



HERBERT NICHOLAS

Herbert George Nicholas 1911–1998

THE MOST IMPORTANT KEY to the understanding of Herbert Nicholas lies in his family. He was born and brought up in the South Wales mining village of Treharris, between the valleys of the Taff and the Rhymney, where his father was Baptist minister. William David Nicholas had been born in another mining village nearby, although his family roots lay in Newbridge-on-Wye, in mid-Wales. He had come to the ministry when fairly young, the product of the Baptist Training College in Cardiff, and although he took no degree, William Nicholas developed, in his son's words, 'an avidity for scholarship and literature which persisted throughout his life'. He accepted the call to Treharris at an early stage in his career and remained there for the rest of his life, for over fifty years, having married Mary Warren, the daughter of the local draper. He was much in demand as a preacher, a man of scholarly bent and literary abilities, a regular contributor to the *Baptist Record*, and a Gladstonian liberal. His son inherited his firm liberal principles and his Christian faith. Herbert was the youngest of seven children, four boys and three girls. He was much younger than his siblings and received from them 'a wealth of attention'. He was surrounded, too, by a great circle of aunts, uncles, and cousins, his mother's relatives. The communities of the family and the mining village were crucial to him, and he remained loyal to them, and indeed to other communities, throughout his life.

An attack of rheumatic fever kept him from school until he was eleven and his early education came from his sister Evelyn, herself a teacher and the eldest of the family. It was Evelyn who decided that Herbert should

Proceedings of the British Academy, 105, 503–510. © The British Academy 2000.

go away to school and for three years he travelled by bus every day to a small school in Cardiff run by a remarkable deaf lady, Miss Maud Humphries, of whom he had fond memories. Thanks to her brilliant teaching he won a scholarship to Mill Hill. He was not happy there and wrote later that it seemed like a prison. However, matters improved when he reached the sixth form, thanks to the teaching of his housemaster, Alan Whitehorn, which won him a place at New College, Oxford, to read Greats. For the next four years his elder sisters supported him financially, Evelyn providing pocket money and settling college bills, Doris paying for his books. The sums were carefully noted and duly repaid later.

At New College, he later said, he ‘experienced a degree of joyous release and excitement, intellectual and otherwise’, and the college was the centre of his life, with only a few intervals, until his death.¹ But his first five terms were a hard grind. Well taught though he had been at Mill Hill, Herbert had started Greek too late to have the facility for classical languages enjoyed by many of his contemporaries. Nor did his tutors on that side of the course provide the stimulus he needed. H. L. Henderson was wooden, and even E. C. Yorke, a brilliant tutor to many men, failed ‘to awaken the spark . . . that Henderson so conspicuously dampened’. He found some relief in a course on Greek sculpture, where his tutorial partner was Tony Andrewes, later Wykeham Professor of Ancient History, who became a close friend until his death in 1990. But even Greek sculpture could not provide compensation for deficiency in the languages, and Herbert ended with a third class in honour moderations.

The Greats course opened up a new world, in which he was attracted equally by philosophy and by history. He went first for tutorials in philosophy to H. W. B. Joseph, a vigorous and combative destroyer of his pupils’ essays and illusions. Being taught by Joseph, Herbert later recalled, was like having one’s head held under a streaming bath tap while treading water without hope of finding ground beneath one’s feet. Richard Crossman provided some intellectual comfort: he was ‘stimulating but more debateable in terms of fundamental quality’. The two pillars of the Greats course for Herbert were C. W. M. Cox, for ancient history, and the young Isaiah Berlin, then at All Souls, for philosophy. Cox was ‘superlative’, fanatically devoted to his teaching, no tutorial ever ending

¹ This paragraph and the next four are based substantially upon tape-recorded conversations between Herbert Nicholas and Jacqueline Beaumont Hughes. I am indebted to her for allowing me to use them. They have been deposited in the New College Archives.

on time, the pupil often returning to the contest after dinner. Berlin, equally superb, generated characteristic stimulus and took great pains. They were the most powerful intellectual influences upon Herbert and remained his lifelong friends, Cox the closer of the two.

After gaining his expected First, he had no very clear ideas for his future. Greats, although immensely valuable, did not provide him with a straightforward route to his subsequent career. Knowing that he was not cut out for philosophy or ancient history, he was awarded a senior scholarship by the college so that he could take tutorials in modern history for a year without sitting finals. He was tutored by L. G. Wickham Legg and David Ogg. Legg was not a rewarding tutor, but Ogg, while engaging in no cut-and-thrust with his pupils, gave brilliantly irreverent expositions of his own when the weekly essay had been read.

In 1935 Nicholas went to Yale on a Commonwealth Scholarship to study history with Wallace Notestein. As an area of study this turned out to be something of a stop-gap for him. He fell in with Notestein's suggestion that he work on seventeenth-century historical writing, partly, he later said, because it was more likely than colonial history to get him a job in England, and partly because it would not involve too much 'grubbing about in archives'. However, his interest in this project gradually faded as he became fascinated by contemporary American politics. Commonwealth students were expected to travel around the States and Nicholas made several trips with a fellow-student, John Murray, finding, as he later remarked, 'America more exciting than Yale'. His growing fascination with the country is fully documented in his diary and in weekly—sometimes even more frequent—letters to his family, carefully preserved by Evelyn. He came into direct contact with the world of the New Deal and developed a huge admiration for the policies of Franklin Roosevelt. By the time he returned to England in 1937 he was contrasting the vitality of American life and politics with the sluggishness of England.

The academic job market in Britain was not encouraging. To begin with, he managed to survive on the remains of his scholarship and on earnings from occasional journalism, writing sharply observed, elegant, and witty pieces for the periodical press. In the academic year 1937–8 there were only three posts open to someone with his qualifications. He was offered two of them and accepted a lectureship in nineteenth-century history and politics at Exeter College, Oxford. The seventeenth century was beginning to slip away. He found Exeter 'as intimate and as friendly a society as I've ever belonged to'; he had an 'enormously agreeable time there'. His closest friend was John Mavrogodato, Professor of

Byzantine Studies, who had grown up in the literary world of London before 1914 and introduced Nicholas to a wider artistic milieu. The only awkward member of the SCR was C. T. Atkinson, an expert on military history, who had opposed his election and refused to acknowledge his existence: 'it was like being snubbed by a gargyle'.

This life ended with the outbreak of war. Classified unfit for military service—the result of rheumatic fever when young—Nicholas joined the American Division of the Ministry of Information in 1941. 'There I had', he wrote later, 'what I can only describe as an indecently enjoyable war. I vastly enjoyed the work which was a natural extension of my academic interests, I had the company of singularly agreeable colleagues . . .'. One of these was R. J. Cruikshank, later editor of the *News Chronicle*, 'a man of such remarkable gifts that his friendship was not only something which I shall always deeply cherish [but] to work with him was a joy as well as a liberal education.'² In 1943 Nicholas went on a tour through the United States to assess the attitudes of Americans to the war. His report, unpublished, is a masterly analysis of America's reactions. 'There is a fundamental difference', he wrote, 'between a war that comes to you and a war that you go to or send others to. . . . It is the difference between an aggregate of varying individual experiences and a communal experience, simultaneous, nationally shared.' His message was trenchant and positive: we must present the story of Britain at war in the most frank and direct way possible, not worrying if we embarrass Americans who are conscious of their Republic's shortcomings. 'If British and American performances in the war are compared, we have every reason for self-congratulation and confidence.' We should not be reticent.³

Nicholas returned to Exeter College in 1946, having been elected to a fellowship two years before. His conversion from the seventeenth century to the twentieth was by now complete. His attention turned in two directions: to contemporary British elections, marked by his becoming also a faculty fellow of Nuffield College; and to American and Anglo-American politics. In 1951 he published the second in the series of Nuffield electoral studies, on the British general election of the previous year; his research student in that enterprise, David Butler, was to carry on the series. In the conclusion to the book, Nicholas let himself go with a trenchant rebuke

² From a brief typescript memoir in Nicholas's private papers.

³ From a typescript report headed 'Report of a Journey through the United States', dated 10 June 1943, in the private papers.

to the political parties, which he accused of neglecting the problems of the nation: while ‘the cosy ritual of electioneering is not separable from the gymnastic exercises which keep the muscles of democracy from getting flabby and the rump of government from waxing overfat’, this should not be done at the expense of genuine debate, and in 1950 such debate was seldom attempted. *Plus ça change*. . . .⁴

Apart from a collection of passages about elections from nineteenth-century novels, *To the Hustings* (1956), *The British General Election of 1950* (1951) was his only book on an explicitly British topic. Although he was at that time contemplating a work on the history of the Press in England, it never got beyond the planning stage. His preferred arena became the political worlds of the USA and the United Nations, to which he devoted a range of books and articles. The first of these, indeed the first book that he published, was *The American Union. A short history of the USA* (1948). Written during the war years and in the intervals between other duties, it made no pretence at being based on original materials but was intended as an introduction to its subject. Elegant, concise and lucid it served its purpose admirably, covering the history of the United States from Raleigh’s early attempts at colonisation to the end of the second world war, largely, though not entirely, from the perspective of politics and the constitution.

In 1951, Nicholas returned to New College as a tutorial fellow in politics, taking over from James Joll. From 1948 until 1957 he also held a faculty fellowship at Nuffield College alongside his tutorial fellowships at Exeter and New College; he became Nuffield Reader in the Comparative Study of Institutions in 1956, holding that post until he was elected Rhodes Professor of American History and Institutions at Oxford in 1969, keeping his fellowship at New College under what became known as the ‘Nicholas Rule’.⁵ In the same year he was elected to the British Academy, becoming vice-president in 1975–6. Although his world centred very much around New College and Oxford, he travelled extensively in the United States, going there for virtually every presidential election until 1988, relishing the opportunities this gave him for direct observation of the political process.

⁴ H. G. Nicholas, *The British General Election of 1950* (1951), p. 305.

⁵ The Rhodes Chair was statutorily attached to St Catherine’s College, but a rule was devised to meet Nicholas’s attachment to his undergraduate college, allowing the first holder of a new chair to remain at his/her college at the time of election.

In 1959 Nicholas widened his range with *The United Nations as a Political Institution*, which went into five editions, carefully updated. As he remarked in his note to the second edition, 'You never step twice into the same UN. . . .' In an essentially general and introductory work, based on printed sources and on conversations with officials of the UN in New York, he covered the origins and the evolution (up to 1968 in the fourth edition) of the UN, followed by chapters on the Security Council, the General Assembly and the Secretariat. Nicholas wrote as a supporter of the ideals of the UN, while withholding a judgement on its success: that depended on the behaviour of its members to one another and on 'how sedulously they cherish the association they have formed'. He followed this book with another on an international theme: *The United States and Britain* (1975). Written for the series, *The United States and the World: Foreign Perspectives*, this is conceived in an essentially chronological framework from 1776 to 1974.

Nicholas's last two books were probably his most memorable, though they differ greatly from one another. One, *The Nature of American Politics* (1980), is an essay of 134 pages, summing up the thoughts of a man who had devoted most of his life to studying that subject; the other, *Washington Despatches, 1941–45* (1981), is a substantial edition (700 pages) of the weekly political summaries sent by the British Ambassador in Washington to London. *The Nature of American Politics* begins by analysing the elements, resistances, and tensions that make America difficult to govern: its size and geographical diversity, the heterogeneity of its peoples, the subordination of politics to other purposes, and the 'anti-governmental cast' of American society. Nicholas discusses federalism, judicial review, the party system, elections, congress and the President. He concludes with a masterly chapter on the style of American politics, formed by an amalgam of influences from southern conservatism, New England moralism and the Irish, but now undergoing change. In *Washington Despatches* he edited a large selection of the weekly political reports nominally written by the British Ambassador but actually drafted on his behalf by Isaiah Berlin, head of the Survey Section of the Washington Embassy. It is unlikely that he would have undertaken so heavy an archival task had it not been for the role in the reports of his old friend and tutor. They provide an invaluable commentary on the Washington political scene from the bombing of Pearl Harbour to the end of the Japanese War. The editing is informative without being obtrusive or excessive.

Nicholas's writings are elegant, concise and lucid. His books, with the exception of the last, are not based upon archival research, which he

viewed with some distaste, but are expositions for the student and the general reader rather than works of original research; they are concerned essentially with politics and the constitution, not very much with social, economic, and cultural developments. As Rhodes Professor of American History and Institutions his role was more that of a bridge-builder than a miner at the coal-face. He was concerned in books and articles to explain and interpret Britain and America to one another, a task that he performed exceptionally well. He enjoyed America and Americans, and they enjoyed him, perhaps because he was so much an old-world Briton. When he took up his chair, American history had little prestige in Oxford and only a marginal place in the undergraduate syllabus. He raised its status and by his personal qualities of wit and friendliness eased the way of visiting American scholars and professors.

In Oxford, he was very much a college man. Next to his family, his loyalties lay with New College, with which he was connected for sixty-eight years. He was a devoted tutor, who kept notes on every student and preserved his contacts with them, especially with Americans, for life. Many became his close friends. In the governing body his was a powerful voice. One of his important initiatives lay in the move for a graduate building in college. Until that date graduate students were rather marginal figures in the undergraduate colleges; New College, with Nicholas's strong support, led the way forward with a new residential building in 1963. After his retirement he was the first director of the college's development fund, to which he gave his energy and his considerable charm to great effect. The college has also benefited from a generous benefaction after his death, enabling it to fund a tutorial fellowship in classical philosophy.

Greater even than his feeling for his college was his devotion to his family. From the time when he first went away to school he wrote long, affectionate letters home. His letters from America give a detailed and illuminating account of what he saw and his reactions to it. When Evelyn retired, she, Doris and Herbert set up house together in Oxford; when first Doris and then Evelyn fell ill, Herbert gave up most of his time to look after them. For many years he was seldom away from home. Then, after Evelyn died in 1987, he was seen again in college, very much the man he had always been, and we realised how deeply we had missed him. Sadly, we were to miss him again, for in 1991 he suffered a severe stroke, which deprived him of his short-term memory. His largely successful fight to recover it was a typical feat of courage combined with intellectual skill.

His was a well-known figure in Oxford. He was neat, almost dapper,

in his well-cut suits and highly polished shoes; serious and formidable in countenance; possessed of a powerful voice that emerged from a slender frame. But his somewhat severe and ascetic appearance was belied by the alert inclination of his head, the ironic twitch of his mouth. His wit was abundant and sharp without being malicious. I allow myself one example. Speaking of an older history professor who was always throwing himself into new schemes, Herbert remarked: 'well, you know X, a heavier-than-air machine. Can't keep up at all if not in rapid motion.'

He looked, and in many ways was, the typical old-fashioned bachelor don. Yet that stereotype does not do him justice. He was a man of real warmth and affection, for his family and his friends; when my wife died, he wrote the most perceptive and moving of letters to comfort me. He was fond of children and surprisingly good with them. Above all, he was life-enhancing. It was fun, if at times exhausting, to be with him. He had great energy and unlimited curiosity; he enjoyed the cut-and-thrust of conversation; he was sharp and funny.

PENRY WILLIAMS

New College, Oxford

Note. I am extremely grateful for the help of Dr Jacqueline Beaumont Hughes, who has allowed me to draw on Herbert Nicholas's papers in her keeping, and on two obituaries she wrote of Nicholas: *The Independent*, 18 July 1998, and *New College Record*, 1998, pp. 71–6. These have been of great value to me.