MAX BELOFF

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1913–1999

I

MAX BELOFF was born in London on 2 July 1913. His parents, Simon and Mary Beloff, were Russian Jewish immigrants who had come to England in 1910. Simon Beloff prospered as an agent in the export trade and so it was a comfortably affluent and cultivated household in which his son Max grew up. The family became quite large with Max the eldest of five, alongside three sisters (deceased) and a brother (John) who has survived him. All were to achieve distinction in later life in the varied fields in which they worked. It was also a liberal household in its approach to the Jewish faith, maintaining many of the Jewish family customs, but not at all committed to regular religious observance. This may go some way towards explaining why in later years Beloff had a secularist view of religion and did not regard himself as part of Anglo-Jewry as that term was understood in the earlier part of the twentieth century, though this never affected the sympathetic ties with the Jewish community in Britain that he always retained. His parents continued to speak Russian in the home, but they must have anglicised themselves fairly quickly since Beloff's first language was English, and only later did he learn Russian and some Hebrew. Beloff was sent to St Paul's School in London where he thrived on the rigorous and challenging academic education for which the school was well known. Whilst there he was sent to Switzerland on health grounds for a term and this enabled him to become fluent in French. At St Paul's he also acquired an interest in cricket that was to endure throughout his life. He

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concluded his school career by winning a scholarship at Corpus Christi College, Oxford to which he went in 1932 to read Modern History. Before embarking on his university studies Beloff spent some time in 1931 in Berlin in order to learn German.

At Oxford Beloff quickly achieved academic distinction. He gained a first in Modern History finals in 1935, this being preceded by winning the Gibbs Scholarship in Modern History in 1934, and followed by a Senior Demyship at Magdalen College in 1935. Whilst an undergraduate Beloff, who had in those days like so many middle-class young men at Oxford strong Socialist sympathies, joined the Oxford Union, spoke wittily there, and became its Librarian. When the famous 'That this House would not fight for King and Country' debate took place in 1933 Beloff acted as teller for the ayes. In a re-enactment of the debate fifty years on he was game enough to speak on the opposite side of that motion. In 1937, after completing a B.Litt. thesis at Magdalen, he went back to Corpus Christi as a research fellow, and after two years in that capacity left Oxford in 1939 for an Assistant Lecturership in the Department of History at Manchester University. At this time Lewis Namier was head of department and Alan (A. J. P.) Taylor one of Beloff's colleagues. Judging from a story told many years later by Professor John Clarke of the University of Buckingham in a commemorative address, the young Beloff did not get on well with Namier. In response to an encomium on him delivered by the American Cultural Attaché in 1976 on the occasion of the two hundredth anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, Beloff could not contain his profound disagreement and with characteristic honesty told him that Namier was 'a bad historian and a horrible man'.

Beloff's time at Manchester was soon interrupted by the outbreak of war. He was called up and served for a short time in the Royal Corps of Signals before being invalided out in 1941. His military service took him to the North Wales coast where, as he was to recall nearly sixty years later when addressing the House of Lords during the debate on the Second Reading of the Government of Wales Bill 1998, he was part of the 'ultimate deterrent' against a German invasion that fortunately never took place. Beloff then returned to Manchester and began to concentrate on American history, a subject that was to become one of his abiding interests. But there cannot have been many students about, and from 1944 onwards he must have spent considerable time in London after he had agreed to work for the Royal Institute of International Affairs on a detailed historical account of Soviet foreign policy. Within a year of the war ending he was offered the newly founded position of Nuffield Reader

in the Comparative Study of Institutions at Oxford and so returned to his *alma mater* where he was to spend the next twenty-eight years.

In the opening pages of his collection of essays *An Historian in the Twentieth Century: Chapters in Intellectual Autobiography* (1992) Beloff remarks that he had always seen his career prospects in terms of becoming an historian. From an early age he pursued this ambition with remarkable single-mindedness. Reportedly taking his cue from a schoolmaster at St Paul's who advised his pupils to read a book a day Beloff became an omnivorous reader of historical material of all kinds. He was also assiduous in making notes on most of what he read, a habit maintained until old age. After graduating he embarked on research for a B.Litt. and chose on the advice of the historian G. N. Clark, a topic in late seventeenth-century English history with both social and political facets. It was the results of this work that were published in 1938 as *Public Order and Popular Disturbances, 1660–1714*, the first of well over twenty books which Beloff was to write in the course of his academic career. This first book was a scholarly monograph offering a fluently written and perceptive account of the fragility of public order in the period after the Restoration. It may well be that this first substantial piece of academic writing in which Beloff explores some of the practical and material limitations affecting all efforts to maintain 'peace, order and good government' foreshadows his later concern with the early stages in the development of the modern state in Europe. Another characteristic of all Beloff's later writing is clearly present in this first book. He had been educated and subsequently trained as an historian in an intellectual environment in which the scholar was expected to range widely within his subject and to be capable of presenting his findings elegantly and in a manner comprehensible to an educated, non-specialised reader. This imperative to write lucidly and to bring together both the historical evidence and the relevant explanatory arguments in a coherent narrative was to remain a powerful influence throughout Beloff's career.

Yet in terms of disciplinary location within the university it was not strictly speaking as an historian that Beloff returned to Oxford in 1946. The post he took up was new and intended to encourage the study of contemporary political institutions. Its first holder was by statute required to be a specialist in American institutions, and within a year of taking up the appointment Beloff was elected to a Faculty Fellowship at Nuffield College, then a fledgling graduate college intended to promote the study of the social sciences. But the Oxford of those days was a tolerant and

eclectic place and few doubted that politics (one of the three elements in the School of Philosophy, Politics and Economics) had to be studied on an historical foundation. Indeed, for many years after 1945 politics as taught and studied at Oxford consisted mainly of papers in modern or contemporary history. Organisationally too the dividing lines between faculties were not as sharp as they later became and Beloff was a member of both the Social Studies and Modern History faculties, supervising graduates from both and offering lectures addressed to students from both faculties. The effect of the commitment to contribute to the teaching of politics on Beloff's intellectual development and his professional career was almost certainly to push his historical interests firmly into the twentieth century and to reinforce a conviction that contemporary political issues and problems could only be analysed and understood from an historical perspective. But whilst he continued to work on historical topics and to publish books that have to be described as works of historical scholarship, he was also developing a strong interest in public affairs and in particular in the ways in which foreign policy was formulated in Britain as well as in the United States and in other countries in Europe and beyond. Inevitably this meant over the years following that disinterested historical concerns were sometimes overshadowed in his work by particular current practical and political preoccupations. History was to run the risk of becoming the launching pad for a political argument.

From 1946 until 1974 Beloff led the life of a successful Oxford don. After his return to Oxford Beloff acquired a large house towards the end of the Woodstock Road in north Oxford where he and his family lived. He had married Helen Dobrin, the daughter of Russian émigrés in 1938, and they later had two sons. He was active both in college affairs (until 1957 at Nuffield, and thereafter at All Souls) and in the conduct of business in the two faculties to which he belonged, and especially in the Modern History faculty. He was too a diligent lecturer and gave much care to the supervision of graduates, a category steadily growing in size and importance during his years at Oxford. But he was not one of those Oxbridge academics who are content to be absorbed by teaching duties and the sometimes beguiling engagements of college or faculty administration. His passion was scholarship and research and it was to these activities that he resolutely devoted most of his time. This, therefore, seems an appropriate point at which to survey Beloff's academic output both during his Oxford years and after.

II

The results of his work on Soviet foreign policy for the Royal Institute of International Affairs appeared in two volumes entitled *The Foreign Policy of Soviet Russia* and published in 1947 and 1949 respectively. The first covered the years 1929 to 1936, the second 1936 to 1941. The focus was narrow and Beloff concentrated on a detailed description derived from a wide range of sources, including such Soviet documents as were then available, of the conduct of Soviet foreign policy in the era of Litvinov and down to the German invasion of Russia. The outcome was an extensive pioneering exercise in what was basically diplomatic history. The presentation was clear and concise, very much in what became the typical Chatham House style. Inevitably such work lacked the prophetic insights of someone like George Kennan who was also thinking and writing roughly at this time about Soviet foreign policy, and it is arguable too that it gave insufficient attention to the impact of Stalin's dictatorship on the making of Soviet foreign policy. Nonetheless, it was a remarkable contribution to laying the foundations for a better-informed approach to understanding Russian foreign policy in the post-war world. Very soon after these two books had appeared, a third volume entitled *Soviet Policy in the Far East 1944–51* followed (1953). Here again Beloff demonstrated his capacity to organise a large and disparate amount of very recent historical material into a coherent and lucid account of Soviet ambitions and interventions in a little known part of the world and thus to provide what he described as a structural framework for considering the deeper movements of change in the region and in Soviet policy. It is also noteworthy that all this work demonstrates political detachment in the handling of the material as well as a shrewd awareness of practical issues and problems.

The very recent history of Soviet foreign policy was, however, not Beloff's only historical preoccupation at this time. He was also reaching back into the past and meeting some of the specific obligations of his new post at Oxford. In 1948 he published *Thomas Jefferson and American Democracy*, and also an edition with critical introduction of *The Federalist or, The New Constitution.* Then in 1954 he brought out a short historical account of the early stages in the evolution of the modern state in Europe entitled *The Age of Absolutism 1660–1815*.

The book on Jefferson, relatively short and based mainly on the voluminous secondary literature on him, came out in a 'teach yourself history' series edited by A. L. Rowse. Whilst it opens with a broad survey of

Jefferson's long life and varied achievements, the main focus is on the contribution made by Jefferson to the establishment of the United States and to the shaping of its democratic traditions and ideals. Beloff's analysis of all this is succinct and shot through with many penetrating insights into the tensions in Jefferson's own political career and in his efforts to combine a strong commitment to natural law doctrines with the need in politics to provide practical answers to the challenges presented. This awareness of the difficulties inherent in reconciling practice with doctrine is expressed again in Beloff's commentary on *The Federalist* when he underlines a basic duality in that remarkable document between the empirical and sceptical account of social relations on which many of its institutional recommendations rest and the system of natural rights to the protection of which, so it proclaims, government should be dedicated. *The Federalist* was soon followed by *The Debate on the American Revolution* (1949), a striking collection of extracts from varied sources of American political arguments in the period 1760 to 1783.

The *Age of Absolutism* is a cross between a modest introductory textbook and a critical essay. A passage in the preface is worth quoting for the sake of the light it throws on Beloff's views on history (or more precisely historiography) as well as on the study of politics. Noting in the preface that he had not written a compendium he remarked: 'I have tried instead to emphasise some elements in the society and politics of the period which appear to be of most consequence from the point of view of those whose interest in history is the *pragmatic one of trying to understand their own times*' (author's italics). This observation indicates clearly that Beloff already at this stage in his career regarded history as in some sense a source of practical lessons and, as a consequence, was satisfied that the study of politics as a practical activity had always to proceed on the basis of relevant historical understanding.

Between 1954 and 1970, a space of sixteen years, Beloff's published output in book form appeared to reflect a shift in the centre of gravity of his research and writing away from straightforward historical work to various aspects of politics and public affairs. This does not mean that he pushed his historical interests out of view—far from it—and towards the end of this period he was working intensively on what was to become the first part of his attempt to delineate the decline and fall of the British Empire. But for a while it was foreign policy-making, both in the United States and in Britain, and the beginnings of economic and political integration in Western Europe that figured prominently in his work. In 1955 *Foreign Policy and the Democratic Process* came out. This reproduced a

series of lectures given at Johns Hopkins University in which Beloff examined the various ways in which the fact of being a democracy had a profound impact on the making of American foreign policy. There followed a work of a quite different kind, *Europe and the Europeans: an International Discussion* (1957). This was the outcome of Beloff's collaboration with a number of study groups set up by the Council of Europe to consider what evidence there might be for the existence of something like a common and shared European consciousness—what some Germans, especially back in the 1950s, were fond of designating *'abendländische Kultur'*. Out of what must have been somewhat rambling investigations and discussions Beloff hammered out an incisive and wide-ranging account of the different strands in what might be called the European political, economic, and cultural space. Much of the analysis he offered was historical and he gave short shrift to many myths about the ways in which Europeans somehow or other composed a unity. On the contrary diversity and difference were vital elements in the European evolution, especially in the cultural sphere to which he devoted a chapter in which he brilliantly synthesised a wide range of evidence drawn from literature and art. The practical conclusions drawn in this book were, not surprisingly, somewhat thin, a fact emphasised in retrospect when one notes that it was written just before the Treaty of Rome was signed. At this time there was little experience of the potential for the drawing together of the separate national economies in Europe. Beloff's presentation of the consciousness of what it means to be European does, however, already reflect in a restrained and entirely non-ideological way the scepticism about the larger enterprise of European unification that he was to express so strongly in later years. It was essentially his keen historical awareness of how Europe had for both good and ill evolved in the past that led him even in the 1950s to pour a certain amount of water into the wine of the enthusiasts for the creation of some sort of common European identity. A collection of previously published essays appeared in 1959 under the title *The Great Powers*. Many of these again reflect his interest in how American foreign policy has to reflect many of the internal structural conditions of American government and politics, but there are also articles on European integration and on problems in comparative political analysis and the relevance of historical study to it.

In *New Dimensions in Foreign Policy: A Study in British Administrative Experience 1947–59* (1961) Beloff sought to show how British administrative methods and arrangements had been adapted in the post-war world to cope with the growth in commitments to a wide range of new

international bodies, especially in Europe. He emphasised the importance for foreign policy makers of finding points of balance amongst competing and often conflicting interests stemming from the more complex international environment in which they had to operate. This excursion into the field of British administration may have reflected Beloff's feeling that after his election in 1957 to the Gladstone Chair of Government and Public Administration at Oxford he ought to make more explicit his concern with contemporary British public administration as a specific field of study. In 1963, however, he was back with American foreign policy and its approach to European unity in *The United States and the Unity of Europe*, a book based on lectures given at the Brookings Institution. In it he traced the significance of the theme of unity in Europe in American foreign policy and the material contributions made by the United States to the economic and political reconstruction of Western Europe after 1945. It was clear in his view that United States governments, whilst ostensibly keen to promote 'unity' in Europe were never quite sure why and how the pursuit of this cause related to American national interests. He also discussed the position of Britain in relation to these developments, laying particular emphasis on the constraints stemming from Commonwealth ties and interests that motivated the British refusal to embrace economic integration in Europe.

In this middle phase of Beloff's academic career there is yet another book on what can be described as the general context of foreign policy, *The Balance of Power* (1967). This was based on the Beatty Memorial lectures given at McGill University in Canada. Here he ranges widely over both theoretical and practical issues bearing on the conditions under which states have to co-exist. He believed that the balance of power in Europe in some nineteenth-century sense had plainly been destroyed both as a result of war and of ideology. The tensions between *Realpolitik* and moral commitments could be seen, so he argued, in the inability of the Americans to decide whether they wanted to see a united Europe as an adjunct to their own power or as an independent power in the world. Whilst it is doubtful how far Beloff succeeded in this volume in clarifying some of the conceptual muddles affecting the very notion of balance as applied to politics in general and international politics in particular, he did as usual illustrate his arguments from a wide range of experience. There is, for example, a perceptive chapter on the impact at that time of the absence of a counterweight in the Far East to China, a situation prompting both the Soviet Union and the United States (though for different reasons) to favour support for India. These lectures are peppered too with acerbic comments on

such matters as contemporary moral reluctance to make use of the notion of a balance of power in world politics, and the self-righteousness and lack of realism then discernible, for example, in the Indian approach to foreign policy. Yet another book appearing in 1969, *The Future of British Foreign Policy,* testified to his preoccupation at this time with the difficulties facing Britain as it struggled to find a new direction in foreign policy in the face of the loss of empire and the gradual but steady progress of economic integration in Europe. He saw the difficulties of any project of European federation, but eschewed all polemics on the relations between Britain and the European Economic Community.

One other work in this middle period underlined Beloff's abiding concern with American political institutions. This was *The American Federal Government* (1959), a short textbook in which he set out lucidly and perceptively the main features of the political institutions and practices of the United States. Overall the output of these years between 1954 and 1969 illustrates the very wide span of Beloff's interests in and knowledge of contemporary politics—international, British, and American. Yet whilst he continued to display impressive erudition and an acute sense of what was significant in all the topics he handled, there are signs of some sacrifice of focus and of scholarly quality in his output. The publication in 1969 of *Imperial Sunset Vol. I: Britain's Liberal Empire 1897–1921* reaffirmed, however, his reputation as an historian. It underlined not only Beloff's voracious appetite for work, but also his underlying belief that only through an understanding of historical experience can we make sense of where we are now and devise intelligent responses to present day practical political problems. He acknowledges in the introduction that he received the impetus to embark on this work from Harold Macmillan's decision in 1961 to apply for membership of what was then known generally as the Common Market. Perhaps unconsciously echoing Edward Gibbon's famous remarks about what prompted him to set to work on his own great history, Beloff states that he intends to trace the profound changes in British attitudes and power since that apogee of empire in 1897, when it would have been inconceivable that Britain would contemplate joining 'a set of economic arrangements . . . inspired by the ideal of a United Europe'. With his keen eye for historical drama—or perhaps for irony?—he notes in the Introduction that Churchill, a subaltern in the Indian army in 1897, the year of the Diamond Jubilee, had survived to vote on the motion approving the application to join the European Economic Community in 1961: 'The decline and fall of the British Empire had been consummated within a single active lifetime.'

Yet despite these echoes of Gibbon's *Decline and Fall* Beloff's *Britain's Liberal Empire 1897–1921* and its eventual successor volume, published in 1989 under the title *Dream of Commonwealth 1921–42*, are very different works. Gibbon set out on his vast canvas events in the distant past with which at any rate the educated classes in Europe were vaguely familiar and the remains of which could still be contemplated in many countries. The decline of Rome could draw on plenty of nostalgia for greatness lost. In contrast (and no doubt Beloff was keenly aware of this) the decline of the British Empire, though well advanced, was still going on and remained a matter of contemporary political controversy. In addition there can be no doubt that there were influential voices in British public life that welcomed the dissolution of empire: it was still far too early for anything like the revisionism in favour of a more charitable assessment of the benefits of the imperial mission for the nations previously subject to British rule and of which Beloff's work contained more than a hint. It is striking, however, that apart from some references early in volume 1 of *Imperial Sunset* to his desire to focus on those aspects of the decline of the Empire which would throw light on what was then perceived as the choice between Europe and the Commonwealth, Beloff then provides a judicious and wide-ranging historical account of the various streams of development within the Empire and in the world to which it was exposed which within a quite short period eroded belief amongst the British ruling elites in the feasibility of maintaining the whole vast structure. After all, British governments had themselves established self-governing 'Dominions' and it was not surprising that most of these assumed ever greater autonomy in the management of their foreign, defence, and trade policies. Perhaps what was really surprising was the fact that even on the eve of the Second World War something like an 'imperial system' still survived, taking its lead from London and bringing all the major self-governing dominions into the war (apart from Eire which had placed itself in a different category altogether). It was characteristic of Beloff's sharp eye for historical turning points that he then brought volume 2 to a close in 1942, the year in which Singapore fell to the Japanese invaders. For him that event was final proof that the Empire had effectively come to an end. No matter what restoration appeared to take place after 1945 Britain would no longer have the resources or the will to keep the Empire going, whether as political reality or as a mere ideal.

Beloff's work on the passing of the British Empire was never completed as he originally envisaged it. There was to be a third volume taking the story down to 1961, but as he reports in the concluding pages of

volume 2 he realised that he was by 1989 too old ever to carry out the task, but he hoped that some day a younger scholar might continue where he left off. Whether in the near future anybody will be ready to embark on such a wide-ranging historical synthesis does, however, seem to be doubtful. Historical scholarship in relation to the imperial experience has, like so much else in the academic world, become both specialised and segmented. Meanwhile Beloff's work stands as an impressive testimony to his powers of historical synthesis, his capacity for shrewd judgements on political events, his awareness of the realities of power in material terms, and the fluency of his pen. But whilst the titles of the two volumes suggest the contemplation of a sad decline from greatness, the content of them reveals virtually nothing of such emotional self-indulgence. Instead what Beloff provides is a clear, no-nonsense historical narration of what he saw as crucial stages in the rapid political decline of what for a few decades had been the most extensive empire the world had ever seen.

After 1970 the flow of publications slowed down a little, no doubt to a large extent because other non-academic preoccupations were beginning to emerge and to make increasing demands on Beloff's time and attention. Most important of these were his involvement in the founding of what was to become the independent University of Buckingham, and later his membership of the House of Lords and the immersion in public affairs that this brought. However, before dealing with these matters it is convenient to conclude this survey of Beloff's principal academic writings. In 1970 he published a collection of articles and essays already in print under the title *The Intellectual in Politics and other essays*. The articles are arranged under six headings, though this device does little to confer thematic unity on the book. Perhaps the most interesting section consists of three essays on what he called the Jewish predicament. These are examples of the comparatively rare occasions (another occurs in his later collection of essays *An Historian in the Twentieth Century*) on which he dealt with aspects of modern Israeli politics and the difficulties faced by the Jewish state in a hostile environment. He appeared to write on these matters with some diffidence and a certain degree of detachment. This may have been a consequence of his lack of sympathy for Zionism as a political ideology, but it may also have owed something to the difficulties he had in coming to terms with a society as brash, energetic, and disputatious as modern Israel. Nevertheless he did visit Israel on several occasions, lectured at the Hebrew University, and was proud of being a governor of Haifa University. In 1980 what turned out to be a highly successful textbook on British government appeared, *The Government of the*

United Kingdom: Political Authority in a Changing Society. This was written jointly with Gillian Peele of Lady Margaret Hall at Oxford who contributed very substantially both to the assembling of research material and to the final shape of the text. The book went into a second edition in 1980 and into a third in 1995, though on the latter occasion without Beloff's participation. Something like an historical supplement to the book on British government is provided by Beloff's 1984 publication, *Wars and Welfare: Britain 1914–1945*. This provides a brisk and judicious summary of the impact of war and welfare policies on British politics and methods of government.

As already mentioned the second part of *Imperial Sunset* came out in 1989. After that there were only two more books to appear. One was *An Historian in the Twentieth Century: Chapters in Intellectual Autobiography* (1992) and the other was *Britain and the European Union: Dialogue of the Deaf* (1996). The former is interesting chiefly for the light it throws on Beloff's family background and his experience in the House of Lords as well as for incisive comments on the writing of history and a variety of other topics. It contains too an essay, entitled 'The Jewish Experience', in which Beloff provides a remarkably sympathetic and perceptive exploration of the social and moral foundations of the Israeli state. In the book on Britain's difficult relationship with the European Union he set out in detail the grounds for what was by 1996 his confirmed and profound hostility to the manner in which the European Union was developing and the implications of this for the political and constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom. Of all the intellectuals in politics Beloff had become perhaps the most convinced Euro-sceptic to be found amongst them. Once again, however, his arguments are not to be dismissed as merely cranky. They rested on persuasive historical grounds as well as expressing his own deep commitment to what he saw as the inherent virtues of the British system of government and British notions of the rule of law. The survival of all this was in his view under threat as the political pretensions of the European Union became ever more ambitious.

III

Despite the fact that Beloff was intensely devoted to research and academic writing, he began in the later 1960s to develop interests which eventually led him into something like a new career in public affairs. This was to last for best part of a quarter of a century down to his death in 1999.

In 1957 he had left Nuffield College for All Souls on his appointment as Gladstone Professor of Government and Public Administration. This was a prestigious position which gave to its holder opportunities to engage in public life if he cared to take them. It may well be that the greater emphasis in Beloff's publications during the 1960s on the practical aspects of government, especially in the field of foreign relations reflected a desire on his part to demonstrate that he was not just an academic historian, but also a keen student of government. Then in the later 1960s came student dissent and a growing taste for iconoclasm amongst the young. Though the manifestations of student radicalism at Oxford were relatively tame compared with those experienced elsewhere even in Britain, they upset many of the more traditionally minded senior members of the University, including Beloff and the then Warden of All Souls, John Sparrow. All Souls, perhaps just because it had no students, was an easy target for the Young Turks who denounced it as a reactionary bastion of privilege. Beloff and Sparrow reacted adamantly and did not conceal their feelings of outrage, though curiously the former was committed to internal reforms in All Souls such as the admission of graduates which the latter came to oppose. After only a few years the storm blew over, not least because many dons at Oxford reacted more calmly and sought some kind of dialogue with the student radicals. But these years disillusioned Beloff considerably (he was from time to time the object of personal vilification) and All Souls was not reformed in the ways he had hoped for. All this may well have stimulated his concern about the position of universities in Britain generally and the question-marks hanging over their future. At any rate he felt strongly enough about these matters to write an article for the journal *Minerva* in 1967 entitled *British Universities and the Public Purse*. This offered restrained and sensible comments on the impending threat that the Comptroller and Auditor General would be given access to university accounts. Beloff did not see this as worth a lot of fuss, but focused instead on the much more diffuse challenges to the autonomy of universities stemming from their increasing dependence on public funds and the tendency of the bodies providing them to foist their priorities on the universities. In so far as the article contained a plea, it was for British universities to be more active in seeking private funds in emulation of their American counterparts.

The effect of this contribution to public debate was to make Beloff well known as someone worried about the drift towards a completely state funded university system and sympathetic to efforts to marshal private resources in support of academic institutions. The initiative

then passed for a while to others, notably Professor Harry Ferns of Birmingham University and Mr Ralph Harris (later Lord Harris of High Cross), the Director of the Institute of Economic Affairs (IEA) and a strong advocate of free markets. It was a paper by Ferns, published by the IEA in 1968, that launched the proposal for a private and wholly independent university. But Beloff was quickly back in the centre of the discussions which then took place and led soon after to the setting-up of a Planning Board for an Independent University. In that context he was active and successful in engaging the support of several eminent people, including his brother-in-law, Sir Ernest Chain, holder of a Nobel Prize for biochemistry. Furthermore, his preference for a relatively traditionalist university with an Oxbridge flavour as opposed to a large city-centre foundation, originally preferred by the radical free marketeers amongst the founding fathers, had a major influence on what finally emerged, though from the very beginning finance was also a major constraint. However, largely as the result of a generous (and at that time anonymous) gift from the businessman, Lord Tanlaw, the scheme for the building of a university in the small town of Buckingham became feasible, and despite the many obstacles in the way of achieving the desired objective the University College at Buckingham was able to open its doors to students at the end of 1975. But well before that event Beloff had been persuaded by the Provisional Council of the fledgling institution to accept appointment as its founding Principal. So in 1974 he resigned from his chair at Oxford and left All Souls for the distinctly Spartan surroundings of what was mainly a building site in a modest market town.

Without doubt Beloff showed outstanding courage and dedication in taking up this challenge at the age of 61. He knew that he faced much opposition from the Labour Government that took office in 1974, from many parts of the bureaucratic education establishment, and even from people who on political grounds should have been supportive. Nevertheless, he set about bringing together a nucleus of talented academic and administrative staff, solicited and gained at least enough financial support to allow the dismal site in Buckingham to be transformed, and played a major part in the design of the initial courses to be offered. In this connection he was very much in favour of courses combining at least two subjects or disciplines and opposed narrow specialisation. He became too a vigorous and effective publicist for the new venture. Once students had arrived he took his duties towards them very seriously, giving lectures, talking with them and providing academic advice when needed. When he

retired in 1979 he could be confident that his successor, Professor Sir Alan Peacock, was taking over a going concern. Though Beloff's time at Buckingham was short, his contribution was crucial to the success of the whole undertaking. He conferred academic distinction on the new institution and above all applied his formidable capacity for hard work and tenacity of purpose to pushing it forward. It was a source of gratification to him that in a changed political climate the new University College received a royal charter in 1983 and was thus enabled to confer degrees in the normal way.

The last phase of Beloff's career took him into public life and service. For most of his life he had been a supporter and sometimes active member of the Liberal party. But he parted company from the party in 1972 and moved steadily towards the Conservative party which he joined in 1979. In particular he was attracted by the libertarian and free market thinking that was being propagated by several 'think-tanks' close to the Conservative party and its new leader, Margaret Thatcher. On her advice he received a knighthood in 1980, and then in 1981 accepted a life peerage, taking the title of Baron Beloff, of Wolvercote, the village near to the end of the Woodstock Road in Oxford where he had lived for many years. In offering him the peerage Mrs Thatcher made no bones about her expectation that he would support the Conservative Party in the House of Lords. For the most part Beloff remained faithful to his side of the bargain, though he was far too independent in his judgement ever to be a mere party man and there were to be many occasions on which he did not hesitate to criticise and oppose measures put forward by the government he supported. One reason for his readiness to take up a critical stance is to be found in the distance that always existed between him and the inner circle of Conservative politicians. This in turn stemmed from the fact that he lacked conventional political instincts and skills, was too honest and outspoken in the expression of his opinions and convictions to be a comfortable partner in deliberations about policy and tactics, and was probably too sharply focused in respect of the causes that mattered to him in public affairs—foreign policy, education and especially the higher end of it, and the British constitution—to relate comfortably to the free-wheeling generalists who dominate British political life. Nevertheless, perhaps for a very short time in the early 1980s Beloff hoped that he might exert real influence on the party's policies for education as a result of an advisory position in the Conservative Research Department to which he had been appointed. But he had an uneasy relationship with Sir Keith Joseph and was effectively sidelined by 1983.

The House of Lords did, however, provide a stage on which Beloff could play the kind of part in public life for which he was eminently suited—that of a thought-provoking and often provocative critic. What is more, the procedural framework suited him. Unique amongst legislative chambers the House of Lords conducts most of its business in plenary session by debate on the floor of the House. It is able to do this chiefly because, knowing that its decisions can always be overridden by a government with a majority in the House of Commons, most members of the Lords exercise self-restraint and tone down party commitment. This is one of the reasons why it has a reputation for rational and well-informed debate: it is indeed rather like a high-grade debating society of the kind that Beloff had known in his youth at Oxford. So most of Beloff's work in the Lords was done through speaking in debate, asking questions, and proposing motions on the floor of House. He was never much of a committee man, though he did serve a short stint (1981–2) on the Select Committee on Science and Technology and in 1995–6 was a member of an ad hoc Select Committee on Relations between Central and Local Government. His record of attendance in the House was impressive, amounting occasionally to over 200 daily attendances in a session. This meant that he got into the habit of coming up to London for at least three days a week. He travelled from Brighton (to which he and his wife retired), stayed overnight at the Reform Club, and then went over to his office in the Lords in the morning and into the chamber later on. Colleagues have recalled that he was a rather solitary figure in the House, sometimes to be found working in the library, sometimes just sitting in a corner thinking. This no doubt helped him to develop an outstanding ability to deliver without notes short and pithy speeches, peppered often enough with sardonic and sometimes humorous remarks. Within the somewhat esoteric environment of the Lords he could perhaps be described as a 'crowd-puller'. Like many other peers he concentrated on topics in which he was keenly interested. He spoke often on education and especially on the universities, and vigorously opposed some features of the Education Reform Act 1988 which he saw as undermining academic freedom. Similarly he opposed in the same year the introduction of student loans, joining forces with critics from the opposition parties and the cross-benches. Foreign affairs often brought him into action, and during the 1990s that often meant opposition to the European Union and to legislation (for example on the Maastricht treaty) stemming from British membership. He maintained too a vigilant eye on all measures and proposals with a bearing on British constitutional arrangements. Not surprisingly he was a persistent

and trenchant critic of most of the constitutional changes introduced after 1997 by the Blair Government. He opposed human rights legislation with perfectly defensible arguments, but his attempt to defend the right of hereditary peers to sit in the House of Lords on the grounds that the hereditary principle was a factor in many social practices, including the inheritance of property between the generations, struck many as quixotic. For Beloff the eighteen years he spent in the Lords may have sometimes seemed like a personal 'imperial sunset'. Yet they were also years of unremitting toil, imposing a burden that he nonetheless accepted without complaint even though in the end Parkinson's disease was steadily taking its toll and reducing his mobility. But in accepting such burdens, which also included regular attendance at meetings of the Association of Conservative Peers, he was remaining faithful to his own austere sense of duty and commitment to public service.

Alongside his activity in the House of Lords Beloff remained very active as a writer, though the flow of books diminished in his later years. But if he wrote fewer books, he was even more heavily engaged than earlier in his life in writing for newspapers, particularly *The Times*. He was also ready to give the occasional lecture, sometimes to bodies like the Conservative Political Centre or the Centre for Policy Studies, sometimes within an academic framework as at All Souls where he gave three lectures in 1997 in commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of Amery's *Thoughts on the Constitution*. Beloff had remarkable fluency as a contributor to the press and, though much of his journalism was polemical, it was never superficial or trivial. He felt strongly on many issues and in the expression of his views he could sometime appear to be insensitive and tactless. But whatever the issue with which he was dealing he always believed that it had to be treated seriously, and often enough that meant putting it into an historical context. He did this even in what must have been the last thing he wrote for *The Times* shortly before his death on 22 March 1999. This was an article in which, prompted by reading volume 1 of Ian Kershaw's *Hitler*, historical comparisons were drawn between the ways in which Hitler and Tony Blair had each built up support for their 'projects'. Not surprisingly this piece elicited cries of outrage from many, though, as I wrote to Beloff at the time, if he had put the emphasis squarely on techniques of propaganda alone, he might have been less exposed to indignant criticism. But he was never one for toning down a vigorous polemic.

Beloff received many honours and tokens of recognition. He was elected to a Fellowship of the British Academy in 1973. He held six honorary

doctorates and was a D.Litt. of the University of Oxford. He was an Honorary Fellow of Corpus Christi College and of Mansfield College, Emeritus Fellow of All Souls, and between 1975 and 1984 a Supernumerary Fellow of St Antony's College. He was an honorary professor at St Andrews University, and naturally retained strong links with the University of Buckingham, in the development of which he continued to maintain a keen interest. He was for some time a governor of his old school, St Paul's, and also of the University of Haifa in Israel.

IV

A fair assessment of Beloff's work as an historian and political scientist (though he disliked that term) is not easy to make. This is in part because whilst much of what he wrote was history, much of it was also what might be called 'public affairs from an historical standpoint'. Inevitably this meant that what was intended to be straightforward historical analysis sometimes ran the risk of being too heavily influenced by current preoccupations arising in the sphere of public affairs. Yet this idea that the historian should be concerned with public affairs was very much to the fore in the 1930s when Beloff was at Oxford, and to some extent his ideal became and remained that of the scholar-historian who brings his knowledge to bear on the problems and controversies of his own times. As to his views on what being an historian really involves, they were plain and down-to-earth. Beloff had no taste for theoretical or philosophical speculation on questions such as: what is the status and validity of historical knowledge? He took the practical line that historical facts were generally ascertainable and that once they had been gleaned from the records of the past and put together intelligently, the historian could claim something like objectivity for the account he presented. There is interesting confirmation of this view in a passage in *An Historian in the Twentieth Century* where he contrasts it with the conclusions of Professor Sir Michael Howard (whom Beloff admired) in favour of a more sceptical view of what degree of historical objectivity is attainable. For Beloff regarded the assurance of objectivity in the pursuit of historical knowledge as something like an antidote to his own pessimism about human progress. This may have reflected the growing disenchantment with the state of Britain that he certainly felt in the last decade of his life. Yet it was a view that was not really in harmony with the rationalist element in his outlook and his passionate belief in the possibility of persuading people by appeal to

reason and experience. Whilst he once described himself in the Lords as 'the last Tory', he was probably in fact much nearer to being 'the last Whig', a position he mischievously attributed to fellow historian Earl Russell when both were united in 1990 in opposing legislation to facilitate student loans.

What stands out in all Beloff's writing—historical or otherwise—is his fluency, clarity of presentation, and cogency in getting across the principal points he wants to make. And he attributed great importance to these qualities, as he makes abundantly clear in *An Intellectual in Politics* when he remarks that: 'The point of writing is to make one's knowledge and ideas accessible to others who may find what one has to say useful; much of narrow political science writing ignores this salient fact and will perish where Bagehot, Bryce and Bodley survive.' Since he could write so fluently and was a glutton for hard work, it is not surprising that he was so prolific. What is more, when Beloff was a young man learning how to become an historian, there was nothing unusual in a gifted scholar turning out short, well-written texts addressed to both students and the educated general reader: the age of academics writing in recondite language more or less only for each other had not yet arrived. Nevertheless, there was a price to be paid for Beloff's capacity to write so much. The quality of the output is variable: the work on Soviet foreign policy is impressively solid and thorough, the biography of Jefferson or the work on the rise of the modern state are just a shade lightweight. The two volumes of *Imperial Sunset* are perhaps Beloff's most carefully constructed and thoughtful pieces of historical writing, whilst some of the work on aspects of international affairs published in the 1960s sometimes suggests an author in too much of a hurry to move on to the next book. Yet these variations in quality are perhaps not really all that great. For the most striking feature of Beloff's *oeuvre* is that he establishes a characteristic style of writing right at the outset of his academic career and maintains it more or less unchanged for the rest of his life. There is thus not much development or change of approach in his work: it maintains throughout the same high standards of lucidity, care in the ordering and presentation of the facts, and a readiness to use the available evidence to ground wide-ranging and sometimes contentious conclusions. In addition it is characterised by many perceptive and sharp insights into the ironies and oddities of human experience and often enlivened by Beloff's acerbic comments on the follies and misfortunes of mankind. But Beloff the historian and writer on public affairs was notably more moderate and restrained than Beloff the journalist and active participant in political life. He is likely to

be remembered longer for his achievements in the first of these roles than in the second. But reflecting on his life in 1992 he remarked, no doubt with reference to the university he helped to found: 'I now know how different is the feel of an institution if one is associated with its workings from the view that an academic obtains by studying it from the outside'. If the University of Buckingham continues to flourish in the years to come, then may be that will turn out to be the most enduring monument to his endeavours.

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