

**The Chapel, Balliol College, Oxford, 3rd December 2011**

**In Memoriam, a Sermon**

**ROBERT OAKESHOTT**

*by Charles Keen*

Since 1920, when Walter Oakeshott, Robert's father, and my father, Hugh Keen, went up to Balliol as undergraduates, our families have been intertwined, at every level, and that could be the main reason why I'm trying to speak about him here, among so many of his close friends and admirers. It should anyway be my elder brother, Maurice, standing here, but, sadly, he's not well enough. I might mention also, that I have evidence, in the form of a letter, that the father of Robert and his twin brother, Evelyn, (also known as Cargs, short for Castor, the heavenly twin), couldn't tell them apart as babies (possibly the only error ever made by that great scholar). Later, their appearances diverged, and it became quite easy to know which was which, but the bonding between them never weakened, so far as I could see, and the friends of one were always the friends of the other, and many of them are here.

My other qualification for this role of spokesman is that I shared a flat with Robert and three others for three of our formative years; formative they certainly were, but James Hughes is the only other surviving relic of our three homes at Colville Square, Edith Road and Battersea. That almost makes him and me twins, though not of the heavenly variety.

You'll sympathise, I hope, when I say it's almost impossible to do justice to the theme of Robert Oakeshott's life. On the one hand, you had got the hilarious jokes and escapades which characterised his life among his friends. On the other, but by no means in conflict with the jokes and fun, was his dedication to good causes and the remarkable list of his achievements.

Looking first at those happy memories of escapades, I turn a page, and see a week in Dublin in 1959, where we were guests of the FitzHerbert family and the Martin family; and it was a fine day, and a pity not to be on the beach, but also a pity not to be drinking draught Guinness made from true Liffey water. Our dilemma was resolved by our going to a hardware shop and buying a 2 gallon galvanised bucket, and to a public house and asking for it to be filled with 16 pints, and to a stationers' for a packet of 100 straws, and off we went. There were more than two of us, but, I must admit, less than 16, and a good many were female, with well shaped, but not hollow, legs. It was a lovely afternoon.

I mention it, because it was such fun, but also because the idea of the bucket was Robert's. And I do want to emphasise that, apart from his "gift of the gab", which we all enjoyed so much, his character was stamped by his initiative and enterprise. If he was seeing you off on a train, and you had a good conversation in hand at the

time, he would, as likely as not, jump on the train, and travel a few stops with you, or see you to your destination.

After the memorial service for Auberon Herbert, we had a lot to say to each other, and remained in Ian Fraser's flat, presided over by Bridget Grant (herself a world class talker), until time for my train for Reading. He joined the train, travelled to Reading and stayed the night with my family and me. In the morning, I found him gone. He had walked a mile to the station, and had returned to Sunderland. At 9.30, I rang his office in Sunderlandia, from my office in Reading, and there he was. Typically, our self indulgence had not at all blunted his dedication to his work.

He was, I would say, a virtuoso talker. He was a very serious thinker too, but, as he discoursed on serious issues, jokes and frivolity would be woven into the fabric, and the effect was spell-binding and enormous fun. It was that combination of fun and penetrating discourse that made us all love his company so much. He enhanced all our lives, just with his company and wit and warm-heartedness.

I must come back to his gift of initiative. I think that was really his most distinguishing feature. He might suggest we buy a bucket for Guinness. He decided to leave a successful career in journalism, to help with the new independence of an African country, Zambia. He started a new school, with a new and practical curriculum in Botswana. He started a new building co-operative in Sunderland, which affected the lives of a great many people. He picked up the ideas of Mondragon co-operative businesses, and created a consultancy, which, to this day, very successfully champions his cause of worker ownership. He persuaded the Foreign Office to release “know-how fund” money, to promote worker ownership in liberated ex-Soviet satellites, and they went for it. Going back 55 years, he raised newspaper backing for his flight to dissident Hungary, with a message of solidarity from the students of Oxford, and the first delivery of medical supplies for their casualties. Fifty years on, he was created a “Hero of the Revolution” by the Hungarian government. He was, in modern parlance, both a self-starter and a heat-seeking missile.

Rather surprising to say, if you didn't know it already, in his late teens, and after leaving school, he was a cavalry officer, in charge of a troop of armoured cars in Malaya, during the troubles there. Less surprisingly, when he later was at Balliol, he led the launch, or relaunch, of two debating societies, the Arnold and Brackenbury and the Asquith, and, less surprisingly still, both were also convivial clubs and very good fun.

Then, there was his dedication to charitable causes. Three of them, CAMFED, FINE CELL WORK and GIVE A KIDNEY, are represented here, and I think their representatives would confirm that his proactive participation made for a great contribution to their launch and success.

He was a great talker, and we'll none of us forget the joys of chatting with him. He was also a great doer, and there are many people across the world who are grateful, to this day, for what he brought them. There have been some moving tributes sent in from overseas, including in particular, Botswana, and some of those tributes can

be viewed later. He wanted to see fair play, and he wanted people to be motivated to help themselves, and he worked tirelessly for those aims.

Well, then, I suppose there had to be a “downside”, and you might say that that was his clothes. They were pretty terrible, and, because they were so bad, he had no compunction in borrowing from his flatmates – so much so that Tom Bingham used, as a young barrister, to keep his bedroom door locked. On one occasion, later in life, I had a conversation with Robert on the subject of what I think is sometimes called “body odour”. He said: “What on earth is wrong with the aroma of honest sweat?”

It was, I think, a point of principle with him that toil and sweat were praiseworthy, and that *homo sapiens* should not be fussing about such things as its outer vesture, or, for that matter, its underwear. “Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow”, seemed to be his philosophy. A fair point, but more so if you're a lily of the field yourself. Things took a turn for the better, when, following the successful employee buy-out at Baxi Heating, Philip Baxendale made a generous gift of some of his own suits to Robert. They nearly fitted, and were clean.

On an earlier occasion, I lent him my dinner jacket, complete with waistcoat and trousers, to go to a very important reception at the Foreign Office, when he was Diplomatic Editor of the *Financial Times*, aged, I suppose, twenty-five. It must have been a very good diplomatic party, since he emerged next day from Bow Street police station, still in my dinner jacket, the trousers of which had worked their way round the heels of his shoes and attached themselves to the soles. Actually, I'm glad to say, it had never been a very good dinner jacket, but it limped a bit after that.

I hate to sound flippant, but so much of Robert's uniqueness was his defiance of convention, his *joie de vivre* and conviviality, his relish of the ridiculous things in life and his infectious laughter. None of that made him any less resolute in his pursuit of the goals he set himself, and which were so important to him.

And, along with his insuppressible humour and his unstoppable energy, there was his warm-heartedness and his love of his friends. And of his friends' children. He loved to help the young to find their way in life, and to give them support in their efforts, along with, as always, friendship, hospitality, hilarity.

The *Sunderland Echo* gave him his first job, and he returned to Sunderland later, to launch a building business, owned by its employees. The *Financial Times* took him into the senior echelons of journalism, and, as if in homage, he always used its pages as his tablecloth, for dinners in his London flat. There may have been loyalty in that, as well as defiance of convention; the dinners were very good and very enjoyable.

He was a wonderful man to have as a friend.