

## Forum

### The 'Intrusion' of Personal Feelings: biographical dilemmas\*

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The notion that history is a morality tale has long ceased to be fashionable. The idea was most uncompromisingly articulated in Lord Acton's famous dictum, 'Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men'. In contrast to Acton's moral absolutism are the notions of impartiality and value-free history implied in Leopold von Ranke's aphorism *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – to tell the past as it essentially was. As a biographer with a specialism in 'telling academic lives', I have often found myself self-consciously steering a course between the polarities of morality and impartiality. Specifically, how does one react to the behaviour of one's subjects?

My starting point is to observe how unrealistic it is to expect biographers (or historians) to divest themselves of feelings and values when dealing with the crooked timber of humanity. Oskar Spate said it so eloquently when reflecting on the sixteen-year excursion that resulted in his three-volume history of *The Pacific since Magellan* (1979, 1983, 1988). He developed a sense of connection with his subjects:

My days among the Dead are Past': over the years the dreamy idealists Mendaña and Quiros, tough ruthless Jan Pieterzoon Coen, Dampier of the enquiring gaze, the Forsters trapped between their high self-esteem and low realities of shipboard life, shrewd Finau of Tonga – these and many others have become for me not mere names in books but real

people, in their greatneses and littlenesses, knowing both mortal despair and euphoric joy, servitude and grandeur.<sup>1</sup>

There is no point in attempting to refute or explain away the presence of personal feelings and values in biographical (or historical) work. The prevalence will vary between individual biographers, but they are never far beneath the surface and are integral to biographical writing. Sooner or later one's preferences and antipathies will 'intrude'. I would endorse the words of the sociologist Llewellyn Gross, who disputed the notion of value-free enquiry, pointing out that facts cannot

stand alone as discrete objects of observation in the pristine purity of value neutrality. They are tied by human nature to modes of evaluation rooted in private, public and scientific concerns... To see a fact and describe its occurrence is to appraise it through an angle of vision bound by personal experience, locality and cultural epoch.<sup>2</sup>

In short, personal feelings – call them values, if you may – are ever-present. It is not a matter denying them or dismissing them as irrelevant or burdensome, but of management – of turning them to best effect, and having a thought-through reason for whatever judgment you make. Besides, so-called objectivity is the fig leaf to cover one's prejudices. To assume the posture of the detached scholar, as Spate put it, is typically a feigned 'impartiality which evades responsibility by saying nothing, the impartiality which

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<sup>1</sup> O.H.K. Spate, 'The History of a History: reflections on the ending of a Pacific voyage', *Journal of Pacific History*, vol.23, no.1, 1988, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Llewellyn Gross, 'Values and Theory of Social Problems', in Alvin Gouldner and S.M. Miller (eds), *Applied Sociology: opportunities and problems*, New York: Free Press, 1965, 385, quoted in Allen Isaacman, 'Legacies of Engagement: scholarship informed by political commitment', *African Studies Review*, vol.46, no.1, 2003, 6. See also Hugh Stretton, *The Political Sciences: general principles of selection in social science and history*, New York: Basic Books, 1969.

masks its bias by presenting slanted facts with an air of cold objectivity – these are a thousand times more dangerous than an open declaration of where one stands; then at least those who disagree can take one’s measure with confidence’.<sup>3</sup>

The manner in which values and personal feelings are revealed and expressed is often matters the most. Some people see the world and its people in explicitly moral terms – it is the way they are and nothing will change them<sup>4</sup> – but biographers, and academics generally, tend to find that less on the moral front is more. That is to say, that under-statement is better than over-statement. Whatever the excesses of tweeting, serious academics and biographers are more circumspect in print than in the spoken word. Just how much of the passion of personal feelings gets left out of academic works becomes clear from the occasional narratives that hit on a sore point. One of two striking examples is Frank Bongiorno’s unalloyed dismay at Tony Blair’s dishonesty and lack of principle over the invasion of Iraq: ‘The difference between a lie and the truth is for Blair a mere technicality; it’s the end that really matters. There was not a word in any of this about the right of citizens to expect their leaders to speak truthfully, in order that they might engage in the political process as well-informed people embedded in relationships based on trust’.<sup>5</sup> The other example involves Robert Dare, who also makes a case for

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<sup>3</sup> O.H.K. Spate, ‘Thirty Years Ago: a view of the Fijian political scene – confidential report to the British Colonial Office, September 1959’, *Journal of Pacific History*, vol. 25, no.1, 1990, 103.

<sup>4</sup> A number of authors in the *Festschrift* to Ron Crocombe observed this with regard to the man so honoured. The contributors had not conferred with each other beforehand but made their observations autonomously. See Linda Crowl, Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe and Rod Dixon (eds), *Ron Crocombe e Toa: Pacific writing to celebrate his life and work*, Suva: University of the South Pacific Press, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Frank Bongiorno, ‘Tony’s War’ (15 December 2009), *Inside Story: current affairs and culture from Australia and beyond*, <http://inside.org.au/tonys-war/#sthash.yDWVXFsk.dpuf> & <http://inside.org.au/tonys-war/>

morality in political life, on this occasion taking John Howard to task for discarding his undertaking for open and accountable government under his watch.<sup>6</sup> The difference in these two cases is that Bongiorno's disquiet was expressed in an online-only magazine of current affairs, whereas Dare smuggled his sense of betrayal into an academic article, whose title gives no clue to some of its contents.

More usually, there is a certain circumspection in how disapproval is expressed. When researching his book on the American historical profession, Peter Novick developed

sympathies or antipathies based on information which does not appear in one's text, because it is irrelevant to the issues under discussion.

Some of those whom I have encountered in the course of my work I like very much.... Other material I came across left a bad taste... Based on my own values, 'prejudices' if you like, I found a number of eminent figures to be insufferably pompous, arrogant, and self-satisfied. Others, particularly junior historians writing to their seniors, often struck me as sycophantic, self-absorbed, self-pitying 'injustice collectors'.<sup>7</sup>

In keeping with the somewhat genteel conventions of academic discourse, Novick leaves unnamed those just described, although his text does identify the perpetrators of bad behaviour when relevant to his discussion.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, William Palmer erred on the side of discretion. When researching his book on 'the World War II

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Dare, 'A Peaceable War Historian: the passions of Trevor Wilson', *War & Society*, vol.23, 2005, 75-87.

<sup>7</sup> Peter Novick, *That Noble Dream: the "objectivity" question and the American historical profession*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, 15.

<sup>8</sup> A reviewer of *That Noble Dream* expressed concern that it might 'inhibit historians from committing their private thoughts to paper in the future. The publication of Novick's book, together with the easy, confidential access to others that long-distance telephone calls provide, may make it impossible to write a sequel to this volume fifty years from now'. See James T. Kloppenberg, 'Objectivity and Historicism: a century of American historical writing', *American Historical Review*, vol. 94, no. 4, 1989, 1014.

generation of historians' in the US and the UK, he was received with discourtesy by some of the historians he wished to interview.<sup>9</sup> Whereas Palmer was generous in acknowledging those who assisted his endeavours, the ill-mannered individuals go unnamed. He also got a taste of the self-absorption referred to by Novick. At the end of one telephone interview, the person on the other end of the line who said, 'Now let's see, you're writing a biography about me, right?'<sup>10</sup> It is tempting for biographers to get their own back in print, but Palmer managed to be even-handed.<sup>11</sup>

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Morality is never static. The changing face of what constitutes morality presents an immediate problem to the present discussion. Morality is a relative concept. Today's sins can be yesterday's normalities, or at least they are tolerated. The biographer of the Australian physiologist 'Pansy' Wright admits to 'oscillating between unalloyed admiration for Wright's brilliance and dismay as his insensitivities'.<sup>12</sup> On the latter score, Wright's provocation of female students in lectures at the University of Melbourne with coarse sexual repartee would be a dismissible offence in this day and age.<sup>13</sup> At the same time, the manner in which some people once

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<sup>9</sup> William Palmer, *Engagement with the Past: the lives and works of the World War II generation of historians*, Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001, xiii.

<sup>10</sup> Palmer, *Engagement with the Past*, xv.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Yehudi Menuhin's mother emerges badly in Robert Magidoff's biography of her son, presumably because she refused to co-operate with the biographer. See Humphrey Burton, *Menuhin*, London: Faber & Faber, 2000, 351.

<sup>12</sup> Peter McPhee, *'Pansy': a life of Roy Douglas Wright*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1999, 3.

<sup>13</sup> See McPhee, *'Pansy'*, 52, 85. The latter instance reads: 'On one occasion he asked a female student in a lecture "Which male part swells to ten times its normal size when aroused?" When the desperately embarrassed young woman

reacted to sinfulness can seem absurd in the light of contemporary practices. Soon after the conclusion of World War II, the chaplain at Balliol College, Oxford, had an affair with the Master's secretary, whereupon a college fellow, who had been married by the erring chaplain, 'promptly arranged a new marriage ceremony by an untainted vicar'.<sup>14</sup> That, to my mind, is raising sanctimony to new heights.

Conversely, some of today's irreproachable values would have been unintelligible in bygone eras. An anti-war baron in the Middle Ages who turned the other cheek would not have lasted two minutes. The problem in the application of morality is to risk imposing present-day standards into situations where they have no application, and upon people who thought in different ways. This consideration led to an article of faith amongst medieval scholars to austere study the past in its own terms, not ours. That was the way the world worked in those days. Apart from sometimes conveying an impression of callous indifference to past suffering, what this injunction overlooks is that the morality of a given time and place was not monolithic. In discussing the travails of Indian labourers on sugar plantations in Fiji, Ken Gillion conceded that the labourers were probably better off than they would have been in India, but that this was no excuse for the harsh treatment on the plantations: 'while conditions in Fiji cannot properly be viewed in the light of the social conscience, working conditions, and anthropological knowledge of the mid-twentieth century, it must be remembered that they were regarded as deplorable by the more sensitive men *at the time*... It was not

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finally blurted out "The penis, Professor", he shook his head and turned to the rest of the theatre. Finally a male student offered the iris as an answer; "Correct", replied Wright, then, turning to the red-faced woman, "and you're going to be very disappointed on your wedding night".

<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Haslam, *The Vices of Integrity: E.H. Carr, 1892-1982*, London/New York: Verso, 1999, 166.

without reason that the Indians called their life on the plantations ‘*narak*’, which means hell.<sup>15</sup>

A way around the problem of relative moralities is to follow Oskar Spate’s example:

when actions flagrantly contradict the actor’s moral beliefs (and most of my actors would call themselves Christians) or the better standards of their own times, then they may justly be condemned. So I have no hesitation in damning Doña Isabel Barreto and Simon Metcalfe, whose actions horrified their contemporaries.<sup>16</sup>

I have followed that advice from the day I read it.

I did, however, have a morality fit on one occasion, and had to be saved from myself. For the last five years, I have collaborated in a series of papers with Geoffrey Gray. Our first such effort concerned the appointment of John Barnes as professor of anthropology at the University of Sydney in 1955.<sup>17</sup> We admitted to being disconcerted, not only at the ruggedness of the in-fighting but by the disturbingly personalised nature of the referee’s reports. The referees of our own paper were equally disconcerted that we had brought such matters to attention, although all our sources were in the public domain. Indeed, State law in New South Wales concerning access to public documents is relatively strict, being governed by a ‘fifty-year rule’;

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<sup>15</sup> K.L. Gillion, *Fiji’s Indian Migrants: a history to the end of indenture in 1920*, Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1962, 129.

<sup>16</sup> Spate, ‘The History of a History’, 9. The missionary and colonial magistrate Samuel Marsden (‘the flogging parson’) provides another example. Many people in the penal colony of New South Wales, which was no place for the faint-hearted, ‘were sickened by the priest’s cruelty, his treachery, his sanctimony and his greed’. See John Ritchie, *Lachlan Macquarie: a biography*, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1986, 148.

<sup>17</sup> Geoffrey Gray and Doug Munro, ‘Australian Aboriginal Anthropology at the Crossroads: finding a successor to A.P. Elkin, 1955’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, vol.22, no.3, 2011, 351-69.

and university archives are considered public documents. In a follow-up paper, Geoff and I discussed Barnes's transition, less than two years later, to the chair of anthropology at the Australian National University (ANU).<sup>18</sup> If the Sydney affair was bad, the ANU scenario was worse, if that were possible. No one came out of the episode and its aftermath looking good, apart from Barnes. I wrote the first draft of that paper, and my narrative was teeming with indignation at the prevalence of procedural lapses specifically and bad faith generally. A wiser head prevailed in the shape of Geoffrey Gray, who quietly insisted that my strident reaction be toned down. His message was to simply set out the information and let readers judge for themselves. I am glad that my strident first effort was hosed down, but it might have been a case of an equal and opposite reaction. In retrospect, I feel that we might have been a bit more explicit in some instances, and spoken our minds, and not given protagonists the occasional benefit of the doubt.

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A somewhat neglected aspect of the place of personal feelings in biographic writing centers on the choice of subject. When researching the genre of biographies of histories, it quickly became apparent that the biographers – at least those writing book-length biographies – were almost always drawn to a given subject through a sense of fellow feeling and an underlying admiration.<sup>19</sup> This is hardly surprising: biographers do not want to spend years researching the life of someone they cannot relate to or downright

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<sup>18</sup> Geoffrey Gray and Doug Munro, "The department was in some disarray": the politics of choosing a successor to S.F. Nadel, 1957', in Regna Darnell and Frederic W. Gleach (eds), *Anthropologists and their Traditions across National Boundaries*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2014, 41-71.

<sup>19</sup> Doug Munro, 'Biographies of Historians – or, the cliographer's craft', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 43, no. 1, 2012, 11-27.



dislike. Adam Sisman realised the dangers when writing his biography of Hugh Trevor-Roper, but in the opposite direction. Although well aware that the unlikable younger Trevor-Roper had transformed into the charming and kindly older Trevor-Roper, Sisman only knew the latter personally, and it did bother him that he ‘may have been influenced by feelings of loyalty, affection and gratitude’ toward the Trevor-Roper he knew.<sup>20</sup>

I once said that I wouldn’t waste my time in writing at length about someone I didn’t respect, and now I find myself deliberating on Manning Clark, not because I like or admire him but because he is interesting – or is it because the two recent biographies are interesting books?<sup>21</sup> Journal article-length studies, by contrast, provide the ideal vehicle for more critical appraisal of another academic’s work and reputation.<sup>22</sup> In mid-2015 I will engage in one such exercise by presenting a seminar paper at Flinders University on the vicious posthumous attack on Clark by his longtime publisher Peter Ryan, which spread over three instalments of *Quadrant* in

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<sup>20</sup> Adam Sisman, *Hugh Trevor-Roper: the biography*, London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2010, xvi.

<sup>21</sup> Brian Matthews, *Manning Clark: a life*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2008; Mark McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: the life of Manning Clark*, Melbourne: Miegunyah Press, 2011.

<sup>22</sup> For example, Geoffrey Gray (e-mail to author, 29 November 2014) was partially motivated to write about the anthropologist Ronald Berndt (1916-90) in order to challenge the assessments of acolytes at the University of Western Australia, where Berndt spent most of his career. See Gray, “‘You are ... my anthropological children’: A.P. Elkin, Ronald Berndt and Catherine Berndt, 1940-1956”, *Aboriginal History*, vol. 29, 2005, 77-106, <http://press.anu.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2011/05/ch0551.pdf>. Cf. Robert Tonkinson and Michael Howard, ‘The Berndts: a biographical sketch’, in Tonkinson and Howard (eds), *Going It Alone? Prospects for Aboriginal Autonomy: essays in honour of Ronald and Catherine Berndt*, Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 1991, 17-42.

1993-94.<sup>23</sup> Previous discussion of the episode has divided along partisan lines. Perhaps the fact that I think that both protagonists, in their different ways, behaved badly, will be no impediment to my eventual analysis, or at least that's what I like to think. At least I have shown my hand and won't be flying under false colours, much less sitting on the fence. My audience will know exactly what my position is.

Authors of biographies themselves can arouse feelings. In a public lecture, Adam Sisman slagged off at a rival biographer of historian A.J.P. Taylor in a boastful and self-promoting manner:

Some years ago I read another life of A.J.P. Taylor by an author whom I will not name. It seemed to me uninspiring and I abandoned the book halfway through. I found myself wondering, 'Why was I ever interested in this man?' He emerged from the pages of this biography as unhappy, mean-minded and self-serving: 'Why had I devoted several years of my life to him?' Trying to answer these questions I pulled off the shelves a copy of my own book, which had remained unopened for some years, and started reading. At once my subject sprang to life and I saw again what a fascinating and delightful individual he had been.<sup>24</sup>

A friend of mine was so appalled by such transgressions of propriety and decorum – not a shred of modest or humility – that he e-mailed to me, 'If Sisman said that then he's a complete shit.... What rock do some people live under, I wonder?'<sup>25</sup> In fact, there is a great deal of

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<sup>23</sup> Republished in Peter Ryan, *Lines of Fire: Manning Clark & other writings*, Binalong, NSW: Clarion Editions, 1997, 175-234.

<sup>24</sup> Adam Sisman, 'Writing the Biographies of A.J.P. Taylor and Hugh Trevor-Roper', Program in British Studies Lecture Series, University of Texas at Austin, 4 May 2012, <http://www.utexas.edu/cola/progs/britishstudies/Lectures/Audio-Recordings.php>. Sisman expressed similar sentiments a previous occasion: 'Other People's Lives', <http://wwword.com/1601/think/miscellany/being-a-biographer/>.

<sup>25</sup> Identity of respondent withheld, but the writer has given permission to quote.

affection toward Taylor from the rival biographer, Kathleen Burk, who was Taylor's last postgraduate student.<sup>26</sup> Her book is also, in part, an intellectual biography of the sort that is beyond Sisman's capabilities.

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The question of morality in academic life was recently brought to the fore with the publication of David Caute's *Isaac & Isaiah: the covert punishment of a Cold War heretic*. The protagonists are Isaac Deutscher (1907-67) and Isaiah Berlin (1909-97), both Jewish émigrés from communism to the more congenial pastures of Great Britain, but divided by political and personal differences and never cordial to one another. Deutscher's review of Berlin's *Historical Inevitability* set in train a pattern of mutual antagonism.

In 1963, Deutscher seemed set for a professorial appointment at Sussex University, the first of Britain's new 'plateglass universities'.<sup>27</sup> Late in the day the Sussex vice-chancellor (Sir John Fulton) wrote to Berlin, who was a member of the university's academic advisory committee, for an opinion – to which Berlin responded:

Your letter puts me in a cruel dilemma. **The candidate of whom you speak is the only man whose presence in the same academic community as myself I should find morally intolerable.** How much of this is founded on objective judgement of his academic and

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<sup>26</sup> Kathleen Burk, *Troublemaker: the life and history of A.J.P. Taylor*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2000. See also Burk, 'Author's Response' (to Paul Addison's review of *Troublemaker*), June 2001, <http://www.history.ac.uk/ihr/Focus/Whatishistory/burk2.html>, which contains a useful discussion on the relationship between history and biography, and the 'antics' of some of her reviewers.

<sup>27</sup> See Michael Beloff, *The Plateglass Universities*, London: Secker & Warberg, 1968, ch. 5.

intellectual activities and how much on personal feelings, I find difficult to say. I feel it is very wrong to leave matters like this: and I certainly have no wish to oppose anything that Asa Briggs, [Patrick] Corbett and others want – nor would I dream of doing so, even if I had a right to do so, which I would. **But I think there is a limit below which lack of scruple must not go in the case of academic teachers.** If you would like to know my views in greater detail, I should be ready to communicate them in conversation – I would rather not put them down on paper. Alternatively, you may wish to ignore this attitude on my part altogether, which would greatly relieve me. **The man in question is the only one whom I have any such feeling – there is literally no-one [else], so far as I know, to whom I would wish to urge such objections** – and of course I do not feel that personal opinions, especially left-wing ones, should be a barrier to academic appointment by your or any university in England at the present moment. I should have supported the claim of [C.] Wright Mills, say, or [Eric] Hobsbawm, vigourously[sic].<sup>28</sup>

The letter alternates between generalised condemnation (identified above in bold typeface) and cautious qualification. It was sufficient for Sussex University to lose interest in Deutscher. The key statement is that Berlin would find Deutscher's 'presence in the same academic community as myself ... morally intolerable', an oblique way of saying that he would resign from the university's academic advisory committee if the appointment went ahead. In this way, a seemingly *fait accompli* appointment, which had the enthusiastic support of the academics in the university's School of European Studies, was blocked. The explanation given to Deutscher was that the university had decided not to proceed with Soviet

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<sup>28</sup> Berlin to Fulton, 4 March 1963, quoted in David Caute, *Isaac & Isaiah: the covert punishment of a Cold War heretic*, New Haven/London: Yale University Press, 2013, 279. Caute begins his book by recounting a conversation with Berlin in 1963, when the latter asserted that he would 'not dine at the same table as Deutscher'. Caute, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 1-4.

Studies. In fact, Sussex was planning a one-year MA in Russian Studies, which raises the possibility that this scaled-down version of original intentions may have been a post facto attempt to justify Deutscher's non-appointment. Whatever the case, it is apparent from the surviving documentary evidence that Berlin's calculated intervention caused Fulton to stymie Deutscher's appointment.<sup>29</sup>

As well as personal animosities, Berlin and Deutscher had serious political differences with the former feeling that Deutscher had systematically downplayed the excesses of the Stalin regime.<sup>30</sup> The episode can thus be seen as yet another case of an appointment in a British university being denied on political grounds. It happened to E.H. Carr, in 1952, who lost out on a senior research fellowship at King's College, Cambridge, in the face of Noel Annan's opposition to the election of an one-time appeaser and a current sympathiser with Stalinist Russia. Whatever we might think about politically motivated opposition to university appointments, at least Annan was open and honest about his part in proceedings.<sup>31</sup> By contrast, Berlin

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<sup>29</sup> Cate, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 279-81, 308-09 n.16.

<sup>30</sup> Berlin gets significant mention as a meddler in Cold War intrigue in Peter Finn and Petra Couvée, *The Zhivago Affair: the Kremlin, the CIA, and the battle over a forbidden book*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Haslam, *Vices of Integrity*, 165-66. The motives for denying university positions for political reasons can be convoluted, and deciding upon their justification is not always cut and dried. Take the case of Hugh Trevor-Roper, who was prepared to support the classicist Moses Finlay for a position at Christ Church, Oxford, once satisfied that Finlay was not a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain. Trevor-Roper objected to communists on intellectual rather than political grounds: he felt they had abandoned reason to a crude party line: 'I do think that the question of his politics is important. On this subject my view is fixed: fellow-travellers, apolitical sillies, – yes, if they are good enough; party members, – no, however good. This is a view I am prepared to defend, and which I am not prepared to change'. Hugh Trevor-Roper to Isaiah Berlin, 18 February 1955, quoted in Richard Davenport-Hines and Adam Sisman (eds), *One Hundred Letters from Hugh Trevor-Roper*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014, 52.

was anything but candid about his role in Deutscher's non-appointment.

The truth came out by degrees, despite Berlin repeatedly attempting to cover his tracks. In 1969 it was anonymously stated in an obscure publication, the *Black Dwarf*, that Berlin 'was responsible for Deutscher being refused a university post at Sussex'.<sup>32</sup> Ten years later, Tariq Ali repeated the allegation in his review of E.H. Carr's *Twilight of Comintern*.<sup>33</sup> The following year, in 1980, the momentum continued with a review by Christopher Hitchens, in the *New Statesman*, of Berlin's book *Personal Impressions*.<sup>34</sup> In each case, Berlin took evasive action, denying the allegation and reassuring Deutscher's widow, Tamara, that her late husband's failure to find employment at Sussex was none of his doing.<sup>35</sup> Much later, Hitchens described Berlin's response:

In the next post came a letter from Berlin, stating with some anguish that while he didn't much approve of Deutscher, his opinion had not been the deciding one. I telephoned Tamara Deutscher and others, asking if they had definite proof that Berlin had administered the bare bodkin, and was told, well, no, not definite proof. So I published a retraction. Then came a postcard from Berlin, thanking me handsomely, saying that the allegation had always worried and upset him...<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Quoted in Cate, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 282.

<sup>33</sup> Tariq Ali, in *Literary Review*, March 1983. See also Ali's review of *Isaac & Isaiah* in *The Guardian*, 20 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/jun/20/isaac-isaiah-david-caute-review>.

<sup>34</sup> Cate, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 288.

<sup>35</sup> The letters are itemised and partially quoted in Cate, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 283-87.

<sup>36</sup> Christopher Hitchens, 'Moderation or Death', *London Review of Books*, 26 November 1998, <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v20/n23/christopher-hitchens/moderation-or-death>. See also María Jesús González, *Raymond Carr: The Curiosity of the Fox* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2013), 202.

Berlin's cover was finally blown, in 1998, by none other than his own biographer, Michael Ignatieff, who quoted part of a sentence in Berlin's letter to Fulton: 'the only man whose presence in the same academic community as myself I should find morally intolerable'.<sup>37</sup> In other words, he was careless enough to leave a copy of the offending letter among his papers, in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, meaning that sooner or later he would be found out and his evasions uncovered.

The noose started to tighten. In 1999, in his biography of E.H. Carr, Jonathan Haslam made a brief but telling reference about Berlin's part in the episode. In Haslam's words:

[In 1983 I wrote] to Berlin to elicit comments on his relations with Carr. Berlin instead insisted on a visit and then attempted to clear the air about the Sussex affair, emphasizing that he had not actually voted against Deutscher's appointment as Professor of History [sic], merely suggesting that he was not qualified for the job. / The publication of Michael Ignatieff's biography of Berlin makes it clear that Berlin was not telling the truth.<sup>38</sup>

Haslam was sufficiently irked to repeat his strictures a decade later, on this occasion pointing out that Berlin's '[d]enials were repeated to Tamara Deutscher on several occasions after her husband's death', as well as to himself. He adds that: 'This and [Berlin's] ardent support for the US war in Vietnam certainly call into question his

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<sup>37</sup> Michael Ignatieff, *Isaiah Berlin: a life*, London: Chatto & Windus, 1998, 235. Ignatieff did not have an easy time as Berlin's official biographer, largely because Berlin had difficulty in taking the exercise seriously. See Ignatieff, 'Berlin in Autumn', in Alistair Horne (ed.), *Telling Lives: from W.B. Yeats to Bruce Chatwin*, London: Papermac, 2000, 373. I am grateful to María Jesus Gonzalez for drawing my attention to this source.

<sup>38</sup> Haslam, *Vices of Integrity*, 242n.

iconic status as a moral authority'.<sup>39</sup> And now we have Caute's forensic examination, which uncovers the magnitude of Berlin's deceit and erodes his moral authority all the more.

Yet Caute attempts to let Berlin off the hook, at least partially. He raises doubts whether Deutscher would have been a successful appointment at Sussex, suggesting that Berlin might have done Sussex a favour in preventing the appointment of someone whose mind and energies might have been elsewhere.<sup>40</sup> The observation comes at the very end of his book, which has the suggestion of getting in the last word. Whether or not Deutscher would have been a successful appointment is entirely beside the point. Nowhere in his damning letter to Fulton does Berlin elaborate on his intellectual reservations about Deutscher and neither does he cast doubts upon his suitability in other respects. At one point he says that he has no desire to interfere with the decisions of the academics at Sussex, who were enthusiastic about Deutscher to the extent of upgrading his application from a senior lectureship to a professorship. But at the crucial meeting of the academic advisory committee, when the academics were only present by invite at specified times, the decision was made to spurn Deutscher. The only protagonist who is still alive is Asa Briggs (the professor of history). He was out of town at the time of the meeting and thus unable to exercise any

<sup>39</sup> Jonathan Haslam, 'Biography and its Importance to History', *Past and Future: magazine of the Institute of Historical Research*, vol.11, 2012, 11 & n.14, <http://winterconference.history.ac.uk/2012/10/16/biography-and-its-importance-to-history/>

<sup>40</sup> Caute, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 288-90. A couple of reviewers have endorsed Caute's observation. See Duncan Kelly, 'The Wit and Wisdom of Isaiah Berlin', 9 August 2013. <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/b69a5ee6-ff44-11e2-aa15-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3A9VK7gl8>; Steven Lukes, 'The Cold War on Campus', *Dissent*, Winter 2014, <http://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/the-cold-war-on-campus>.



influence. He told Caute how disappointed he was that Fulton had vetoed Deutscher's appointment:

I was aware of [Berlin's] intense distrust of Deutscher who seemed to me a great 'acquisition'. As far as I can recall, Fulton did not tell me of Isaiah's veto, for that is how Fulton treated it. . . . In those early Sussex days I had considerable power to carry through appointments, but ultimately the Vice-Chancellor had his own veto powers, very seldom used. . . . I very much wanted Deutscher at Sussex.<sup>41</sup>

Some strong words have been said in the final few paragraphs. Academics are normally far more restrained and the reader might be asking whether Berlin's action against Deutscher is worth all the fuss? It hardly matters, one might say: worse things have happened at sea. Viewed in that light, the Deutscher affair is of minor moment. In my experience – having co-authored journal articles on academic appointments and sat on appointment committees – the Deutscher affair may not be characteristic of the appointment process but is but no means an isolated case. One might also say that we have all done things that may embarrass in our lives, or in Michael Holroyd's words:

All of us have griefs and fears, have stupidities, humiliations and regrets we would be rid of. We do not want them preserved in university archives, cooked up and served with a smile for the next generation. All this is acknowledged.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Briggs to Caute, 21 June & 19 September 2011, quoted in Caute, *Isaac & Isaiah*, 280-81. Briggs devoted some space to his time at Sussex in his autobiography, but he doesn't mention the Deutscher affair. Briggs, *Special Relationships: people and places* (Barnsley: Frontline Books, 2012), see esp. 144, where he says that 'a powerful incentive to move [from Leeds to Sussex] . . . was that since I was the first academic appointed I would have a major part in the appointment of others. I was thinking not so much of individuals as a team'.

<sup>42</sup> Michael Holroyd, *Works on Paper: the art of biography and autobiography* (London: Little Brown, 2002), 11.

All the same, there is a time and place for straight talking when it comes to people not living up to their self-proclaimed standards. An especial disapprobrium attaches to those who abuse a position of trust – the bent cop, the embezzling lawyer, the womanising priest, the paedophile school teacher. Berlin compromised his position of trust when he wrote to the Sussex Vice-Chancellor in the terms he did. It was not a lapse of judgment on his part but a calculated ploy to deny an enemy an academic position, but without providing precise reasons for his objections. There is also the repeated duplicity as Berlin then attempted to cover his tracks. He systematically tried to lie his way out of the situation. In doing so, he violated accepted moral codes. Above all, he was disloyal to his own liberal values. Isaiah Berlin emerges from this wretched episode, in words used to describe Somerset Maugham, as 'a fairly poisonous old toad'.<sup>43</sup> Since the publication of David Cauter's *Isaac & Isaiah*, Berlin's part in proceedings is all over the net, to the further detriment of his reputation. In short, he was 'morally intolerable' by his own definition.

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### **About the Author**

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<sup>43</sup> Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: literary estates and the rise of biography* (Boston/London: Faber & Faber, 1994), 292.