ranging from Martial to La Rochefoucauld and Nietzsche. They confirm his deep engagement with Plato and Aristotle, with personal heroes such as Spinoza, Cervantes, Montaigne and Pascal and with the novels of Tolstoy, Turgenev, James and Conrad, among many others. Again and again he returns to the themes of death and life, the enchantment and salvations of religion and poetry, and above all love.

For the truth is that Oakeshott was not merely an Apollonian, but a Dionysian. He was married three times and had an extensive but often unsuccessful and rackets love life. A man of enormous charm, brilliant conversation and few pretensions, he admired and respected many women, yet had periods in which he behaved with great cruelty to those who loved and depended on him.

Oakeshott rejected philosophy as a guide to human conduct

The *Notebooks* include a remarkable sequence, dating from 1928-34, named after “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” by Keats, in which the thirtysomething Oakeshott veers from profound observations on love and loss to obsessional grumbling about his principal girlfriend, Céline (his diaries attest to an interest then in at least nine further women), interspersed with melodramatic screams of sexual frustration. He said of himself, “I am like the River Jordan, my course has ended in a Dead Sea.” And of his first wife, “To know is to lose.”

In a man just married with a young child this is not pretty, to say the least. But it is compelling to read, and its counterpart – his supposed antidote to love – was *Experience and Its Modes*, and the first formation of his philosophical world-view. Oakeshott rejected philosophy as a guide to human conduct and tried at times to compartmentalise the two sides of his own character, the Apollonian and the Dionysian, but he never disavowed them. His ideal was always that of the self-chosen life, the life lived in the full expression of one’s individuality. About that there could be no compromise, whatever the consequences – for him or others. ●

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