

Cambridge University Press
052183368X - Letters, 1928-1946
Isaiah Berlin
Excerpt
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THE LETTERS

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Called
 me
 Promise
 given
 17/5/28

33, Upper Addison
 Gardens 105
 W. Kensington W. 14
 31/3/28

Dear Mr Chesterton

My friends and I were bold to address this letter to you because we regard ourselves as, in a sense, continuing a tradition which you and your friends had started at St. Paul's School. The boast and peculiarity of St. Paul's has for a long time been that it did not produce a uniform type of men for export to the universities, - that Paulines are totally unlike men from any other school, and totally unlike each other; this fact in itself is not remarkable in a day-school; what is remarkable is that this peculiarity finds no articulate expression anywhere. The Spraying societies, i.e. the Union and the Junior Debating Society, both of which have now all the force of tradition behind them, are normally anæmic and languishing bodies. 'The Pauline' magazine is still an arid and gloomy publication, which reflects no side of school life whatever. 'The Debater', which in theory represents the rebels, has been declining into a tame collection of writings of the prize-essay type, and has all but

The first page of the earliest surviving letter, to G. K. Chesterton, 31 March 1928

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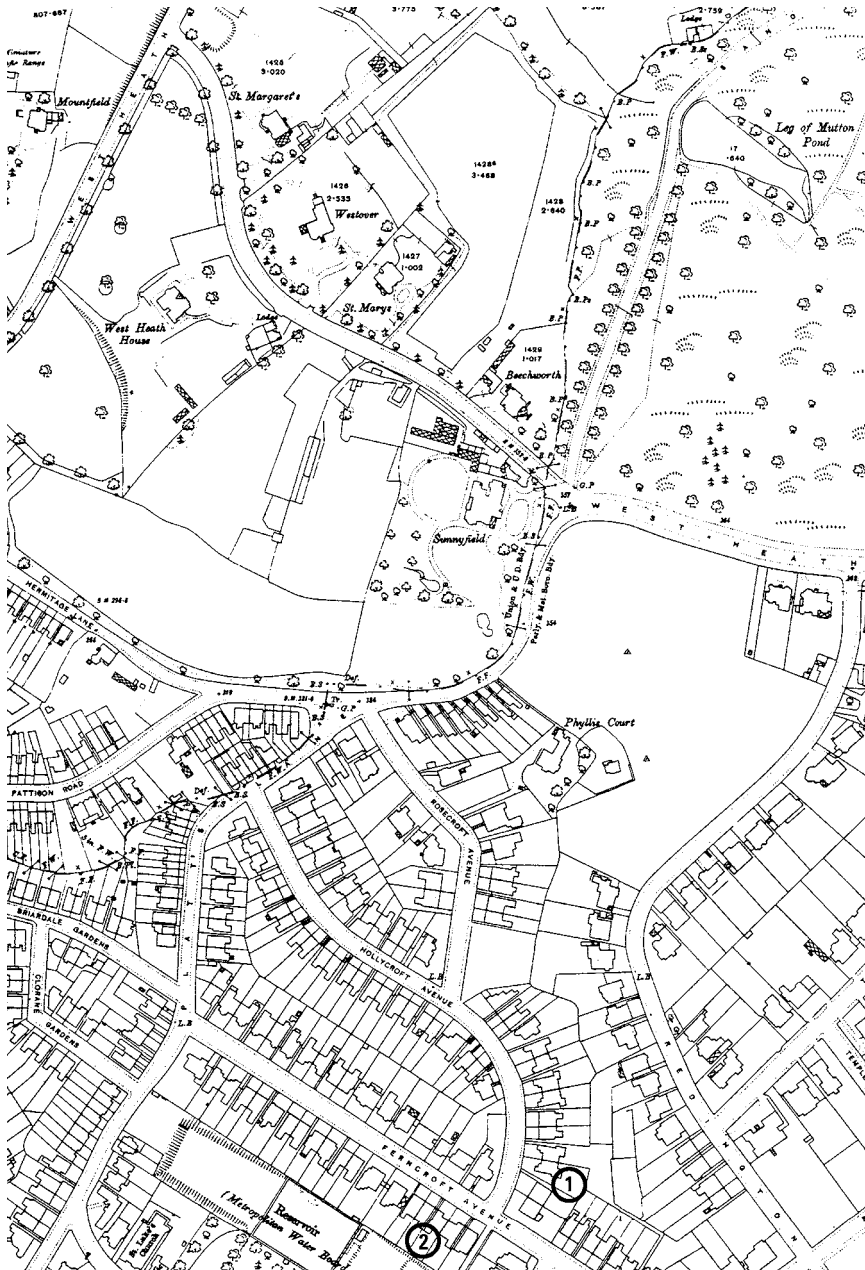
LONDON

The only great and tremendous satisfaction I had in my life was that my son is growing up and studying among people who consider him clever and good-hearted.

Marie Berlin, autobiographical notes¹

¹ Marie *Berlin (1880–1974; an asterisk signals an entry in the biographical glossary), mother of Isaiah *Berlin (hereafter ‘IB’).

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Part of Hampstead: the Berlin family moved into 49 Hollycroft Avenue (1) in October 1928;
the Philipp family (see p. 253 below, note 6) lived at 6 Ferncroft Avenue (2)

31 MARCH 1928

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IB first took his Higher Certificate examinations at St Paul's School, Hammersmith, London, in July 1927.¹ He passed, though without winning any distinctions. In December 1927, having been rejected twice by Balliol College, Oxford, in the spring (once for a scholarship, once for a place), he won a Scholarship² to Corpus Christi College to read 'modern subjects', i.e. Classical Mods³ followed by history. But after a conversation soon afterwards between IB and G. B. Grundy,⁴ the Corpus don who claimed to have secured him his award, the history element was replaced by Greats.

TO G. K. CHESTERTON⁵

31 March 1928

33 Upper Addison Gardens, West Kensington, London W14

Dear Mr Chesterton

My friends and I make bold to address this letter to you because we regard ourselves as, in a sense, continuing a tradition which you and your friends had started at St. Paul's School. The boast and peculiarity of St. Paul's has for a long time been that it did not produce a uniform type of men for export to the universities, – that Paulines are totally unlike men from any other school, and totally unlike each other; this fact in itself is not remarkable in a day-school; what is remarkable is that this peculiarity finds no articulate expression anywhere; the Speaking societies, i.e. the Union and the Junior

1 He offered Classical Studies (Latin, Greek, Ancient History, Literature), with English Literature as a Subsidiary Subject: *Oxford and Cambridge Schools Examination Board: Examinations for Certificates, July 1927, List of Successful Candidates* [Cambridge, 1927; bound as part of OUA OC 10/43], p. 21.

2 According to IB, 'I probably got in on the essay paper, writing on "bias in history". We were a fairly sophisticated London school, we used to read highbrow journals, e.g. T. S. Eliot's *Criterion*: that had recently published an anti-Western article by an Indian whose name I don't recollect called "Bias in History" – the very title of the set essay – and I reproduced what I remembered of it, and was elected.' From his contribution to Brian Harrison (ed.), *Corpuscles: A History of Corpus Christi College, Oxford, in the Twentieth Century, Written by its Members* (Oxford, 1994), 44–50, at p. 44. The article he remembers is Vasudeo B. Metta, 'Bias in History', *Criterion* 6 No 5 (November 1927), 418–25. The school gave him Logan Pearsall Smith's *Little Essays Drawn from the Writings of George Santayana* (London, 1920) as a scholarship prize.

3 For Mods and Greats see xviii/2.

4 George Beardoe Grundy, Fellow and ancient history Tutor, Corpus Christi College (CCC), 1903–31, Senior Tutor 1928–31.

5 Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874–1936), journalist, novelist, critic, poet; illustrator and co-author of *The First Clerihews* (Oxford, 1982), a facsimile of the notebook in which Edmund Clerihew Bentley (485/8) and his contemporaries at St Paul's recorded the first examples of this genre, including two by GKC (on Cervantes and Carlyle) that were later published by Bentley as his own. At St Paul's, aged sixteen, GKC founded the Junior Debating Club and a magazine entitled *The Debater*. GKC attended St Paul's from 1887 to 1892, IB from 1922 to 1928.

Debating Society, both of which have now all the force of tradition behind them, are normally anaemic and languishing bodies. 'The Pauline' magazine is still an arid and gloomy publication, which reflects no side of school life whatever. 'The Debater', which in theory represents the rebels, has been declining into a tame collection of writings of the prize-essay type, and has all but lost touch with the livelier elements in the School.¹ There is no doubt that the School is as full of original talent as ever; but this talent is extraordinarily shy and refuses to show its face in public, and must therefore be coaxed into doing so patiently and delicately. We have therefore considered it advisable to found a new School magazine whose sole and whole purpose would be to print anything submitted by Paulines, if it is well-enough written, and more or less sincere, however irresponsible, or immature, or fantastic it may be. We shall attempt to concentrate on contents and vigour rather than faultlessness of style, and have selected for this purpose an editorial committee from among the most unconventional elements in the School: the Union, and the Lower School are both represented upon it. We naturally intend Paulines rather than Old Paulines to be the chief contributors; but it is all-important that 'The Radiator' should be inaugurated with great éclat, and be at once read as widely as possible, and as the impetus, which anything written by you in it would produce on the sales, is infinitely great, we appeal to you, sir, to help us in our task. The first number of 'The Radiator' will probably be issued on the 1st of June (permission for a 'new satirical Journal' has been granted by the High Master),² and we shall be grateful to you, sir, for anything you choose to send us; – a poem or an essay or a story or an open letter will be equally welcomed by us. Once more allow me to implore you, sir, in the name of Exuberance and Outspokenness which will surely be the distinctive characteristics of our magazine, to give us your support.

I remain

yours sincerely

I M Berlin³

(Joint-Editor).

British Library, BL Add. MS. 73232A

The letter is annotated by Chesterton: 'Called here / Promise given 17/5/28'.

The first issue of the Radiator was published on 5 June, too soon to

¹ IB himself contributed to the *Pauline* and the *Debater* in 1928: one of his contributions (631/1) appears in this volume; the others may be read in the IBVL under 'Uncollected publications'. No doubt he also wrote some of the other material in the first issue of the *Radiator* (vol. 1, No 1, Summer 1928, sixpence), as well as the article on pp. 7–8 below, but no item is signed by him.

² John Bell (1890–1958), High Master 1927–38.

³ M = Mendelevich, a patronymic IB later dropped.

JUNE 1928

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*include the promised contribution, but this unsigned description of the encounter (surely by IB) does appear therein:*¹

OUR INTERVIEW WITH GKC

We came replete and in good humour to our goal – Topmeadow, Beaconsfield,² nor had we been long upon our journey. The house glowed in the warm sunlight, and proved a perfect picture of contentment. Timidly and with halting steps we advanced along a flagged path to the great oak door; with deference we pressed the electric bell, and politely stated our request. We were told that the great man was busy, but that he would see us. We almost fell over each other in our eagerness to be the first to grip him by the hand. We found ourselves (we know not quite how) in the presence. We were motioned with a wave of the hand and sat nervously upright upon the edge of a sofa drenched in large orange cushions, tracing imaginary patterns with our walking sticks upon the ample carpet. The whole room seemed a luxurious surfeit of cushions, large orange cushions. We felt as in a trance. GKC waved a hand – *the* hand, we reflected, that had written . . . – we were recalled from our reverie by a Voice, ‘Americans . . .’. We listened, and heard how some incredible American had thought of some medieval Chesterton building that house, of Chestertons from generation to generation adding to it, and lastly of GKC sitting in this ancestral pile writing of men who were Thursday and of the innocent Father Brown.³ From the depths of the chair he uttered his quiet studious laugh . . . ‘built it ourselves twelve years ago . . .’.⁴ Yes, the oak certainly *looked* old; but we pictured the low-ceilinged Tudor houses and shuddered.

This was the epitome of comfort itself. We got decidedly sorry for America, in so far as one can feel pity for a nation that sings not the praises of beer.

‘When I revisit the shadows of the moon’ (happy phrase!) murmured the voice in the chair ‘what always strikes me is Digby La Motte.⁵ Still as young as ever he was when I was a small boy. I would like to take him about in my pocket, and produce him and say “See how young I am! Here am I, a disreputable old journalist: there’s my old schoolmaster!”’ There came a period of chuckles . . .

We shook hands.

The last thing we were conscious of was a booming voice, ‘The cross roads . . . Windsor . . . through the town . . . good luck . . .’

1 On pp. 24–5.

2 Where Chesterton and his wife Frances (d. 1938) continued to live for the rest of their lives.

3 Chesterton’s *The Man Who Was Thursday* appeared in 1928, his *The Innocence of Father Brown* in 1911.

4 The house was indeed built by the Chestertons, to their specification.

5 Digby La Motte (1861–1946), a young master at St Paul’s in Chesterton’s time.

We felt that we had been in the presence of the great, and the great had not disappointed us.

Chesterton redeemed his promise with a poem, 'Debellare Superbos',¹ which appeared in the second issue of the magazine,² re-titled St Paul's School Radiator because the Albion Motor Co. in Glasgow, whose trade journal was called The Radiator, had lodged an objection.

From May to October 1928, while moving house from Kensington to Hampstead, the Berlin family lived at the Royal Palace Hotel, Kensington. During this intermission IB's parents, together with Marie's sister Ida,³ visited their relations in Riga, to help IB's aunt Berta⁴ care for her ailing mother.⁵ IB appears to have divided his time between the hotel and the Samunovs' home in Sinclair Road (near St Paul's School), where Yitzhak,⁶ Ida's husband and Mendel Berlin's⁷ business partner, would have kept him company. Mendel evidently returned before Marie: see the letter from Rotterdam below.⁸

TO MARIE AND MENDEL BERLIN

Sunday [3 June 1928]

57 Sinclair Road

Dear Mother & Father.

Both Itzchock⁹ & his sister regard me as having definitely advanced in the science of looking after myself. For instance I commit no grave mistakes in connection with my diet, I get my clothes pressed, I go to bed & rise in time, and generally behave better than the Schlemihl¹⁰ which I am usually made out to be. To day for instance I sent off 7 letters to M-r I. Goldston informing him that though father would simply leap for joy if he could

1 'To subdue the proud in war', from Vergil, *Aeneid* 6. 853. The poem is not included in *The Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton*, 3rd ed. (London, 1933), the first edition of which (London, 1927) IB reviewed anonymously in the February 1928 issue of the *Pauline* – vol. 46 (1928), 13–15 – nor listed in John Sullivan, *G. K. Chesterton: A Bibliography* (London, 1958).

2 Winter 1928 number, p. 39.

3 Ida Samunov (1887–1985).

4 Berta Volshonok (1893–1941), Marie's unmarried sister.

5 Rodsia-Freude ('Rosa') Volshonok (c.1866–c.1930).

6 Yitzhak Samunov (1886–1950). His surname sometimes became Germanised as 'Zamenhof', as in the case of the Russian-speaking Polish Jew who invented Esperanto, Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof (1859–1917), to whom it intrigued IB to think himself connected.

7 Mendel *Berlin (1884–1953), IB's father.

8 p. 12.

9 Yiddish transliteration of Hebrew version of 'Isaac' (usually 'Yitzhak' among Hebrew-speakers); also 'Yitzchok'.

10 Yiddish for 'unfortunate but amiable bungler'.

3 JUNE 1928

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contribute some £1000 to the N[ew] West End Synagogue,¹ yet, because he is away, the joy is still to come; to Women Zionists² I write that it is hopeless for them to start anything so long as you, their head, brain, heart, muscles, intelligence, energy, (oh mother!) are away. To Councillor Arthur Howitt³ I write of my sympathy in that he is going to be deprived of both your companies when he opens a Talmud Torah;⁴ in fact, perhaps he can postpone it? it won't be the same without you. As for the Bnei Brith⁵ they have decided to liquidate the whole business if you are not going to help them. What are ten thousand Snowmans⁶ to one you? And so on. Your social duties seem to extend from Lady Aberdeen⁷ to Harrods who indignantly demand payment for certain scent & eau de cologne which father seems to have purchased. Moreover P. S. Allen,⁸ the President of Corpus,⁹ has written to ask for my Higher Certificate; I had to answer that I had no access to it. Perhaps father can write Yitzchok where it is lying, because one does not want to keep University waiting. The valet de chambre is frankly surprised at the quantity of fathers suits, shoes, etc. He says nothing but looks on me (am I not also partly owner of them?) with vast respect.

The Hall-Porter regards himself as 'in loco parentis' i.e. my adopted father, and rings up to Yitzchok whenever there are letters. My relations with him, if not actually intimate, are of special 'деликатность'.¹⁰ I lead a very comfortable double existence. Mostly I sleep here, with Yitzchok, but sometimes I pass the night at the hotel. Last night I went to [the] theatre with Ettinghausen,¹¹ and so as not to disturb anyone, I slept at the Hotel. All meals, of course, in school-time and during the weekend I take at Sinclair

1 A fashionable Ashkenazi synagogue in St Petersburg Place, London W2, on whose behalf, it seems, Mr Goldston was running an appeal.

2 Marie, always an active Zionist, was for many years the Chairwoman of the Brondesbury and District Women's Zionist Society, a branch of the Federation of Women Zionists of Great Britain and Ireland.

3 A councillor in the SW London district of Richmond, of which he had been Mayor in 1924-5.

4 Religious secondary school for Jewish children, attended on Sundays.

5 B'nei B'rith ('Sons of the Covenant') is the most prominent world-wide philanthropic Jewish association.

6 A prominent Hampstead Jewish family; cf. 529/4.

7 Lady (Ishbel Maria) Aberdeen (1857-1939), née Marjoribanks, wife of John Campbell Gordon, 7th Earl of Aberdeen and 1st Marquess of Aberdeen and Temair, youngest daughter of 1st Baron Tweedmouth.

8 Percy Stafford Allen (1869-1933), President of CCC 1924-33.

9 Whether IB would be bound in October 1928.

10 'Деликатност' ('tact').

11 Walter George Ettinghausen (1910-2001), born in Munich, one of three children of a successful book-dealer; IB's contemporary at St Paul's 1923-8 and Oxford (Queen's modern languages 1928-32); after the war he changed his surname to Eytan, and was later (1948-59) first Director-General of Israel's Foreign Ministry.

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3 JUNE 1928

Road. M-rs Swan¹ who is terribly excited about L'affaire Halevi² looks after me devotedly. At last (now I may write definitely) (do not wire congratulations till a day after – *please*.) it has come off officially. So to-day the Braut & Brautigam³ went off to Jascha Heifetz⁴ as a kind of quasi-honeymoon. Both are very pleased, and Yitzchock's worst fears are allayed because Halevi has come in a different suit and a new shape of collar. I have already announced my definite intention to avail myself often of their hospitality, and they seem less downcast than one might suppose. A pleasant, if slightly elderly pair. Will they have children? but there, I am getting indelicate. Rivkah is slowly learning English but persists in commanding me not [to] speak Turkish, which is a language which she seems to detest above others. Russian is Turkish, English is Turkish, French is Turkish, Hebrew is almost Turkish, but Yiddish is *not* Turkish. Why? A deep problem. When you come back bring Bertha with you. (My digestion is perfect, Eno's Fruit Salts is a heavenly drink, and I am looking better.)

Yours with love etc. etc. etc.

Shaya

P.S. To see Halevi & Rivkah blush before each other is a romantic and remarkable sight which those who have not seen it cannot imagine. IMB.

TO IDA SAMUNOV⁵

[June 1928]

[57 Sinclair Road, London W14?]

Dear Idussia.

I am now engaged in the exciting pursuit of literary fame i.e. I have become the editor of a new School paper which is quite difficult to publish.⁶ It is written definitely for the lower classes and plays up to the gallery; which is very amusing and pleasant. One cannot soar in high intellectual sublimities all the time: and even a little commonness is a relief. I am sending you a copy. As usual I write about myself, because to tell the

¹ Perhaps the housekeeper.

² A reference to the engagement between Yitzhak's sister Rivka and Eliezer Halevy, the future parents of Ephraim Halevy, Head of Mossad (the Israeli secret service) 1998–2002.

³ 'Braut' and 'Brautigam' are German for 'bride' and 'bridegroom'.

⁴ Jascha Heifetz (1901–87), American violinist originally from Russia, gave a recital in the Albert Hall, London, on the afternoon of Sunday 3 June 1928, with his main accompanist at that time, Isidor Achron; the programme included Grieg's Sonata in C Minor and Lalo's *Symphonie Espagnole*.

⁵ A PS added to a letter, of which only the last (second) page survives, from Yitzhak to Ida.

⁶ The *Radiator*: see pp. 5–6 above.