LECTURE ON A MASTER MIND

WALTER BAGEHOT

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I

THE author of a recent book on Walter Bagehot makes this remark: 'One very suspicious circumstance about the reputation of Walter Bagehot is that almost nobody has a word to say against him.'[1] But ill-nature abhors a vacuum and our author does his very best to redress the balance. His principal criticism seems to be that Bagehot was a banker and very interested in money. One must concede that these two things do not always go together; one must admit that they could; one might even assert that they should. In Bagehot's case it is certain that they did.

Now, I do not myself find anything *suspicious* in the fact—and it is a fact—that almost nobody has a word to say against Bagehot. But I confess that I do find it *surprising*. It seems to me that one could find reasons, if it were necessary to do so, to explain why Bagehot's work was undervalued or underrated, at least, or why his opinions and assumptions were criticized or controverted or rejected.

There are reasons why Bagehot's work could be undervalued or underrated. For a start, he writes so well. His prose is lucid, but whereas lucidity is sometimes achieved at the expense of colour and decoration, producing a cold, clear light, like the midnight sun, Bagehot is never grey, never dreary; he is vivid and lively; what he writes is memorable. But good writing, especially on serious and difficult subjects, is sometimes held against an author. Is not this good writing merely fine writing? Is it not too bright? Is it not too interesting to be true or good? Is it not so clear as to be positively transparent and easy to see through? He may lack heaviness, but does he not also lack weight?

[1] C. H. Sisson, *The Case of Walter Bagehot* (Faber, London, 1972), p. 108.

Then, he covers such a wide range and trespasses upon the preserves of so many specialists. The edition of his collected works which is in process of publication by *The Economist*, under the editorship of Norman St. John Stevas, was originally planned for eight volumes; it is expected to reach twelve—two of literary essays, two historical, four political, three economic, and one of letters and miscellany. The first four are already published; the next four are expected in June 1974. The rest are expected in a year or two. It is appropriate at this point to pay a tribute to *The Economist* and in particular to the late Geoffrey Crowther, who initiated this project, 'for the munificence with which it has supported this undertaking, as a contribution to scholarship and as an act of *pietas* to Walter Bagehot, its third and most famous editor'.[1] Bagehot was a journalist—indeed all his books except one, *Lombard Street* (1873), were first published in journals. But what journals! They were not 'dailies' in the literal sense of 'journal' but periodicals. 'He was fortunate in living in a period when the great Victorian periodicals were at the height of their influence and circulation, since the long essay was a form ideally suited to his particular genius.'[2] So he began writing, in 1847, for the *Prospective Review* and the *Inquirer*, both basically Unitarian journals. Bagehot's father was a Unitarian, and his mother was Church of England: as a boy he attended the Church of England service on Sunday mornings and a Unitarian service conducted by his father in their house on Sunday afternoons and managed to conform to both. He went on to write regularly for the *National Review*, spasmodically for the *Saturday Review* and the *Spectator*, for the *Contemporary*, the *Fortnightly*, and regularly of course for *The Economist*, of which he was editor from 1861 until his death at the age of 51 in 1877.

But would it have been *surprising* if, with his wide journalist's range, he came under criticism from the specialists and the professionals—the literary critics, the historians, the economists? Might they not regard him as an amateur, or worse still a gifted amateur? What was a banker doing writing about Hartley Coleridge, Cowper, Shelley, Milton, and Clough? What could be more unprofessional than choosing as a subject: 'Shakespeare—

[1] I adopt the words used by St. John Stevas in his preface to Volume I of the *Collected Works*, p. 11. In future references to these volumes I call them *Collected Works*.

[2] This quotation is also from St. John Stevas's preface to the aforementioned edition, to which I am indebted for the information in this paragraph.

The Individual'? Or more far-fetched than attempting an article with the title: 'Wordsworth, Tennyson and Browning or Pure, Ornate and Grotesque Art in English Poetry'? What is an historian to think of a journalist who publishes essays on: 'What Lord Lyndhurst really was', 'The Character of Sir Robert Peel', or 'Why Mr. Disraeli has succeeded'? And short studies of Brougham, Althorp, Palmerston, Gladstone, Cobden, Bright, and Derby (both 14th and 15th Earls)—to name a few—all very readable and stimulating, but without a single footnote or learned reference? As Lord Jeffrey said in the opening words of his review of Wordsworth's *Excursion*: 'This will never do.'[1]

Or how seriously can an economist be taken who chooses as the subject of an essay 'Adam Smith as a person'? And what can his colleagues think of a man who writes: 'No real English gentleman, in his secret soul, was ever sorry for the death of a political economist; he is much more likely to be sorry for his life'?[2]

A writer with so wide a range, too, must surely betray the dilettante, especially if it includes literary and poetical studies! And worse still if he breaks out into popular science—Darwinism, natural selection, survival of the fittest. And worst of all if he dabbles in the field of higher education! What is this graduate of University College, London, doing writing about the reform of the University of Oxford in 1852? And why is he at pains to remind us of what Adam Smith said about University government in *The Wealth of Nations*? 'If the authority to which a teacher is subject resides in the body corporate of the college or university of which he is himself a member, and in which the greater part of the other members are, like himself, persons who either are or ought to be teachers, they are likely to make a common cause, to be all very indulgent to one another, and every man to consent that his neighbour may neglect his duty, provided he is himself allowed to neglect his own.'[3] And he tells us that all through his life Adam Smith retained 'a fixed belief that endowments for education tended only to the "ease" of the teacher, and not to the advantage of the learner'.[4]

A glance at Bagehot's essay on the report of 1852 of the Commission to inquire into the state, discipline, and studies of the University of Oxford, illustrates one further reason why he could be underrated. His habit, or rather his gift, of treating serious subjects in a mocking or light-hearted way,

[1] Quoted in *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 332.
[2] Ibid., p. 324.
[3] Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 88.
[4] Ibid., p. 89.

could easily incur the charge of flippancy or worse. 'Very odd, indeed, at first sight', he wrote, 'is the received English theory, that as places of education, Oxford and Cambridge are both perfection. The schemes of tuition seem so different. Cambridge teaches her students the discoveries of Cambridge men; . . . Oxford, on the other hand, disdains every approach to novelty.'[1] Chaucer had noticed that the Clerke of Oxenford was disinclined to speak about his subject. Bagehot remarks that 'a certain speechlessness is still a part of the character' of an Oxford graduate. 'Particularly the custom is to refrain from speaking on their own pursuits;—there is some story', he says, 'of a Head of a House who was presented to Napoleon after the Peace of Amiens, and was asked on his return what was his opinion of the French Emperor. "Sir", replied the dignitary, "you see at once he is not a University man, he talks about the *classics*".'[2] Then, his writing abounds in remarks which could be regarded as jibes or sneers. 'The great obstacle to originality', he says, 'is the English nation.'[3] Or again, 'the secret of prosperity in common life, is to be commonplace on principle'.[4] Or 'laborious study is, for the most part, foreign to the habits of English merchants'.[5] Or 'The abstract thinking of the world is never to be expected from persons in high places.'[6] And of Sir Robert Peel we have some famous maxims: 'A constitutional statesman is in general a man of common opinions and uncommon abilities';[7] 'the powers of a first rate man and the creed of a second rate man'.[8] This is all very well, so long as we can be sure that he does not mean us!

II

Undervaluation is one thing; positive disagreement or disapproval of Bagehot's ideas and proposals is another. There are, I think, reasons why this latter attitude would not be wholly inexplicable. From an uneasiness at his laughing at commonplaces one could pass to a dislike to what he appeared to stand for. Bagehot did not believe in democracy, as the term was generally understood in his day nor as it is so understood today. In this his views were not markedly different from his

[1] *Literary Studies* (Miscellaneous Essays), edition of R. H. Hutton, 1895, Vol. 3, p. 81. [2] Ibid., p. 93.
[3] *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 37 (quoted). [4] Ibid., p. 244.
[5] *Lombard Street* (6th edn., 1875, P. S. King & Co.), p. 174.
[6] Ibid., p. 177. [7] *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 242. [8] Ibid., p. 245.

contemporaries in Britain, be they statesmen or political theorists. They and he did not favour universal adult suffrage.

Bagehot believed in liberty but not in equality. He wrote, without apology or circumlocution, about the 'lower' and 'upper' classes, and the 'lower' and 'upper' orders. He praises a 'deferential' society, and 'deferential' is not a word people have grown to like. 'Free government involves privilege', he says, 'because it requires that more power should be given to the instructed than to the uninstructed.'[1] He had no high opinion of the electorate created by the Reform Act of 1832. He spoke of 'this self-satisfied, stupid, inert mass of men', unwilling 'to admit its own insufficiency'.[2]

But he accepted that a defect of the reforms of 1832 was that 'the existing system takes no account of the views and feelings of the working classes, and affords no means for their expression'. On the other hand he saw a dilemma. 'Either your arrangements give to the working classes a sufficient power to enable them to decide the choice of the member, or they do not. If they do, they make these classes absolute in the State. . . . On the other hand, if the degree of influence you give to the poorer classes is not sufficient to enable them to control the choice of any members, you have done nothing. . . . If the poor are to have a diffused influence in all constituencies, it must be either a great one or a small one. A small one will amount only to the right of voting for a candidate who is *not* elected; a great one will, in reality, be the establishment of democracy.'[3] And he spent great effort in trying to devise a system which somehow avoided either extreme.

The Reform Act of 1867 filled him with forebodings. 'In plain English, what I fear', he wrote, 'is that both our political parties will bid for the support of the working man; that both of them will promise to do as he likes if he will only tell them what it is; that, as he now holds the casting vote in our affairs, both parties will beg and pray him to give that vote to them. I can conceive of nothing more corrupting or worse for a set of poor ignorant people than that two combinations of well-taught and rich men should constantly offer to defer to their decision, and compete for the office of executing it. *Vox populi* will be *vox diaboli* if it is worked in that manner.'[4]

[1] *The Economist*, 5 Sept. 1863.
[2] *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 230.
[3] *Essays on Parliamentary Reform* (1883 edition), pp. 43–4.
[4] *The English Constitution* (World's Classics edition), p. 271.

But a contrary danger could just as easily be foreseen. 'I can conceive', he said, 'that questions *being* raised, which, if continually agitated, would combine the working men as a class together, the higher orders might have to consider whether they would concede the measure that would settle such questions, or whether they would risk the effect of the working men's combination.'[1] The language—'higher orders', 'ignorant poor'—may sound out of date; the warnings are commonplaces; we would prefer that people did not talk like that. But the problem and the dilemma and the analysis of them both are far from irrelevant to our condition today.

III

However, as our recent author wrote, almost nobody had a word to say against Walter Bagehot. He finds it suspicious; I find it faintly surprising. But for myself, I have no hesitation in joining the majority. I am glad to record that Woodrow Wilson, while still a Princeton professor, spoke of Bagehot as his 'master'. In the course of two articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*,[2] published eighteen years after Bagehot's death, he wrote: 'Had I command of the culture of men, I should wish to raise up for the instruction and stimulation of my nation more than one sane, sagacious penetrative critic of men and affairs like Walter Bagehot.' The tone and the sentiments of the Princeton professor are recognizable!

It was in the United States, in fact, that Bagehot's fame first began to spread. In 1889, twelve years after his death, the first uniform edition of his works was published—it might seem oddly—by the Travellers Insurance Company, Hartford, Connecticut.[3] His views on American democracy cannot have been received enthusiastically by the American public at large, but then it is not likely that the public at large would have read them at all. 'A dead level of universal suffrage runs, more or less, over the whole length of the United States. . . . The most enthusiastic advocates of a democratic government will admit that it is both an impulsive and a contentious government. Its special characteristic is, that it places the entire control over the political action of the whole state in the hands of common labourers, who are of all classes the least instructed—of all the

[1] *The English Constitution*, pp. 271–2.
[2] November 1895 and October 1898.
[3] Mrs. Russell Barrington, *The Life of Walter Bagehot*, p. 21.

most aggressive.'[1] '. . . A low vulgarity, indefinable but undeniable, has deeply displeased the cultivated mind of Europe . . .'[2] The United States and France were the two foreign nations which engaged Bagehot's interest strongly and steadily throughout his career as a journalist. What he wrote on these two countries is now conveniently assembled in Volume 4 of the *Collected Works* and it is a fascinating volume. To speak of the American pieces first. We must bear in mind that Bagehot never visited the United States. Contrary almost to his principles he was writing of a country and society of which he had had no personal experience.

Bagehot assumed the editorship of *The Economist* just at the time when Abraham Lincoln had been elected President of the United States and the country began to move towards civil war. He wrote extensively on the Civil War; thirty-seven of the articles which he contributed to *The Economist* on American affairs between January 1860 and December 1867 have been selected and reprinted in this volume. They cover a wide range of topics from 'The Political Crisis in America' to 'The Reconstruction of the Union'. Their principal significance lies in their constituting not history but contemporary historical documents for the student of British opinion towards America at this period. They exhibit at least two interesting characteristics.

The first is their illumination of the constitution of the United States—a subject of great interest to Bagehot. The contrast between the English and the American constitutions fascinated him. 'The practical choice of first-rate nations is between the Presidential government and the Parliamentary; no state can be first-rate which has not a government by discussion, and these are the only two existing species of that government. It is between them that a nation which has to choose its government must choose. And nothing therefore can be more important than to compare the two, and to decide upon the testimony of experience, and by facts, which of them is the better.'[3] In two articles in particular[4] on 'The practical operation of the American Constitution at the Present Extreme Crisis' he expounded his views 'The decisive test of real excellence in a political constitution at a great crisis', he wrote, 'is its tendency to place in power the statesmen of the country best fitted to meet it, and its further

[1] *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 297–8. [2] Ibid., p. 299.
[3] *The English Constitution* (World's Classics edition), pp. 311–12.
[4] One in June 1861 in *The Economist* and the other in October 1861 in *The National Review*.

tendency to give them every possible help and attainable aid in the arduous enterprise of meeting it. Has the American Constitution done this? It would be hardly too much to say that it has done the very contrary . . .'[1] 'Mr. Lincoln is a nearly unknown man—who has been but little heard of—who has had little experience—who may have nerve and judgement, or may not have them—whose character, both moral and intellectual, is an unknown quantity—who must, from his previous life and defective education, be wanting in the liberal acquirements and mental training which are principal elements of an enlarged statesmanship.'[2]

It might be said that the American people are to blame for this and they must put up with it. But, says Bagehot, 'the *Constitution* is as much to blame as the people, probably even more so'. For it requires an absolute majority for the election of a President and this makes it difficult to secure any election unless some unexceptionable candidate can be put forward. 'Naturally this very unexceptionable person is one of the most obscure members of the whole party: a very commonplace, ordinary person. He is almost always one of the lowest, the least known member of the party; and out of the party candidates so nominated the President is chosen.'[3]

The second interesting characteristic of the articles is that Bagehot was so often incorrect in his prognostications and, with our benefit of hindsight, so often mistaken in his judgements of the character and capacity of some leading figures. In this he was at one with many other influential Englishmen of the time, and it is in this respect particularly that his articles have historical value as contemporary evidence. At first he thought it unlikely that there would be any civil war at all; he was certain that the North could not win it; and he held that it was not desirable that it should. Not that he was in favour of slavery.[4] But he did not see the victory of the North as the way in which it should be abolished. As the war proceeded, his views were naturally modified by events. And when the North won, he gave them what some might have described as a typical Englishman's praise: 'Every Englishman, at least,' he wrote, 'will feel a kind of personal sympathy with the victory of the Federals. They have won, as an Englishman would have won, by obstinacy. They would not admit the possibility of real defeat . . .'[5] In any case, it is not the habit of a journalist to

[1] *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 277–8.
[2] Ibid., p. 279.
[3] Ibid., p. 280.
[4] Ibid., p. 391.
[5] Ibid., p. 413.

attempt to justify his prognostications when they have been proved manifestly wrong, but to construct some more.

It is in his treatment of Lincoln, perhaps, that Bagehot's judgement may seem most strikingly at fault. Well, Lincoln is now acknowledged to be a great man and a great master of English, but it was not always so, and it is *not* so today throughout the whole of the United States. His policies were criticized at the time and some can legitimately be criticized today. When, by two proclamations in 1862, he suspended the writ of *habeas corpus* and declared martial law throughout the United States with respect to all persons arrested for aiding the rebellion or hindering the draft, and proclaimed the emancipation of all slaves in rebel states or belonging to rebels, Bagehot described his 'astonishing absence of statesmanship and indeed of ordinary political sagacity' and spoke of half-hearted and inconsistent policies.[1] It was a fair comment.

When Lincoln was re-elected for a second term as President in November 1864, Bagehot wrote: 'It is not even contended that Mr. Lincoln is a man of eminent ability. It is only said that he is a man of common honesty, and, it seems, that this is so rare a virtue at Washington that at their utmost need no other man can be picked out to possess it and true ability also. Mr. Lincoln has been honest, but he has been vulgar . . .'[2] Well, Lincoln was vulgar. Few of his jokes were funny without being vulgar. But they were funny!

But, of course, assassination transformed Lincoln's stature. There was a change of view overnight. 'We do not know in history', he wrote, 'such an example of the growth of a ruler in wisdom as was exhibited by Mr. Lincoln. Power and responsibility visibly widened his mind and elevated his character.' 'Mr. Lincoln, by a rare combination of qualities . . . had attained such vast moral authority that he could make all the hundred wheels of the Constitution move in one direction without exerting any physical force . . .' 'The very style of his public papers altered, till the very man who had written in an official despatch about "Uncle Sam's web feet" drew up his final inaugural in a style which extorted from critics . . . a burst of involuntary admiration.'[3]

This was a sudden conversion. And Bagehot was not the only convert. A great merit of Bagehot's writings on the American Civil War is that they contain from time to time a

[1] Ibid., pp. 369 and 372.
[2] *The Economist*, 26 Nov. 1864.
[3] *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 409–10.

strong contemporary shock. And when he was wrong, he was usually instructively wrong.

IV

The French pieces are concerned mainly with Napoleon III. They begin with the seven letters on the *coup d'état* of 1851 which Bagehot contributed to the *Inquirer*. He was twenty-six; he had gone off to Paris for a change of scene, having decided to give up the law but not certain what to do next. He had the good fortune to be an eyewitness of the *coup d'état* and his interest in Louis Napoleon, once aroused by these events, persisted until Napoleon's death in 1873. Bagehot wrote enthusiastically in favour of the *coup d'état*, and these views were naturally not congenial to most of the readers of the *Inquirer*. But the letters may justly be described by the word 'brilliant'. In my opinion, he never wrote anything better, in style or content, though he wrote a great deal as good. At the same time it must be admitted that they exhibit the characteristics to which I referred at the beginning of this lecture, of being 'light and airy, and even flippant, on a very grave subject'.[1]

It was in these letters that Bagehot developed his views on *national character*, which, in his opinion, was 'by far and out of all question the most important factor'[2] in determining political and constitutional questions. 'No absurdity is so great', he wrote, 'as to imagine the same species of institutions suitable or possible for Scotchmen and Sicilians, for Germans and Frenchmen, for the English and the Neapolitans.'[2] He rejected two opinions to the contrary. 'The first is the idea of our barbarous ancestors—now happily banished from all civilized society, but still prevailing in old manor-houses, in rural parsonages, and other curious repositories of mouldering ignorance, and which in such arid solitudes is thus expressed: "Why can't they have Kings, Lords and Commons *like we have*? What fools foreigners are!"' In other words, what is wrong with the Westminster model? The second is the view that there are certain rights of men in all places and all times, that accordingly a single stereotype government is to make the tour of the world, and 'you have no more right to deprive a Dyak of his

[1] The words of his friend R. H. Hutton, quoted in ibid., Vol. 1, p. 51.
[2] Ibid., Vol. 4, p. 49.

vote in a "possible" Polynesian parliament, than you have to steal his mat'.[1]

Bagehot thought that 1848, the year of revolutions, had taught people the folly of both these dogmas. 'A really practical people will work in political business, as in private business, almost the absurdest, the feeblest, the most inconsistent set of imaginable regulations. Similarly, or rather reversely, the best institutions will not keep right a nation that *will* go wrong.'[2]

To come down to particular cases, the English national character ensured, favoured, deserved parliamentary government, freedom and order, while the French national character almost asked for its failure. 'The most essential mental quality for a free people, whose liberty is to be progressive, permanent, and on a large scale, is much *stupidity*.'[3] '. . . There is some lurking quality, or want of a quality, in the national character of the French nation which renders them but poorly adapted for the form of freedom and constitution which they have so often, with such zeal, and so vainly, attempted to establish . . . I believe that I am but speaking what is agreed on by competent observers, when I say that the essence of the French character is a certain mobility.'[4] '. . . I will not say that the quality which I have been trying to delineate is exactly the same thing as "cleverness". But I do allege that it is sufficiently near it for the rough purposes of popular writing.'[5] 'And what I call a proper stupidity keeps a man from all the defects of this character.'[6]

He gives what he calls a gentle illustration of his meaning. 'All England knows Mr. Disraeli,' he says, writing in 1851, 'the witty orator, the exceedingly clever *littérateur*, the versatile politician; and all England has made up its mind that the stupidest country gentleman would be a better Home Secretary than the accomplished descendant of the "Caucasian race". Now, suppose, if you only can, a House of Commons all Disraelis, and do you imagine that Parliament would work? It would be what M. Proudhon said of some French assemblies, "a box of matches".'[6]

Notions of national character are viewed nowadays with scepticism by many people and with positive hostility by some. Is there such a thing? How is it formed? Bagehot can only say: '. . . All men and all nations have a character, and that character when once taken is, I do not say unchangeable . . . but the least changeable thing in this ever-varying and changeful

[1] Ibid., p. 48. [2] Ibid., p. 49. [3] Ibid., pp. 50–1.
[4] Ibid., p. 55. [5] Ibid., p. 56. [6] Ibid., p. 57.

world.'[1] 'Why nations have the character we see them to have is, speaking generally, as little explicable to our shallow perspicacity, as why individuals, our friends or our enemies, for good or for evil, have the character which they have . . .'[2] Positive hostility is aroused against the idea of national character when it is taken to suggest that some nations are born to freedom and good government, and others to despotism or anarchy and remain unchangeably so. No such conclusion need follow. National character, or let us say national characteristics, like individual character or characteristics, are formed and changed; environment plays its part, as does heredity. All the same, the Race Relations Board might wish to take up with Bagehot, if he were writing today, the passage in his Third Letter where he says: 'There are breeds in the animal man just as in the animal dog. When you hunt with greyhounds and course with beagles, then, and not till then, may you expect the inbred habits of a thousand years to pass away, that Hindoos can be free, or that Englishmen will be slaves.'[3]

V

To most of Bagehot's contemporaries, the description of him in the *Dictionary of National Biography* as 'an English economist and journalist' would have appeared to be not only accurate but also adequate. It would be presumptuous of me to attempt to assess Bagehot as an economist, but of course I intend to presume a little!

It is not very difficult to see why the young J. M. Keynes, reviewing an edition of Bagehot's works in 1915, asked the question: 'How is it that Bagehot was an economist and yet not an economist?'[4] Partly perhaps because he wrote so well. Maybe he suffered from the 'fault' which he ascribed to Adam Smith: 'Adam Smith is not dry at all—the objection to him is that he is not enough so, and that the real truth in several parts of his subject cannot be made so interesting as his mode of treatment implies.' 'Abstract theorists may say that such a style as that of Adam Smith is not suitable to an abstract science—but then Adam Smith has carried political economy far beyond the bounds of those who care for abstract science or who understand exactly what it means.'[5]

[1] *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, p. 50. [2] Ibid., p. 49. [3] Ibid., p. 50.
[4] *Economic Journal*, xxv (1915), p. 369.
[5] *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 110.

We recall at once Keynes's account of *Lombard Street*. 'It has become the one book in the whole library of economic literature which every economic student, however humble, will have read, though he may have read nothing else. . . . I suppose teachers prescribe it, fearful of disclosing prematurely the real character of the subject to be studied, and in hope to persuade the young student that Political Economy is quite different from what it really is, and much more amusing.' And he adds, with a slight note of rebuke: 'To understand *Lombard Street* brings added pleasure. But it is not necessary to understand it much in order to enjoy it a good deal.'[1]

Then, his idea of what economics was or was for is not shared by all economists. It was, he said, 'the science of business' or 'the theory of business'.[2] As he said of Adam Smith, 'though a political economist, he was not a mere economist'.[3] (Neither was Keynes.) 'There certainly are economical treatises' wrote Bagehot, 'that go straight on, and that might have been written by a calculating machine. But *The Wealth of Nations* is not one of these.'[4] Nor is *Lombard Street*. It is, as Keynes said, one of the classics of political economy. Its sub-title is: 'A description of the money-market'. It deals with central banking —a not unimportant subject in the realm of political economy— and Bagehot made an important contribution to it. It is significant that the modern authority on central banking, R. S. Sayers, entitles one of his books *Central Banking after Bagehot* and says of *Lombard Street*: 'The appearance of this book is the appropriate starting point because it closes one chapter and opens another— or at least points out that another has opened. It settled once and for all the question of how the Bank should behave in a crisis.'[5] 'Since Bagehot wrote, no one has ever seriously questioned the doctrine that in time of stress, the Bank must lend and lend without stint.'[6] Bagehot laid the foundations of modern central banking theory to the satisfaction of almost everyone.[7]

But Bagehot's contribution to economics is not confined, of course, to *Lombard Street*. The magnitude of his writings may be gauged from the fact that at least three of the volumes in the *Collected Works* will be needed to assemble his articles on the subject. Nor was his contribution confined to writing or to

[1] *Economic Journal*, xxv (1915), p. 371.
[2] *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, pp. 85 and 113.
[3] Ibid., p. 118.
[4] Ibid., p. 85.
[5] R. S. Sayers, op. cit., p. 9.
[6] R. S. Sayers, *Modern Banking* (7th edn., 1967), p. 102.
[7] *Central Banking after Bagehot*, p. 18.

theory. He was the trusted adviser of Chancellors of the Exchequer; he was a practising banker and he knew business—he had a profound grasp of the problems of currency in theory and practice.

It is natural to compare him, in economics as in politics, with John Stuart Mill whose *Principles of Political Economy* was first published when Bagehot was 22. Indeed he wrote a long review of the book, not entirely laudatory, when it came out. When Mill died, Bagehot wrote in *The Economist* of 17 May 1873: 'In political economy, the writer of these lines has long been in the habit of calling himself the last man of the ante-Mill period. He was just old enough to have acquired a certain knowledge of Ricardo and the other principal writers on political economy before Mr. Mill's work was published; and the effect of it has certainly been most remarkable. All students since begin with Mill and go back to all previous writers fresh from the study of him. They see the whole subject with Mr. Mill's eyes. They see in Ricardo and Adam Smith what he told them to see, and it is not easy to induce them to see anything else. Whether it has been altogether good for political economy that a single writer should have so monarchical an influence may be argued, but no testimony can be greater to the ability of that writer and his pre-eminence over his contempories.'[1] It is a just tribute, and warning. One feels, as Keynes did, 'a good deal of sympathy with the half-truth that the greatest service Mill did for Political Economy was, by making it almost as good an examination subject as mathematics, to provide with a livelihood the now numerous band of academic economists'.[2]

VI

'Physics and Politics' sounds a good title for a book. Many of us might think that we could write one. Not much expert knowledge of physics would be required, and we are all experts on politics. But what Walter Bagehot wrote about in his book *Physics and Politics* is not, I imagine, what we would expect a modern author to deal with under that title. He gave us his thoughts on the application of the principles of natural selection and inheritance to political society. We would not today include this branch of science within the area of physics; we

[1] *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 558.

[2] *Economic Journal*, xxv (1915), p. 375.

would expect rather to hear of atomic energy and the problems which its exploitation and control raise for politics. What Bagehot did in his *Physics and Politics* (published in 1872 after appearing in parts in the *Fortnightly*) was to break into the areas in which social anthropologists, social psychologists, and sociologists now employ themselves. He discusses again his ideas on nation-making and national character, first put forward in the Letters on the *coup d'état* of 1851. He writes about myth and ritual, about progress, and the rise and fall of civilizations. He identified certain factors in the progress of civilizations. 'The first thing to acquire', he wrote, 'is, if I may so express it, the *legal fibre*; a polity first—what sort of polity is immaterial; a law first—what kind of law is secondary; a person or set of persons to pay deference to—though who he is or they are, by comparison scarcely signifies.'[1] 'The object of such organizations is to create what may be called a *cake* of custom'—he coined this famous phrase. 'All the actions of life are to be submitted to a single rule for a single object; that gradually created the "hereditary drill" which science teaches to be essential, and which the early instinct of men saw to be essential too. That this *régime* forbids free thought is not an evil; or rather, though an evil, it is the necessary basis for the greatest good; it is necessary for making the mould of civilization, and hardening the soft fibre of early man.'[2]

That is the first step. But 'the great difficulty which history records is not that of the first step, but that of the second step. What is most evident is not the difficulty of getting a fixed law, but getting out of a fixed law; . . . not of making the first preservative habit, but of breaking through it and reaching something better'.[3] And it was government by discussion which broke the bond of ages and set free the originality of mankind. 'A government by discussion, if it can be borne, at once breaks down the yoke of fixed custom. The idea of the two is inconsistent.' Once submit a subject to the ordeal of discussion and 'you can never withdraw it again; you can never again clothe it with mystery, or fence it by consecration; it remains for ever open to free choice and exposed to profane deliberation'.[4] And he sees England as the striking example of the benefits of government by discussion.[5]

To state briefly what Bagehot maintained is not difficult, but a bare summary destroys most of the effect of the book, which

[1] *Physics and Politics* (new edition), p. 50. [2] Ibid., p. 27.
[3] Ibid., p. 53. [4] Ibid., p. 161. [5] Ibid., p. 204.

rests upon its stimulating or inspirational quality, indefinable, intangible, but there. It has the sort of qualities which made Graham Wallas's book *Human Nature in Politics* so exciting and so influential. It has been described frequently as a *tour de force*. William James called it 'that golden little book'. And yet I have to confess, coming back to it again after some years, that of all Bagehot's works, *Physics and Politics* seems to me to stand up least well to re-reading. Perhaps it is liable to seem dated, as Darwinism is dated, but again like Darwinism, if it is dead, it refuses to lie down. Or is it that some of it seems to state the obvious? But here again, if Bagehot had not stated it then, would we think it obvious now?

VII

In the Royal Archives at Windsor, there is preserved an ordinary school notebook and in the opening pages of it there is to be found a summary, in careful handwriting, of the precepts which Mr. Walter Bagehot had laid down, in his confident way, in *The English Constitution*, for the instruction and guidance of our English Kings—I paraphrase the words of Harold Nicolson.[1] The handwriting is that of the Duke of York, later King George V. The date is 1894 when the Duke was about 29 and Bagehot's book a little younger.

In March 1894, J. R. Tanner, a fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, had been engaged to instruct the young Duke of York on the law and practice of the Constitution. Tanner succeeded in inducing the Duke to read and analyse some at least of the 'sparkling' pages of Bagehot's *English Constitution*, and in particular chapters 2 and 3, entitled 'The Monarchy'. In the summary which the Duke made in 1894 and which Nicolson reproduces in its entirety in his biography of George V, there are crystallized, as he says, 'those conceptions of the functions and duties of a constitutional monarch which, when he came to the throne, [King George] applied with consistent faithfulness'.[2]

It is, when you think of it, rather remarkable that Tanner should have felt able to draw the Duke's attention to Bagehot's book. In a letter which Queen Victoria wrote on 14 May 1894 to the Empress Frederick, she said of the Duke of York, 'he also

[1] *King George V: His life and reign*, pp. 61–2. The information in these paragraphs is taken from this book.

[2] Ibid., p. 62.

has a Professor from Cambridge to read with him'.[1] Tanner was not then or ever a professor, but no doubt the Queen shared with the majority of her subjects the view that universities are composed of two sorts of people, students and professors. He was in fact a fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, as I have said, and remained such until his death in 1931. He was to become an authority on naval and constitutional history, although he had not published any books on these subjects in 1894. To the modern student he is the editor of Tanner's Documents on Tudor and Stuart constitutional history, published in the 1920s—Tanner's Documents constitute their Bible, in the sense that they are more often referred to than read.

We do not know who it was that suggested Tanner as the future King's constitutional mentor; it is not obvious that he was an expert on the subject so far as the nineteenth century was concerned. He was indeed still in his thirties—about 5 years older than the Duke. But it is clear that he had the great quality of a good tutor: he knew the best book to recommend. All the same, it was not at first sight the obvious book in all respects for the royal pupil. The Queen, the Duke's grandmother, whom Bagehot had described as a 'retired widow' was still on the throne; the Duke's father, the Prince of Wales and future Edward VII had been described by Bagehot as 'an unemployed youth'.[2] And he had offered various opinions on royalty in general. 'A royal family will generally have less ability than other families', he had said.[3] 'As far as experience goes, there is no reason to expect an hereditary series of useful limited monarchs.'[4] An hereditary monarch, 'can but be an average man to begin with; sometimes he will be clever, but sometimes he will be stupid; in the long run he will be neither clever nor stupid; he will be the simple, common man who plods the plain routine of life from the cradle to the grave'.[5] For a young heir-apparent, there were some disturbing remarks. 'The occupations of a constitutional monarch are grave, formal, important, but never exciting; they have nothing to stir eager blood, awaken high imagination, work off wild thoughts.'[6] But there was a word or two of encouragement. 'I think it may be shown' wrote Bagehot, 'that the post of sovereign over an intelligent and political people under a constitutional monarchy

[1] Ibid., p. 61.
[2] *The English Constitution* (World's Classics edition), p. 30.
[3] Ibid., p. 63.
[4] Ibid., p. 74.
[5] Ibid., p. 75.
[6] Ibid., p. 48.

is the post which a wise man would choose above any other—where he would find the intellectual impulses best stimulated and the worst intellectual impulses best controlled.'[1] Well, we do not know how much of Bagehot's book the future George V read or what he thought of some of the passages which treat monarchy in a mocking, if not a hostile manner. Nothing of the kind emerges from the summary in the old school notebook at Windsor.

VIII

Discussion of Walter Bagehot issues inevitably and irresistibly, sooner or later, in discussion of *The English Constitution*.[2] In writing this book, he achieved brilliantly at least three great successes. I will speak briefly about each of them.

First of all, he achieved brilliantly what he set out to do. This was, as he tells us, to describe 'the English Constitution as it was in the time of Lord Palmerston'. This was an extremely difficult thing to do. It is hard enough for the constitutional historian to describe the working of the Constitution in the past, to get at all the relevant documents, to form an opinion of what really did happen, and to produce something that is alive, if not lively. But, as Bagehot himself said, 'there is a great difficulty in the way of a writer who attempts to sketch a living Constitution —a Constitution that is in actual work and power. The difficulty is that the object is in constant change. An historical writer does not feel this difficulty; he deals only with the past; he can say definitely, the Constitution worked in such and such a manner in the year at which he begins, and in a manner in such and such respects different in the year at which he ends; he begins with a definite point of time and ends with one also. But a contemporary writer who tries to paint what is before him is puzzled and perplexed: what he sees is changing daily. He must paint it as it stood at some one time, or else he will be putting side by side in his representations things which never were contemporaneous in reality. The difficulty is the greater because a writer who deals with a living government naturally compares it with the most important other living governments, and these are changing too; what he illustrates are altered in one

[1] *The English Constitution* (World Classics edition), pp. 65–6.

[2] Very occasionally he spoke of the *British* Constitution; indeed he uses 'British' three times at the beginning of the book. But it is rare thereafter.

way; and his sources of illustration are altered probably in a different way.'[1]

The measure of Bagehot's achievement can be gauged when we say that his picture survives in fact in all important respects under the scrutiny of the Constitutional historians of the period who have had access to all the documents of the time, which were not of course available to Bagehot. It is a marvel that he could penetrate the workings of the system and display them so clearly, so vividly, and so profoundly. It is true that he had a wide knowledge of persons in politics, and almost unlimited access to those who worked the Constitution or knew how it was worked. But he had never sat in parliament (though he had tried) nor held political office himself nor been a civil servant. Perhaps it was as well, bearing in mind Macaulay's opinion that 'we should sooner expect a great original work on political science . . . from an apothecary in a country town, or from a minister in the Hebrides, than from a statesman, who, ever since he was one-and-twenty, had been a distinguished debater in the House of Commons'. Such an experience, he believed, impaired the faculties 'which are required for close reasoning or for enlarged speculation'.[2] Bagehot's account rings true; it is too good not to be true, you exclaim to yourself. It is the same sensation that you experience in reading Trollope's political novels but not in reading Disraeli's novels. And, the interesting fact is, that the detailed researches of the historian confirm the impressions and intuitions (dare one say 'insights'?) of the contemporary critic and observer. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in his estimate of the political influence of the monarchy. He made the striking and famous assertion (included by the young Duke of York in his summary): 'To state the matter shortly, the sovereign has, under a constitutional monarchy such as ours, three rights—the right to be consulted, the right to encourage, the right to warn.'[3] At the same time he admitted: 'There is no authentic explicit information as to what the Queen can do, anymore than of what she does.'[4] He had, therefore, to form his judgement in the absence of the information. It is true that, in asserting the Sovereign's right to be consulted, he could quote what he called that 'most instructive breach of etiquette', by which Lord John Russell made known Queen Victoria's claim, in a memorandum to Lord Palmerston,

[1] Ibid., p. 259.

[2] Quoted by Bagehot in his 'Character of Sir Robert Peel', *Collected Works*, Vol. 3, p. 258. [3] *The English Constitution*, p. 67. [4] Ibid., p. 52.

to the right to be consulted, not as a mere formality but as an effective and real thing.[1] But in general he was making his own penetrating assessment and classic formulation of the position.

Some later constitutional historians have attempted to show that the Queen had in fact more or greater rights than these. In my opinion all they have shown is that the Queen may have thought that she had more; or may have wished that she had more, or may, on occasions of irritation or desperation with certain ministers, have talked or written as if she had more. But in fact, it was not so. What was in practice possible was the assertion and exercise to the fullest extent, if need be, of the rights to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn. Bagehot knew this, even if the Queen did not. He also knew, and added to his statement, that 'a king of great sense and sagacity would want no others'.[2]

IX

Bagehot, then, achieved superbly what he set out to do—to describe the English Constitution as it was in the time of Lord Palmerston. It appeared as a series of articles in the *Fortnightly*, beginning in 1865, and was published as a book in 1867, the year in which Disraeli's Reform Act was passed. When Bagehot came to produce a second edition in 1872, he declared: 'Since that time there have been many changes, some of spirit and some of detail. In so short a period there have rarely been more changes.'[3] He decided that his best plan was to keep the original sketch in all essentials as it was at first written and to describe shortly such changes, either in the Constitution itself or in the constitutions compared with it, as seemed material. So he wrote an introduction to the second edition which is usually separately printed as an epilogue to the book. And this remains the best way to read him. Take the original book—and the introduction to the second edition fits well into the whole picture—and then, armed with his opinions and analysis of tendencies and judgements of events and institutions, ask yourself how it stands up to the facts and opinions of modern times. If we ask ourselves the question: What is living and what is dead in Bagehot's *English Constitution*, we find ourselves asking what is living and what is dead in the English Constitution

[1] *The English Constitution*, p. 66. [2] Ibid., p. 67.
[3] Ibid., pp. 259–60.

today? Fundamental issues are raised in vivid and controversial form. There can be few other examples of a book which, having become out of date in one sense almost before it could be reviewed,[1] is still up to date and full of life and thought to this day. As you read his judgements upon the constitution of Palmerston's day, you are irresistibly led to raise these very questions for succeeding periods, down to and including our own time.

His second great achievement then was—not merely to produce a classic on Palmerston's time, but to produce also a classic of constitutional knowledge and wisdom, which all those who wished to understand the English Constitution in future times and constitutional questions of all time would regard as their first and chief source and guide.

His method of analysis and exposition has had an enduring influence. 'No one', he says, 'can approach to an understanding of the English institutions . . . unless he divide them into two classes . . . first, those which excite and preserve the reverence of the population—the *dignified* parts, if I may so call them; and next, the *efficient* parts—those by which it, in fact, works and rules.'[2] Among the dignified parts are the Queen, the House of Lords, and in some measure the House of Commons; among the efficient parts the Cabinet, and, to a considerable extent, the House of Commons. The first chapter of *The English Constitution* is entitled 'The Cabinet'—perhaps the first book on the English system of government which so begins. And a footnote at the end of his first edition reads: 'So well is our real Government concealed, that if you tell a cabman to drive to "Downing Street" he most likely will never have heard of it, and will not in the least know where to take you.' We live in a 'disguised republic'.[3]

Well, to what address would the cabman be asked to drive today? This is the sort of question which those keen students of 'decision making', with their determination to know where the real decisions are taken and their belief that there is some one such identifiable place, are likely to ask. For Bagehot it would be too simple a question to which there was no single or simple answer. But his fascinating exposition of the distinction and interaction of the dignified and the official parts of the English constitution still influences modern students. Is the answer

[1] Mr. R. H. S. Crossman's remark in his introduction to the Fontana edition of *The English Constitution*, p. 1.

[2] *The English Constitution* (World's Classics edition), pp. 3–4.

[3] Ibid., p. 258.

still 'Downing Street'? If it is, is it the Cabinet that attracts us there, or is it, as one fashionable theory holds, the Prime Minister and all that surrounds him, all that gives him authority and to which he gives authority? Has the cabinet joined the dignified part, and do we have Prime Ministerial government as the efficient part? Has the House of Commons gone over completely to the dignified side, or, at any rate, has it completely left the efficient side?[1]

It is perhaps in the study of parliament that Bagehot's influence is most enduring and most pervasive. It is apparent not only in the study of the British parliament, but also of the parliaments of the Commonwealth, and even of the Congress of the United States. There is no doubt that Bagehot's ideas influenced Woodrow Wilson in the writing of his classic *Congressional Government* (1885) which held the field for some decades in America. It is significant that when Bernard Crick, our contemporary British authority on parliament, came to expound his subject, he found Bagehot's description of the five functions of the House of Commons, formulated in 1865, still appropriate to the modern approach—the electoral, the expressive, the teaching, the informing, and the legislative.[2] 'It might be a worthy exercise in intellectual history', wrote an American political scientist recently, 'to trace in detail the influence of Bagehot on British and American study of legislative politics.'[3] Indeed he goes on to say that, while research on the working of Congress has gone far beyond the formulations of Woodrow Wilson, a good deal of British parliamentary study does little more than re-dress Bagehot in contemporary fashion. This may not be intended as a compliment to British political scientists, but it is a compliment to Bagehot.

One explanation of the interest which Bagehot's *English Constitution* arouses is, I think, that so much of what he writes is readily quotable. It is said of some of Shakespeare's plays that they are full of quotations, meaning that they are full of familiar sayings. *The English Constitution* is also full of quotations, but in the sense that quotations can be readily culled from it, and

[1] There is an ingenious discussion of this topic in R. H. S. Crossman's introduction to the Fontana edition of Bagehot's *English Constitution*, especially pp. 51–7, and a contrary view (with which I concur) is expressed in P. C. Gordon Walker, *Cabinet Government*.

[2] *The Reform of Parliament* (Weidenfeld & Nicolson, London, 1968), especially pp. 45–7.

[3] Samuel C. Patterson, 'The British House of Commons as a focus for political research', *British Journal of Political Science* 3, p. 365.

indeed the sort of quotations beloved of examiners, because they lend themselves naturally to discussion. 'It is not the business of a Cabinet Minister to work his department. His business is to see that it is properly worked.' Or 'The House of Commons is an electoral chamber; it is the assembly which chooses our president.' None of these, and scores of other remarks of the same type, are wholly true or wholly false; none of them is actually outlandish or preposterous; none of them can be answered by a single yes or no; what is more important, none can be answered with certainty or finality; they have a vitality and a staying power which provokes discussion and ensures fruitful discussion.

X

The third great achievement of Bagehot in writing the *English Constitution* may be expressed by saying that, in a special sort of way, Walter Bagehot invented the English constitution. And that in two senses of the word 'invent'. There is an archaic sense, still surviving in the festival of the Church on 3 May, known as the Invention of the Cross, commemorating the *finding* of the Cross by St. Helena, the mother of Constantine. Bagehot *found* the English constitution. It took some finding; it was not by any means obvious; there was little to guide him. At the same time, in the modern sense, he *invented* the Constitution; he made of it a working and living structure. He had the gift of breathing life into it; he created it. It is not an exaggeration to say that before Bagehot wrote, there was no English constitution that people could recognize or apprehend as a living and working thing. And it was not a skeleton or museum piece which he assembled; he did not confine himself to the anatomy of the subject, though that, if only in mainly legal terms, would in itself have been a difficult and worthwhile task. He went far beyond anatomy, and combined the physiology, the pathology, and the psychology.

The final proof of his achievement was that the Constitution he invented or created was recognized as authoritative. What he said happened soon became accepted as what should happen. His work was descriptive; it became normative. It was to Bagehot's book that people looked to see what the rules were—not only, indeed not mainly the legal rules, but the conventions and the customs and their *raison d'être*. Perhaps the best illustration of this authoritative quality of Bagehot's work is found once again in his famous statement of the three rights of the

sovereign—to be consulted, to encourage, and to warn. By enumerating these three rights as matters of fact, he invented or created them as rules of the constitution. By that statement he ensured that no sovereign could successfully claim more; I believe also that he ensured that no sovereign could be granted less. It came to pass also almost at once that those who wanted to know what the Constitution 'said' on any subject—whether they were statesmen, or civil servants, or students—consulted Bagehot's book and, on the basis of what he had said, worked out what the rule should be. The presumption was that what Bagehot wrote was, if not correct, right; that the answer would be found in what he said, or in the exposition or the *ratio decidendi* of what he said. In this Bagehot was unique. Much has been written about the English constitution; it has been informative and even interesting, but it has become dated or obsolete and gone into limbo. Nobody before Bagehot had written a book on the subject with the scope, the quality, the vitality, or the authority which he displayed, and nobody has done so since.

XI

When the Council of the British Academy approves the name of an individual to be the subject of the lecture on a master mind, the individual is, in my opinion, created *ipso facto* a Master Mind. The lecturer may choose to justify the title, if he wishes. But he may content himself, as I do, merely with asserting it. So I assert: 'Walter Bagehot, banker, economist, political thinker and commentator, critic and man of letters, was Victorian England's "most versatile genius".'[1] He is, of all authors, the one who, to be appreciated fully must be read, not read about. He wrote of John Stuart Mill—a clear case of a master mind, I venture to say—as having a 'monarchical' influence on the study of economics.[2] Bagehot himself did not have this 'monarchical' effect on the study of the subjects upon which he wrote. Where Mill was magisterial, Bagehot was merely masterly. Of him it could be said, as he said of Adam Smith; 'A student familiar with abstractions may prefer teaching like Ricardo's, which begins in dry principles, and which goes with

[1] Adopting the words with which Norman St. John Stevas opens his short biography. *Collected Works*, Vol. 1, p. 29.

[2] Ibid., Vol. 3, p. 558.

unabbreviated reasoning to conclusions that are as dry. But such students are very rare. Teaching like [Bagehot's] . . . vitally changes the minds and maxims of thousands to whom an abstract treatise is intolerable.'[1] And to none of Bagehot's works does this apply more appropriately than to *The English Constitution*, *the* masterpiece of this Master Mind.

[1] Ibid., p. 115.