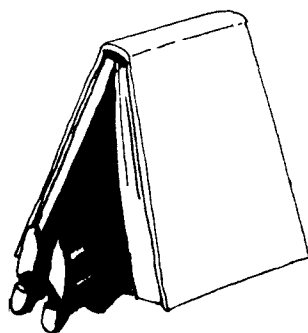

DISCUSSION

Maurice Cowling's "New Right"

Of Gurus & Sages

By Julius Gould



MAURICE COWLING'S extended epistle from Peterhouse ("Irony, Geniality & Malice" in *ENCOUNTER*, November 1989) is a curious *mélange*. At one level—where there is ample geniality—he is, in effect, reviewing the new edition of his book *Mill and Liberalism*. (His article, we are told, "forms a part of the new intro-

duction" to that work.) Few authors are given such an irresistible opportunity: and the book is duly praised for its prescience and other sterling qualities. But Cowling's main concern is with recent British political and intellectual history, and with how the New Right arose to combat what he calls "liberal virtues". I share his desire to put the New Right into a proper historical perspective. But in so far as there is, or was, such an intellectual current, it was *international* in its origins. That dimension, perhaps for reasons of space, does not loom large in Cowling's presentation. Of course, there could be debate over the range of countries (such as the USA and France) that would need attention. But we cannot really rest content with the Oxford-London-Cambridge triangle—including, though it does, that illustrious zone which comprises Peterhouse.

On the narrower British question there is indeed, as Cowling senses, an important field of historical study. How far did the practice of the Thatcher governments originate or find guide-lines in "ideas"? and whose "ideas"? As Cowling observes: "Historians will make their usual enquiries about . . . any friends whom Mrs Thatcher may have been in the habit of consulting." And he has a little list of thinkers—

many of whom he clearly deprecates. (Some of them are allotted whole footnotes of derision.) I wonder how many of them would seriously help Mr Cowling with his enquiries. I for one would be very wary of his approach. First of all, there are restrictions resulting from the principle of confidentiality: and that principle should not surrender to historical enquiries, even if they come from Peterhouse. And, secondly, I should be a trifle worried about his interpretations. Their geniality might be soothing but the irony could be less agreeable. Any malice could simply be ignored.

Cowling is not, it would seem, an easy man to please. Thinking back to 1963, he is right to recall that what he calls "liberal virtues" in morals and politics then enjoyed a remarkable vogue. And he was certainly on the attack. In that same year he published another book, *The Nature and Limits of Political Science*, assailing, among much else, the liberal orthodoxy of the social sciences. I wrote then of that book that "it does no harm to be reminded that our ranks include some who are vacuous and some who are sinister. But the effect is ruined by indiscriminate over-statement . . ." I felt then, as I feel now, that liberal decencies can be distinguished from liberal excess and hypocrisy. I would prefer to describe the "virtues" that Cowling abhors as illiberal, socialist, and authoritarian. For their exponents were, indeed, grossly indifferent to market requirements and absurdly successful in imposing their views on lesser mortals. Cowling could deservedly claim credit for having opposed them when others were bedazzled or bamboozled: a quantum of self-praise is certainly in order.

His positive message, however, is not so easy to summarise or applaud. It does seem abridged in his reproof to Michael Oakeshott and F. A. Hayek:

" . . . neither has conceptualised the combination of politeness and negative bloodiness which is the essential antidote to liberal virtue."

I note that he says "essential antidote," not "only alternative": but it probably comes to the same thing. Such mixes of "tone and posture" do not lend themselves to proof. But they would seem in Cowling's eyes the quintessence of Toryism or Conservatism. Alongside, appears to run another "need": he writes of a "temperamental negativity which is needed everywhere".

These are large claims, or, rather imperatives—derived no doubt from Cowling's interpretation of English history. He sees a gap between his ideals and the principles which attract most of Mrs Thatcher's intellectual supporters. He is right to do so. For I know of no evidence that the advocates of "negative bloodiness" or stark illiberalism have been crucial to the Thatcher years: and my guess is that Cowling's musings

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on the subject amount to a blue and irrelevant herring. This genre of bloodiness is often found in sophisticated circles on the Right—especially among those who are devoted to *hierarchy* and *deference*. I am inclined to regard such talk as a kind of sentimentality comparable to the cant talked on the sentimental Left about “caring” and “compassion”.

Both kinds of sentiment please their advocates: and neither is a useful guide to policy. They are prejudices (in the Burkean and most other senses): they are impossible to verify or disprove. Obviously Cowling is entirely free to applaud “negativity”—however positively—and to set up any standards or imperatives about Conservatism that appeal to him. But it certainly does not follow that what are “essentials” for him form a necessary posture for other conservatives.

Cowling does not demand *expressis verbis* that we think as he would like: and he claims no monopoly on behalf of the (somewhat varied) cadres of the Peterhouse Right. He accepts that many forces were at work at the beginning of the Thatcher era—free-market economics, journalism, as well as what he calls oddly the London School of Economics Right (and on that his list is strangely incomplete). But since most, if not all, of those circles are uncommitted to “negative bloodiness” there is a clear inference that, whatever their strength, they have failed the Cowling test. I suppose they will bear such a verdict with liberal fortitude.

Again, he tells us that there are “no skeletons” in his cupboard—the contents of which have, hitherto, not been a matter either of general interest or controversy. I accept the assurance. But even that virtue, quite apart from any others that he is too modest to mention, confers on him no special right to test us on our conservatism as if we were a set of ageing candidates for the Cambridge Tripos.

SOMETHING, finally, about “the Left”. Whatever his prescience elsewhere, Cowling observes that in 1963, in the heyday of “the end of ideology”:

“Though Raymond Williams was about to become a guru, it was by no means obvious that Hobsbawm, Perry Anderson, T. Eagleton and E. P. Thompson would become gurus too.”

Now I do not deal in gurus—but there were quite a few of us around who did *not* think that ideology had died, who had seem glimmerings of its return in other countries, and who suspected that the tough-minded, flexible and assiduous people he mentions would push the gentler social-democratic thinkers out of the limelight. (Some of these “gurus” also had the special advantage of a difficult prose style.)

And so it proved The watershed was the international student rebellion of the late 1960s on which Cowling also offers this recollection:

“. . . I certainly said, and probably believed, . . . that, if the revolting students of the Student Revolution were revolting against Lord Beloff, Lord Annan and Sir Isaiah Berlin, there must have been *something* to be said in their favour.”

I do not question that he said such a thing—still less that he “probably believed it”. But, if taken seriously, a belief of this kind is oddly parochial and impossible to square with the facts. There are whole shelf-loads of books open to an historian’s scrutiny which show how parochial—and irrelevant—this was. There were countless thousands of students in revolt against “the system”—and most of them, alas, had never even heard about Beloff, Berlin or Annan, let alone Cowling and myself. . . . Their leaders had more sinister preoccupations—and many of Cowling’s unexpected “gurus” were quick to see that this was so. I predicted that this would happen: and so again it proved.

Peterhouse Blues

By Max Beloff



MAURICE COWLING, in “The Origins of the New Right: Irony, Geniality & Malice” (ENCOUNTER, November 1989), makes a case for there being something in Britain that can

be called “the New Right”, but only to the extent that some people have introduced new ideas, or refurbished old ones, within the broad framework of the Conservative Party. It is not self-standing in the way in which this could be said of the American New Right, nor indeed has it been much concerned in the new agenda of public and private morals which has figured in the transatlantic debate. But Mr Cowling’s own highly personal attitudes colour what he writes, and prevent him from fully understanding what has actually gone on. The opacity of his prose style can also be an obstacle.

He talks of the Conservative Research Department “once restored to doctrinal respectability by Mr Robin Harris” having supplied advisers to government. As I was a member of the team at Conservative Central Office that appointed Mr Harris as well as a number of other members of the Department’s staff, I find this quite mystifying. If “doctrinal respectability” means alignment with the basic beliefs of the Thatcher régime, this took place under Mr Harris’s predecessor, Mr Peter Cropper—later Mr Nigel Lawson’s special assistant. Central Office is perhaps a better place from which to study the Conservative Party than Peterhouse.

While, except for my single contribution to the *Black Papers*, I find it odd for me to appear in this article at all, I note that each reference to me is an example of the “malice” which Mr Cowling wrongly believes to be a Tory virtue. I do not know why he should talk of a “skeleton in my cupboard”. The fact that I was for some time a member of the Liberal Party is no secret—many other Tories have been drawn from the Liberal ranks, and have brought a recognisable element into the Tory make-up. Does Mr