

The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism

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Poker was Maurice Cowling's game. Late-night gambling amidst the smoke and whisky fumes probably appealed to him as one of the many means by which he rebelled against the respectability of the South London petit bourgeoisie in which he had been raised; Peter Ghosh once referred to the 'Chandleresque' style that he affected. Poker was also a good game for Cowling because he was famously hard to read. If he had been a left-wing sociologist, this would have been no surprise, but Cowling was a right-wing historian and spent much of his life amongst journalists who valued literary abilities above almost any other quality. Readers were left with the disconcerting impression that there was something willful about his opacity; that it was a card-player's bluff. Matters were made more awkward because, alongside his long impenetrable books, sometimes in the introductions and sometimes in the spats that followed publication, Cowling issued quotable, if inscrutable, statements that seemed to hint at the possibility of understanding his general historical approach. It was hard to know whether these remarks were to be taken seriously or whether they were feints designed to throw his opponents off balance.

Earnest undergraduates, who thought that the great man might clear things up if they could only see him in the flesh, found themselves sitting among a tiny audience in a room that had been chosen for its distance from the history faculty (I seem to recall that some lectures were, in what may have been a private joke, delivered in Mill Lane) where they were treated to a lecture that was read out in a monotone. The experience was rather like attending a concert by the one of the more forbidding post-punk bands, and I suspect that

Cowling's appeal for a certain kind of young man (like that of, say, *The Fall*) lay partly in the expectation that no one else would like him.

Reviewers had a hard time with Cowling. He often insisted that the most ferocious critics were the only ones who had really understood him. Reviewing a book about Cowling by a group of his admirers is even harder. Some of them claim that Cowling himself would disapprove of the interpretation that they put on his work. Michael Grenfell points out an obvious contradiction in Cowling's writing about liberalism but then insists that Cowling himself must have recognized this apparent flaw in his argument ('one can safely dismiss any idea that Cowling was missing the point' (1)) and must, therefore, have been making some deliberate point. There is much talk about how Cowling's enemies 'sneered' at his work, but there is also a kind of pre-emptive sneering: the authors here imply that a certain kind of reader is unlikely to grasp their arguments and that such people just need to read Cowling's work more carefully.(2)

Cowling's career got off to jerky start. Brilliance in examinations took him through Cambridge and into a succession of prestigious posts (as a diplomat or leader-writer on the *Manchester Guardian*) for which he was absurdly unsuited. Cambridge was his real love and he worked hard to establish himself in an academic post there. His Cambridge was, however, a strange place. He first came up in 1943 when most of the undergraduates, and large proportion of the more dynamic dons, were away driving tanks or breaking codes. His undergraduate study was interrupted by military service in India and Egypt. This meant absorption into the rituals and hierarchies of the officer's mess; unlike that of his comrades who were called up a year or so earlier and sent to Italy or Normandy, his view of the army was not disrupted by the messy business of fighting. However, unlike Michael Wharton or Enoch Powell, Cowling does not seem to have been excited by the power of tradition and inequality in India itself. Cowling went back to India to do research but his contacts appear to have been mostly with secularized, educated Indians (the kind that Powell most disliked); his most significant finds concerned the light that reports to the Viceroy might throw on *English* politics.

Cowling's major publications can be divided in three. First came *Mill and Liberalism* and *The Nature and Limits of Political Science* (both published in 1963). These are polemical works. The first argued that Mill was a 'moral totalitarian' rather than a believer in freedom and the second that political science could not hope to understand the complex motives behind human behaviour. Next came a trilogy of works on British politics between 1867 and 1940, which were themselves published between 1967 and 1975. These, at least until recently, have been regarded as Cowling's most important achievement. They involved detailed archival research into 'high politics' over short periods. They ran against fashions for 'history from below' and study of the *longue durée* (fashions that were, in fairness, less well established in the late 1960s than they appear, in retrospect, to have been). Many of his critics believed that these books also reflected a lack of interest in ideas, though this was one of the few criticisms that provoked Cowling to indignation. Finally Cowling spent the last fifteen years of his life producing three volumes on *Religion and Public Doctrine*. This was regarded by Cowling himself as his most important work and Cowlingites have come, in large measure, to share this view. During the 1980s, however, *Religion and Public Doctrine* confused everyone, which was probably one of its intentions. Its emphasis on the history of ideas studied over a long period seemed to break with the techniques of Cowling's political history.

Cowling's admirers often present him as a heroic outsider who was thwarted by an academic establishment. This is not true. From 1963, he had a secure job at a powerful university. The antler-locking confrontation of undergraduate supervision provided him with the ideal means to influence young men; apart from Lady Gwendolen Cecil and Sheila Lawlor, there were no women in Cowling's intellectual firmament. Cowling's career, unlike those of John Vincent or Roger Scruton, was not damaged by his political views. He benefited from close relations with the history editors at Cambridge University Press, who published all his books. They once pulped an entire run of one volume in order to suppress a potentially libelous word in the introduction: an episode that puts one in mind of Waugh's crack about surgeons having removed 'the only non-malignant part of Randolph Churchill'. Though Cowling opposed the expansion of British universities, it provided jobs for his disciples and protégés. Though he sometimes denounced the 'professionalization' of history, his extensive use of private archives during the middle part of his career was seen as highly 'professional'. The academic climate of the 1960s and 1970s suited Cowling. He was not a Marxist, though,

characteristically, he sometimes expressed himself in terms that sounded Marxist, but was emphatically not an anti-Marxist and, indeed, welcomed the rise of English academic Marxism as a means of escaping from the intellectual 'flatness' of the 1950s. Most of his colleagues disagreed with him, which is what he wanted, but they were still sufficiently close to his pre-occupations to regard him as worth attacking. Cowling thrived in a university that valued the capacity to write books and coach undergraduates. Lack of interest in doctoral supervision, conferences or research grants was no great handicap in his day. 'Impact' was one of his favourite words but he did not mean it in any sense that would be comprehensible to the Research Assessment Framework.

Cowling was much given to apparently confident statements and also sometimes presented successive books as being part of a single consistent oeuvre. However, Jon Parry, the Peterhouse historian who flew closest to the Cowlingite flame without actually burning his wings, writes: 'it is possible, in retrospect, that his opinions on many issues were less fully developed than his forthright criticism of other writers suggested'.⁽³⁾ Philip Williamson shows that the three books on 'high politics' reflected an evolution in Cowling's thought. His definition of the political elite expanded and, most significantly, he gave increasing attention to the possibility that politicians might become stuck in rhetorical webs that they had initially spun for instrumental purposes.

Cowling wrote that 'It is from religion that modern English history should begin'⁽⁴⁾, and he finished his career with books that were explicitly about religion. His view of religion and history did not simply mean that historians should take religion seriously or that they should recognize the continued echoes of religious belief in apparently secular thinkers. He seemed to think that history could be written from a distinctively Christian point of view. What this point of view was, however, is hard to pin down. He wrote of Edward Norman: 'he is in danger of abandoning – perhaps wishes deliberately to abandon – the only claims that make it possible to believe that the Church of England is a Church'.⁽⁵⁾ Did Cowling himself think that the Church of England's claims to authority were important? If so, his own apparent attraction to Catholicism seems odd. Did Cowling simply adopt Christianity because it provided the most effective vantage point from which to pour contempt on liberalism? He himself seems to have recognized that the Christianity of his latter years had evolved from hostility to certain kinds of secularism (perhaps an example of how a political polemicist could get caught in the web of his own rhetoric) but insisted that it was not reducible to that hostility: 'there has been a determination to avoid the enthusiasms of the past, including the confusing of Christianity with the enmities through which it had been approached in the first place'.⁽⁶⁾

One sometimes feels that the most important character in Cowling's Bible was the serpent, a very Cowlingesque figure in his challenge to 'innocence' and determination to make people 'rethink their assumptions', and the part of Christianity that had most impact on his historical writing was the notion of man's imperfectability. This notion partly underlay his approach to political history, which stressed personal and factional struggles. Cowling's approach in this respect was emphatically not Namierite. Cowling had little interest in money (unlike Namier, he never had a real job) and did not try to explain the actions of his historical subjects in terms of material interest.

Unlike Namier, Cowling's interests were exclusively English. He spoke no foreign language and was only happy in parts of the world (southern Ireland in the early 1960s, Wales in the 1990s or certain departments in American universities) that seemed more English than England. His interest in the culture of continental Europe began and ended with the habit of putting a circumflex on 'role'. The European anti-fascist crusade of 1936 to 1945, a matter of obsessive interest to both an older generation who had come of age in the 1930s and a younger generation who came of age in the 1960s, meant nothing to him. To Cowling, Hitler only mattered for the effect that he had had on British politics. As for Communism, it only mattered if the Soviet Union impinged on British interests. Cowling's dislike of Noel Annan and Isaiah Berlin sprang partly from his sense that there was something distastefully European about their fear of totalitarianism. Cowling was not even interested in European intellectuals who might have thought about some of the problems that he himself wrestled with. He mentioned Charles Maurras only as an influence on Eliot and, unlike many of his associates, he showed no interest in that greatest of all Maurassians: Charles de Gaulle.

There was a contradiction at the heart of Cowling's approach to politics. Though his own political interventions were inept (he once tried to derail the Robbins report by getting Edward Boyle invited to Peterhouse Master's Lodge) he celebrated 'tough-mindedness' and 'realism'. However, his admiration for political skill was mixed with his romantic attachment to the impossible cause. He helped make the Third Marquess of Salisbury into a cult figure for the right, but his admiration was mainly for the exuberant and extreme young journalist rather than the wily old prime minister. In terms of contemporary politicians, his two heroes were Enoch Powell, the Conservative of impossible principle, and Harold Wilson, the socialist who seemed utterly devoid of principle. He once urged Powell not to raise immigration as an issue because he believed that Wilson would prove more adept at fighting in the gutter; it did not seem to have occurred to Cowling that Powell was more concerned with damaging the interests of Edward Heath than advancing those of the Conservative Party.

Cowling's admirers sometimes talk about his estrangement from the 'post-war consensus' of 1945 (or 1940) to the mid 1970s. This seems to me to miss the point. Cowling's view of politics actually worked best for periods when there were no real disagreements of principle between major politicians and when politics really could be explained in terms of personal rivalries amongst the elite. It is no accident that Cowling's most significant works of political history were produced during the great age of the political diarists (Castle, Crossman, Donoghue) who recorded machinations of individuals on a day-by-day basis.

For Cowling himself, the key date in post-war history was 1963.⁽⁷⁾ This was the year of Macmillan's resignation and also, significantly, the year in which Cowling began his career as a serious academic. Cowling's hero, Harold Wilson, was, of course, the great winner from 1963 and, in some ways, this suited Cowling. The conflict between admiration for impossibilist principle and admiration for political skill need cause no problems if the Conservative cause was irredeemably lost. Cowling could now sit back and admire Wilson's manoeuvres without feeling that anything serious was at stake. The self-indulgent melancholy with which Cowling surveyed the British political scene between 1963 and 1975 reminds one of how left-wing historians, often installed at rich American universities, regarded Thatcherism during the 1980s.

It would be interesting to know more about Cowling's feelings during the period immediately before he returned to academic life. He apparently wrote a pamphlet, now lost, defending the Suez expedition. He was hostile to the retreat from empire and to 'Butskellism' (though he wrote, in a characteristically gnomic aside, that this had been invented by Samuel Hoare in 1934). However, the years 1956 to 1963 also saw the apogee of Conservative politics as 'the art of the possible'. They saw Macmillan and Douglas-Home confound their rivals with a skill that was every bit as impressive as Harold Wilson's. They also saw the Tory election victory of 1959; Cowling was an unsuccessful candidate. There was something oddly grudging in Cowling's view of all this. He does not seem to have allowed for the possibility that Conservatives had played a good game with the hand that they had been dealt. He said nothing about Iain Macleod: the politician who was clever enough to understand the ideas of the right (he invented the word 'Powellite'), but shrewd enough not to apply them.

Cowling published his last work of political history in the year that Margaret Thatcher became leader of the Conservative Party. He knew Thatcher and one of his pupils, Michael Portillo, was, briefly, seen as Thatcher's designated successor. Cowling, however, was condescending about Thatcherism – he issued the astonishingly unCowlingite verdict that there was 'room for improvement'. He seems to have believed in 1978 that Callaghan, whom he admired, had won the struggle for the moral low ground that would lay the way for electoral victory. His obsession with liberalism made him overestimate the importance of 'Hayekians' in Thatcher's entourage; the struggle between the 'organic conservatives' of Peterhouse and the ex-left-wingers of the Centre for Policy Studies was, in truth, a squabble in the servants' quarters of the Conservative party, and I suspect that many Tory front-benchers had never heard of either Cowling or Alfred Sherman. Thatcher's brisk pragmatism was utterly removed from Cowling's political vision – indeed the single political figure that Thatcherites most despised was the one that Cowlingites most admired: Stanley Baldwin.

How far, one might ask, was Cowling's turn away from political history a response to Thatcherism? He had planned to write a volume on 'The impact of inflation'. Was this venture thwarted when it turned out that the Conservative Party was willing to face down inflation? Cowling's books on *Religion and Public Doctrine* are now sometimes celebrated as his most important work, but, more than anything, they surely represent a kind of sulky exile from the real politics of the 1980s. Some think that Cowling disliked the Thatcher government because he saw it as 'liberal', and Cowling himself seemed to endorse this suggestion. However, Cowling had always recognized that a diminution of the state (especially, one suspects, the welfare state) would be a good thing and that it would help to restore desirable inequalities. It is hard to see how such a man could have had any honest reason to object to, say, Lawson's 1988 budget, and Lawson, incidentally, could not be accused of liberalism.

Cowling was not, in fact, a particularly good practitioner of history; his most engaging quality was his own dissatisfaction with much of what he wrote. His achievement is to be found, not so much in the finished product of his history, as in the intentions with which he set out: the introductions to his books are always the best bits. As Michael Bentley writes, 'Cowling believed in belief'. He held out the possibility that history could be written by people who founded their approach on Christian faith and Conservative prejudice. There was, of course, a paradox here. It is not clear that Cowling ever possessed the faith that he regarded as being so important, nor that he necessarily admired people who did possess such faith. His most successful protégés were those – such as Noel Malcolm, Harold James or, most of all, the arch-liberal Niall Ferguson – who never became card-carrying Cowlingites. His own mind was restless and the most important effect of his teaching was to encourage more skepticism amongst those who came from different political or intellectual traditions rather than to encourage stauncher faith on the part of those who shared his professed beliefs.

Notes

1. Michael Grenfell, 'Cowling and liberalism', in *The Philosophy, Politics and Religion of British Democracy: Maurice Cowling and Conservatism*, ed. Robert Crowcroft, S. J. D. Green and Richard Whiting (London, 2010), pp. 65-82, p. 70.[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. '[T]hose still disinclined to do so [take Cowling's position seriously] will, on more careful consideration, discover that they need to mount a rather more sophisticated defence of their own position'. 'Introduction', in *ibid*, pp. 1-12, p. 3.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Parry, 'Maurice Cowling: a brief life', in *ibid*, pp. 13-24, p. 19.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Maurice Cowling, *Religion and Public Doctrine* (Vol. 1, Cambridge, 1980), p. xii.[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Ibid*, p. 451.[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. *Ibid*, p. xviii.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. Cowling, *The Impact of Hitler* (Cambridge, 1975), p. 2: 'It [the consensus established in the struggle against Hitler] lasted until Macmillan's retirement, establishing inflation, disestablishing the Empire and permitting a receptivity in which the central features of Labour thinking became entrenched as normal'.[Back to \(7\)](#)

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