



*From the portrait by Mrs. C. Dodgson*

SIR ERNEST BARKER

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1874-1960

PROFESSOR SIR ERNEST BARKER, Litt.D., F.B.A., died, at the age of eighty-five, on 17 February 1960. Sometime Fellow of Merton, St. John's, and New College, Oxford, and of Peterhouse, Cambridge, he had been Principal of King's College, London, before he became, in 1928, Professor of Political Science, and first occupant of the chair, in Cambridge University. This was a post which he held until his retirement in 1939. He also lectured at various times in Amherst College, Massachusetts; in Cologne University; and in India. A memorial service took place in Peterhouse chapel, of which college he remained an Honorary Fellow, on 27 February, which concluded with the solemn singing (by some in the pronunciation of the Church Catholic and by some in the pronunciation of Westminster School) of *O quanta qualia*, which would have pleased him mightily, although he might have commented, in his broad Manchester accent: 'It was rather a Medieval Latin, but I like Medieval Latin. And it was Abelard's. One should love Abelard.' In seeking the Jerusalem of perpetual peace, such as Kant talked about, *Nostrum est interim mentes erigere*. One can almost hear a lecture by 'E. B.' on that theme, today so topical.

His father was a red-bearded, violin-playing miner, himself a miner's son. The influence on her son of his mother, a hard-working woman and a great moralist, is—as with Kant—not a biographical incident, but a fundamental factor. Deliberately she had her son christened by the name 'Ernest'. He lived to mine the ore of scholarship. Ernest Barker was brought up in a farm cottage, and later on the small farm to which the cottage was attached, in what may be called 'the pan-handle' of Cheshire. But his style of diction was and remained not so much that of southern Cheshire as of Lancashire. Surprised and delighted students heard him, in one lecture, produce the remark that 'one of the results of the Industrial Revolution was to do away with dialect'; but the lecturer appeared personally to confute his own words. These matters of biography and ecology are very relevant to his future career. He himself chose to entitle a little pamphlet about his childhood and early manhood, printed for the National Council of Social Service and reprinted

in his autobiographical *Age and Youth*, 'The Father of the Man'. It throws light on both his strength and his weaknesses.

In view of his background and of his dedication to such civic work as that of the National Council, he was seriously discussed by the academic *cognoscenti* as a possible Minister of Education in Labour's first Government. He was, as already Principal of King's College, London, almost as obvious a choice as H. A. L. Fisher had been earlier. During the Second World War he was indeed chairman of a commission of the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education. It may be added that, had he himself considered ministerial office and had he been invited by the Premier in 1929, one may have every reasonable confidence that he would have 'Macdonaldized' in 1931 and joined the National Government. He had profound social (rather than socialist) interests and regarded himself as a liberal and indeed a Liberal. Of Congregationalist up-bringing, although a member of the Establishment later, the non-conformist tradition of the North Country profoundly affected his thinking. The time was to come when he was to remark of H. J. Laski that 'Laski didn't understand the meaning of community'; but it is noteworthy that, Laski having in a characteristic dedication attributed to him such knowledge of community as he had, Barker entered a disclaimer. His views, he states, were much the same as Fisher's and, about Guild Socialism, 'I was curious rather than convinced'. 'Individual autonomy', he tells us, 'is the banner that claims my allegiance.' He repudiated the notion that he was the spiritual father of Laski's Pluralism—hands the dubious honour over to Gierke, Maitland, and Figgis—and goes on record as no supporter of a doctrine 'that dissolves and divides the sovereignty of the State [capital initial] among a plurality of different groups and communities'. Barker never forgot Burke and, whatever his party allegiance and religious education, could properly have been claimed, in so many aspects of his moral life, to be profoundly conservative and a man of 'the establishment', with the deep conservatism of many a trade unionist and small farmer.

Hence it is not paradoxical that we find him enjoying the playing fields of Downside, and rejoicing in the society of Benedictine abbots or of Dominican Provincials of the great character and charm of Bede Jarrett. Nor was he by any means indifferent to the fascination of the society of noblemen and great figures of the outside world. He found, as he tells us, in America his apt mentor and even Nestor in Abbott Lawrence Lowell, of Harvard. Thackeray would have understood some aspects of

Barker. He would yet not perhaps have understood his genuine delight in developing his pupils. Blessed by the encouragement of his mother and rising from small village elementary school to Manchester Grammar School, Barker became a classical scholar of Balliol and a Craven Scholar. The qualities of this kind of training show themselves in Sir Ernest's work, but also the drawbacks. He himself describes—in the Autobiography of which this writer treasures an autographed copy—his mind as 'a rag-bag' from which fall out, with a certain amusing regularity, all the velvet and silk patches of Latin and Greek quotation. Piety towards my Noah forbids me to list them. They almost weaken my belief in compulsory Latin. On the other hand, among the assets, one notes the wide and liberal culture, the polymath learning, and, not least, the stress on 'character' and Roman *gravitas*. This stress Ernest Barker owed to a traditional education grafted upon a character, thirsty for education but also deeply moralistic and even sentimental, which was receptive of it. He was a fine instance of the polymath, shepherding so many assorted animals into his ark, which is, alack!, all too rare in that modern technical education which can leave a man a barbarian in culture. And he admirably exemplified the flowering, himself *pars non minima*, of the Oxford 'Greats' school. He was classicist, philosopher, historian, political scientist—and all with distinction. He was a scholar of many parts. He was an administrator. But, above all—with this traditional, conservative, and almost public schools emphasis upon 'character'—he was a great tutor. For him indeed manners—but perhaps peculiarly North Country downright manners rather than Southern sophistication—'makyth man'. Probably he would have agreed with the curt dictum of W. P. Ker to an All Souls postulant: 'I don't like wit.'

As he himself writes, perhaps his 'golden days'—one of 'the most stirring years of life'—was his last year, just after the First World War, at William of Wykeham's great college. Here he fully found himself. It was the year when, under Warden Spooner and with Julian Huxley and J. B. S. Haldane as Fellows, the student body included Henry Andrews, Bowra, Deane Jones, Harrod, Jacob, Keir, Laver, James Mann, Morrah, H. H. Price, Santa Cruz (then Villaverde), Scott Stokes, Strauss, Snow, Woodruff, and others of that calibre, most of them members of the college Essay Society. Rather oddly, as Barker himself remarks in his Autobiography, the great political crop from New College, Hayter, Gaitskell and Crossman, Pakenham and

Jay, was to come later. It was this memorialist's fortune to have Ernest Barker as tutor in that vintage year, when the captains and majors returned from war and imported a seriousness and maturity into their studies, which were to the taste of the more Puritan side of his knotty character. With dubious loyalty as a Balliol man, I recall that he told me: 'One does well to prefer New College because, although Balliol gets more Firsts, New College gets more Seconds than any other in the University, and the Seconds are much more stable types.' Barker was quick to suspect and distrust the 'unstable'. This moralism did not conflict with his esteem for 'Firsts', if they were 'well-rounded men'. His relations with his coruscating pupil, H. J. Laski, sometimes approached the litigious. Not oblivious to Laski's success and publicity, he walked warily in judgement. He took care to note that Laski, as a New College exhibitioner, 'at the time could not be counted the foremost of his contemporaries'. The clue is perhaps to be found in the very Barkerian comment that Laski had 'at times, indeed, too quick an intelligence'. Others had 'a more regular temper'. As a great tutor, although not always easy to get on with by pupils who disliked paternalism, he and H. W. B. Joseph, his contemporary as Fellow, present a fascinating contrast. Barker, as he himself records, had the sympathetic gift—so vital in a teacher—of seeing his pupils 'in the warmer and brighter light of what they might become'. Most of the better and more modest of young men are shy and, to develop their powers, they crucially need the warmth of this encouragement from those they, even excessively, respect. It can, of course, lead to 'an over-estimate of powers'. From the wintry integrity and chill criticism of Joseph no one might expect any such over-estimate. Upon him, as a tutor, Sir Roy Harrod has commented in *The Prof.* 'I will only say that it was well to have had both as tutors'.

The weakness of Barker's moralism perhaps showed itself when he became an administrator and Principal of a great college. Brought up in the philosophy of metaphysical idealism, which nourished Bradley, he was perhaps rather a moral idealist—nor is the analogy of the two false, since Barker, as philosopher and administrator both, was fully preoccupied with his 'station and its duties'. His moralism could be prejudiced, hasty, and oppressive. The tutorial system, unlike a good seminar, does not easily permit of the quick reply from the student. Barker's judgements were sometimes even marked by a certain peasant *naïveté*. The Victorianism of Coventry Patmore was congenial. And—to recall a famous administrative episode—

the short skirts of the young ladies of King's College were not. He publicly explained their effect upon himself. It was Barker who lost. But it added an amusing episode to the tedium of debates about the sites of London University and of King's College, themselves almost as boring and disproportionate as the great Roads debate—they had better have debated the vision of Rhodes—which preoccupied all the intellectual Olympus of Oxford for a generation.

This large, gangling, moustachioed figure will be remembered as a great character in the English academic life of this century. He was educated in years before the modern democratic Education Acts—in days when opportunity for ability came by lucky chance. He did not come from the *jeunesse dorée*; but he was able to mould it and others. As an administrator he will scarcely be remembered; and his comments on comparative education in Britain, America, and Germany are scarcely profound by comparison, for example, with Newman's famous essay or with the recent analysis by James B. Conant of Harvard. What, then, of Barker as a scholar? He was diffuse in his interests. But those of us who are Goetheans will not blame him for this—even if we recall Goethe's flash of self-criticism: 'Renunciation shows the master.' Books or articles on *Plato and his Predecessors*, on the Crusaders, on the origins of English Parliamentarianism in the early constitutions of the Order of Preachers, on the theory of sovereignty, on Herbert Spencer and *his* successors, tripped from his pen, as well as pamphlets connected with Social Service and encouragement to Sociology. In his last years, if he did not 'settle Hoti's business', he did provide us with his *Social and Political Thought in Byzantium*. Could any one head contain so much? And yet the gifts as tutor and lecturer still blazed. In some students' university days nothing was more memorable or more fruitful, among Oxford lecturers, than the lectures of Ernest Barker and of A. J. Carlyle, who were prepared to 'bend the bow of Ulysses' and to deliver courses which swept an entire subject into illuminating proportions. The important and redeeming thing with any polymath is focus. Having grasped the whole, one became consumed with interest to understand the part. This, I understand, is not the modern practice. It is a great loss. The first, if not the last, task of education is to cause 'a delight in knowledge'. The words are Barker's own.

A scholar, however, is other than a great lecturer and teacher. He may be indeed a polymath but yet, within each branch of his learning, he must satisfy the exacting requirements of sound

scholarship so that—and this is the definition of a masterpiece—the work, once done, does not have to be done again in that generation. Such a scholar, for example, was Maitland and such was Namier. There are, however, two different geniuses in scholarship. There is the meticulous, in the mood of a Ranke, of Tout and of Tait. And there is that which, also exact, is nevertheless seminal. Gibbon, Voltaire (a better historian than used to be thought), even Macaulay, are of this genius and genus.

Let us begin with criticism—which, owing to a quirk of human nature, usually means negative criticism. Byzantine political theory was a sterile field, and on re-examination we are confirmed in the view of it as a sterile field. Nevertheless the survey was needed and, with scholarly exactitude, coupled with the antiquarian curiosity which characterized him, Barker carried the task through. Oxford, at least, is much given to volumes of ‘documents’ or ‘gobbets’. Our interest in Nicephorus Blemmydes may be lamentably jejune; but with documents of political thought, from Alexander to Nicephorus and beyond, Barker supplied us in two volumes. (It is perhaps odd that when American textbook writers, instead of advising students—which indeed they sometimes do—to go to the original texts, supply volumes of ‘selections’, this is invariably held to be evidence of the patchy and deplorable condition of ‘American pseudo-culture’. I fail to note the difference.) We may here applaud the grammarian of culture and politics.

Ernest Barker was fundamentally a modest man and seems even to have been intimidated by the Cambridge school of historical studies. As philosopher of politics he wrote, in his early Oxford days, the stimulating *Political Thought of Plato and Aristotle* (1906). It was perhaps a pity that his modesty led him to refuse a reprint, and to make it difficult of access for students until he had satisfied himself with a revised edition. This was to have been published in two volumes, but, as often happens in the case of highly conscientious scholars, the second projected volume, *Greek Political Theory: Aristotle and his Successors*, never saw the light of day. In his Cambridge period, after retirement, Barker published his *Reflections on Government* (1942) and his *Principles of Social and Political Theory* (1951), which were in effect distillations of his Cambridge lectures. They are sober, learned, balanced, suggestive. But they are not his best or most original work. They are marked by a certain timidity and even conventionality. Although he himself chose to treat them as

mere parerga, Barker was perhaps at his best when, against the background of impressive and wide-ranging knowledge, he was able to write with a light pen and in a seminal style, as he did in his little Home University Library book, *Political Thought from Herbert Spencer to Today*, or in his brief article, in the old *Political Quarterly*, 'The Discredited State'. It is yet perhaps typical that, whereas some scholars were prepared to salute Barker as the spiritual godfather of Pluralism, he shied away from any such commitment. In fact the State ought not to be discredited; nor would stable thinkers do this. One might yet, he would have felt, opine that the metaphysical theory of the State, unsustained by history, went rather too far. And Barker, scholar and tutor, would turn back to his self-appointed task of translating the massive learning of Gierke and Troeltsch—Gierke, whom Maitland had made to spark a revolutionary new theory of political society.

Barker was a scholar, and an eminent scholar, of the seminal type. He did not indeed achieve the status of the greatest masters, because their creative *daimon* and indeed extravagance, be it of a Hobbes or Marx or indeed of an Augustine, tended to alarm him. The mystics, again, he assured this writer, were usually heretical. Not unwisely he referred us back to Aristotle—who was doubtless more stable than Plato, a yet permissible love. The debt to Barker of those who came under his teaching was still beyond question immense. Classicist, historian, and philosopher, his influence was pre-eminently exercised, his other skills contributing, in the field of political theory. It is here that he will be judged.

The art of politics apart, into which Ernest Barker (unlike H. A. L. Fisher) was not tempted, Politics in the Aristotelian sense divides, as Political Theory, into the Political Philosophy of ends and the Political Science of means. It was perhaps a misfortune that Professor Barker was elected, as first occupant, to a new chair at Cambridge which happened to be styled that of 'Political Science'. It was attached to the History School there. If there was a fault, it was not Barker's. It was the fault of those who named the chair or of the electors to it—most of them, one gathers, historians or influenced by historians. It is as if the electors to the Cambridge chairs of Medicine were philosophers. No doubt there could be an argument for it—but not an adequate argument. From Ernest Barker's whole background, his interpretation of his subject, apart from lecturing on legal institutions and local machinery, was necessarily that of a



'Greats' philosopher, turned historian. For him 'science' could here only mean *Wissenschaft* in the German, and not in the English, sense. It was a strange appointment to follow in the succession of Henry Sidgwick, author of the *Elements of Politics*, written in that great Utilitarian tradition for which Barker had scarcely a particle of sympathy. Of the contemporary literature of what is today called Political Science, Barker was almost entirely innocent, at least if we take his known interests and his bibliographical references as a guide.

If a copy of his now rare Inaugural Address at Cambridge, *The Study of Political Science at Cambridge and its Relation to Cognate Studies* (1928), be consulted, one notes that, amid the modest disclaimers that came natural to his style, he assured his hearers that the subject was 'certainly nebulous, probably dubious, and possibly disputatious'. The passage augured ill for any of the resolution of a great pioneer; and the departure from the pretensions of a Hobbes, Spinoza, Bentham, Mill, and Sidgwick was clear. By the second page of the address he redefined the subject as 'political philosophy' and, on the third, he announced his—very natural—preference for calling it 'Political Theory'. Elsewhere we can see that the affiliation is with Moral Philosophy, of which Political Philosophy is a province. Economics is another such province. The study of means is abandoned for the valuation of ends. He invoked here, dubiously, as touching the meaning of *πολιτικὴ ἐπιστήμη*, the great authority of Aristotle, a teleologist—but also much more. Green, Bradley, and Bosanquet—the group which Hobhouse attacked—were his exemplars, although Sidgwick, Seeley—'one of the earliest discoverers of the British Empire', rather than author of *Introduction to Political Science*—Acton, *clarum et venerabile nomen*, and the lawyer Maitland received honourable mention. Attention was given to the seducer, Croce—and had not Collingwood followed the *Via della Croce?*—although the possibility is admitted of 'a political theory [philosophy] which may be a good theory, without being rooted in historical study'. And then he announced his plan—which the present writer, as a sometime historian, cannot but applaud—for lectures on the history of political ideas, something which Barker was so pre-eminently fitted to do.

Although sympathetic in his practical activities with Sociology, the significance of the gamut in Sociology between contemporary Social Studies, 'today's history', and general theories of action, seems to have escaped him. Specifically rejecting the suggestions of Comte and Mill, the word 'Sociology' is not

mentioned in the Inaugural Lecture. Further, despite the concise warning by Bryce and the great living example of Graham Wallas, the possible contribution to Political Science of Psychology receives—along with Biology—only comment at the end of the list, after respects have been paid to the lawyers of sovereignty and the state. 'In this matter my eyes are a little held . . . psychology is a fashion. . . .' It is like Physics and Biology. It is oddly accused of 'referring the present to the past'. 'The dignity of man may suffer.' 'I have been told', he adds, with the academic detachment that kills, 'that its aim is entirely practical.' He did not exactly say, with H. W. B. Joseph, 'you will find much better things in Plato'. But he meant it. . . . On the whole, he felt there was more in Eugenics. A 'good Oxford man' would not worry much about either.

There are those, then, concerned in an older tradition with taking political science seriously and who might have hoped great things from the foundation of a new chair in a major university, for whom Ernest Barker's appointment, in terms not of the great tutor but of the greater subject, could only be regarded as a disaster. But this would be to take too narrow a view of the matter. Really the issue is one of nomenclature. The only moral is that the academic bodies who found chairs really should consider exactly what it is that they want and should name it precisely. They should be professionally competent to understand the implications of the subject. What stands out was that Ernest Barker was a great political philosopher and among the first five or six of our generation in the English-speaking world.

What, then, was Sir Ernest's contribution to Political Philosophy—or, if we regard Philosophy as a seamless robe, to Philosophy in its social emphasis? Here it is proper that we should look first, not at his translations and commentaries on other people, but at his own book *National Character* (1927), followed by *Britain and the British People* (1942), which expressed on the national level what was of such vital importance to Barker on the personal level. Here Edmund Burke and Richard Baxter came together. Here, in Platonic style, his own stress, like T. H. Green's, upon individual character was able to be 'writ large' in the social scene. The objections to the theme, especially for a modern sociologist, are patent. Although some choose to assimilate the English character and the Roman character, few would deny a difference between the British national character and the Italian or the Spanish. Nevertheless, what precisely do we

mean by 'British national character'? If we say 'English', like Dr. Johnson's, then every Scotsman and Boswell will protest. And every Welshman and Ulsterman. Is it not all too nebulous—even more so than Hegel's Idea, incarnate in the State and marching through world history? There is yet a core of significant truth. There are diverse traditions, objective, expressed in and, in turn, shaped by the dominant ideas, but no less in and by the drama and religious and social habits of a people, and permeating the literature of countries. They stamp a state or, more accurately, a nation. Nevertheless, beyond, for example, the English—or even the North Country—character, there is the British tradition; and beyond the British tradition the Atlantic, and beyond the Atlantic that of humanity and humanism. And here there may still be a transcendent and catholic judgement of what, according to the most tested values, should be the shape of what Marcus Aurelius, before Augustine, called 'the City of God'. Each phase is wider than, and embraces—if not always with equal warmth and profundity—its predecessor. Incidentally, it is this truth of multiple but authentic loyalties which Pluralism (about which Barker preserved a canny wariness) especially grasped. What Barker did fully understand, alike by scholarship and temperament, and expounded, was both the notion of social traditions and that of widening circles in these traditions.

Although there were other books of his which made a wider impact upon students at the time, not only works of scholarship but those little more popular studies, of great brilliance, which he himself tended to deprecate with a wave of the hand, were this writer compelled to choose the book which best expresses the essence of his teaching, it would probably be a comparatively late one, *The Traditions of Civility* (1948). Maybe there is here a debt to, a reminiscence of, Dante's *De Monarchia*. Although the title is a quotation from Patmore, nevertheless the deliberate retention here of the plural has its significance. In the judgement of some, including this writer, there is one Grand Tradition of values, resting on reason and on our profounder human nature itself and the requirements and character of the human spirit—although there may be eminent deviations, which invite critical judgement, to both left and right. However, patently Barker was right in the sense that, in historical existence, there are a multiplicity of traditions. Even within one culture there may be a multiplicity of not wholly harmonized values. Indeed Sir Isaiah Berlin holds this multiplicity and even permanent contradiction

of values to be one of the inevitable concomitants of human freedom. What is true is that, not only the form of 'the myth of the State', in Cassirer's term, but the spirit of the people, is shaped by this tradition, single or multiple. Some indeed would so far analyse it as to leave only a powerless multiplicity. Barker, on the contrary, would have tended towards its singularity in community life, even if the tradition itself, as in the Anglo-Saxon world, had a Puritan and Whig stress upon the individual personality and upon free choice. Barker here approaches the position—or rather problem—of Lippmann, in his *Public Philosophy*. Indeed Lippman acknowledges the debt. What it would have been interesting to have (although I have not been able to find it) would have been a critical and extensive review of Lippmann by Barker.

So we may salute his spirit, an honest man, a seminal mind—his career a tribute to what a liberal education can do in this country and to what it could do so much more widely, were the openings for ability as frequent as they should be. Professor Sir Ernest Barker's own career he owed to the merest and luckiest chance—that a rich man's son wanted to be tutored and that 'E. B.', the cottager, was tutored with him; and that the son lost in the examination and that Barker won the place. Barker thought it providential, and this may well be. (It was yet not the providence of an adequate Board of Education.) We may fitly, at the end, write of Ernest Barker, as I do with the piety which befits the relation of student and master, what was written as epitaph of another man who equally rose from humble to high estate, and who likewise was preoccupied with the rule of the moral sense, Bishop Butler—that here was a man *pius, simplex, candidus, liberalis*. What higher testimony can we give to any man?

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