Chapter 4

London: the LSE, the 'British Committee on International Theory', the 'English School' and the early days of the IISS

Coral Bell

London in the ten years from 1965 to 1975 seemed to me the central focus of intellectual enquiry about issues of war and peace. Washington was under rather a cloud because of its increasing, and disastrous, involvement in Vietnam. Hedley and I both taught at the London School of Economics (LSE), though not during the same period. We were both members of the British Committee on International Theory, the so-called 'English School', and also of what became the now worldwide International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS). In its earliest days it was mostly a London-based association, operating out of just a couple of rooms in the Adelphi. Hedley acquired a second base in the Foreign Office, when Harold Wilson came into office as Prime Minister, and I had one at Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs. Those years in London were enormously important to me, and I think to Hedley as well, so they seem to deserve the recording of a few memories.

The most vital thing about the LSE, aside from the students, for both Hedley and me, was the influence of Martin Wight, but I have included in this book Hedley's own memorial lecture to him, so I think I do not need to say much more here about his great charisma as both teacher and colleague. But it seems worthwhile to say a few words about the changes in both the LSE itself and the general context in which strategic issues and crisis-management were discussed in London in the six years or so between my arrival as a graduate student in 1951 and Hedley's as an assistant lecturer. In retrospect, those years seem to mark an important shift in the context of discussion of all the Cold War issues, some of which are still with us, and certainly were with Hedley to the end of his life.

When I arrived in 1951, London was a city barely getting over a war. Its ruins lay all about us. I stayed for a while in a student place in Bloomsbury and used to walk on Sundays down to St Pauls, still rising triumphantly above a

small wilderness of a pretty pink-blossomed wildflower called *London Pride*. It all seemed tremendously symbolic.

So did some events in the academic and political fields. One was that the Attlee Government, which had inherited power from Churchill just before the end of the war, was by then reaching the end of its own days. So was the brave but forlorn Festival of Britain. And so was the reign of Harold Laski, who had been regarded by many as the conscience of the British Labour Party, as well as the dominant intellectual force at the LSE and in the British Left in general, for many years. By this time he had come to be quite a thorn in the side of the Prime Minister, who, once (in a letter adroitly 'leaked') had famously advised him, 'a period of silence from you would be appreciated'.

At the LSE he was succeeded by Michael Oakeshott, as famous and influential a figure on the traditionalist Right as Laski had been on the Left. *The New Statesman* regarded it as a great betrayal, and raged about the appointment for weeks. I was luckily in time to catch the last of Laski's lectures and the Oakeshott inaugural. Some of that inaugural lecture has helped define international politics for me ever since.

All that may sound like mere academic small change now, more than half a century afterwards. But, in retrospect, it still really does mark a change in the intellectual climate of Europe, and maybe the West generally. Of course the Cold War had been with us since March 1946, and already had its classics in the literature of international relations. (My first seminar paper for Martin Wight was on Kennan's theory of containment.) But a further turn in disillusionment, from some at least of the more optimistic assumptions of the wartime Left, meant more permanent acceptance that the optimism of the past had to be discarded, in fields like the control of the arms race, a point quite important in Hedley's early success, and in the development of the IISS, which was so vital an influence to him.

Of course, it did not translate at the time to the intellectual atmosphere of the Research Common Room, which was where I found my company for the next few years. I still remember the President of that cosmopolitan body, a charming Iraqi, welcoming newcomers (of whom I was one) as recruits to an institution 'which had given so many brave young men to the revolutionary forces of the world'. True enough. Not many of my friends have been executed by firing squad, or been the target of political assassination. But the little group of six or seven I used to hang out with in those years included one of each: an Iranian who grew up to be Mayor of Teheran, and was executed by the Ayatollah's regime, and an Israeli who got to be Ambassador in London, and luckily survived his intended murder for political reasons.

Philosophically, the LSE at the beginning of my time as a student there was dominated by Professor Karl Popper, whose book *The Open Society and Its Enemies*

is still as powerfully relevant to the struggle against authoritarianism in these days of fundamentalist religious doctrine, as in those days of fundamentalist political doctrines. But in time I came to be more influenced by the delicate ironic scepticism and pragmatism of Oakeshott:

In political activity, then, men sail a bottomless and boundless sea; there is neither harbour for shelter nor floor for anchorage, neither starting-place nor appointed destination. The enterprise is to keep afloat on an even keel; the sea is both friend and enemy, and seamanship consists in using the resources of a traditional manner of behaviour to make a friend of every inimical occasion.¹

Those words, from his inaugural lecture, have always seemed to me to define particularly the dilemmas of international politics. But I am not sure whether Hedley was equally influenced.

As far as the British Committee on International Theory is concerned, the primary thing to bear in mind is that its name was rather a misnomer. It was really not a committee, but an old-fashioned small discussion group, in an Oxford and Cambridge tradition. It did not aim to build or present a body of international theory. Indeed, Martin Wight, one of the two 'stars' of the groups (Hedley was the other) once published a provocative little essay called 'Why is there no international theory', evoking blasts of indignation from many of his academic colleagues, especially as he rather implied that there was not likely to be one either.

I was a member of the group from the time I was recruited in 1965 as Reader in International Affairs at the LSE until 1977, when I returned to The Australian National University. For those 12 years, the group was a major intellectual influence on my life, especially because of the times it provided for talking to Hedley and Martin. Its ending has been a long grief, even though we only met two or three weekends a year. On average, I think there were usually only about eight people present on most of those occasions. We met in a Cambridge or Oxford College during student vacations.

The group had been founded in 1958, convened initially by Herbert Butterfield, a historian perhaps less well-known now than he was then—the originator of what was then called 'the Whig interpretation of history'. Originally it was financed, along with a similar group in the United States, by the Rockefeller Foundation, which covered the then very modest costs of our food and lodging. Once, I remember, we met at a grand Italian palace, at Bellagio on Lake Como, which is maintained by the Foundation to provide an occasional taste of luxury to needy scholars.

One of the ideas behind the group was that the meetings would provide a chance for the academic analysts of policy to meet those who actually made it—foreign office people and such. I think that worked reasonably well, but the

only members of whom I retain vivid memories were Hedley, Martin, Michael Howard and Adam Watson. Adam had been the British Ambassador in Cuba, and was to be Hedley's most important editorial collaborator later.

Though the Cold War was in full vigour for the entire lifetime of the group, we were much less concerned with that than with the intellectual history of political thought, insofar as it was directed towards issues of war and peace. So we were more preoccupied with Thucydides, or Sun Tzu, or Hobbes, or Machiavelli, or Kant or Burke, or Tom Paine or Lenin than with the latest developments between Moscow and Washington. Or, rather, what we were trying for was an understanding of how the books of those who had written most perceptively about similar dilemmas in their respective times could help us comprehend and illuminate ours. I remember the last thing Martin said to me, just before his sudden and lamentably early death, was that he was returning to Grotius, and finding him more relevant to contemporary events (this was 1972) than he had expected.

In Martin's last year or two, we had been brooding a good deal over the transformation of the original European society of states into a global and universal society of states, but it was not until Hedley had taken over as a sort of discussion leader that we decided on the study that became eventually *The Expansion of International Society*, as a venture that many of us, as well as relevant outside scholars, would write essays for. Hedley and Adam became joint editors, and it occupied a good deal of their time over the next decade or so. Our timetables were leisurely in those distant days.

It was always intended that the book would be, not just a collection of individual essays, but a coherent and comprehensive account of that whole 500-year patch of history, from the end of the fifteenth century to the end of the twentieth century. So it was seen as a systematic analysis of that evolution, under four headings: the nature and expansion of the European system, the reaction against the world order thus created, the entry nevertheless of the non-European states into it, and the nature of the new global society—'the flood-tide of European dominance over the world, and its subsequent ebbing', as Hedley put it.

I think that we adhered to that notion reasonably well, and that gave a convincing and understandable shape to what might otherwise have been a rather undisciplined analysis. (I wrote the essay on China and the international order). Hedley and Adam wrote the introduction and conclusion together, and Hedley, despite gathering ill-health, wrote three of the essays—those on the revolt against the West, the emergence of a universal global society, and the Western collision with Africa.

To my mind, Hedley's work on this book is particularly important to Australians, including Canberra policymakers. His writings on the anarchical

society, and control of the arms race, though immensely valuable, are likely to be read mostly by academic or expert groups. But *The Expansion of International Society* could be read without difficulty by high-school students, and should give them an understanding of 500 years of history—the world-historical process that provided the global context within which Australia emerged to its present status. The world is now changing very fast. In order to understand where that world is now going, it is helpful to understand where it came from.

The British Committee on International Theory in time mutated into what has now been called ‘the English School’ of international theory. That name also is a misnomer: owed to an unfriendly critic, from Aberystwyth, who suggested that it was high time we shut up shop. I used to wistfully think at times that it might be better, since other people seemed determined to give us a name, for us to start calling ourselves ‘the London School of International and Strategic Theory’. ‘London’ does not carry any sense of being exclusively English or British: it is an immensely cosmopolitan city, even more so now than when we all met regularly there. A Londoner can be from Albania or Zimbabwe, and these days probably is. It always seemed to me that it was particularly incongruous that Hedley, who was so defiantly Australian, should come to be described as a member of the English school. However, Martin (who was certainly the primary focus of the English School, if one exists) did not take to strategic analysis. He had been a pacifist in his youth and, though he abandoned that position in time, he retained a revulsion against strategic analysis, especially nuclear calculations.

I had the good fortune to know three of the founding members of the IISS when the whole project was still just a gleam in the eyes of those who later became among its most eminent influences: Michael Howard, Denis Healey and Alastair Buchan. I was working in the early 1950s (though still a graduate student at the LSE) at Chatham House, originally as rapporteur on a book about Britain and the United Nations, and those three were members of the study-group for the book. All of them had fought hard wars. Alastair had been at the Arnhem disaster, and once told me that he had seen most of his friends die all around him. Denis had been beach-master at Anzio, one of the hardest-fought landings in Europe. Michael had fought his way through Europe with his regiment. All three had come to understand that war was too serious a matter to be left to the generals. This was the time when the full implications of the consequences of nuclear war were just beginning to be understood, even by the strategists.

Denis (now Lord Healey) in due course became the most influential spokesman in Parliament about strategic issues, especially nuclear ones, and Defence Minister in Harold Wilson’s Government, when Labour came back into office in the 1960s. That was Hedley’s time at the Foreign Office, working on arms control policy. Bob O’Neill’s splendid essay in this volume is the best authority on that. In time, no doubt the Foreign Office archives will provide more documents. But I was

for a while a member of an Advisory Committee of academics and others that Hedley set up, and I remember with great enjoyment its meetings. His Minister (a former Army officer who had become defence correspondent of *The Times*, and then Lord Chalfont when the Prime Minister needed a spokesman in the Lords) seemed to provide Hedley with quite a free hand. We listened to and argued with people like Patrick Blackett, the eminent physicist, whom many misguided people regarded as practically a traitor, because his views were so far left, on why Western policy was all wrong, and Lord Rothschild, the eminent zoologist, on the aggressive instinct in animals, including man. I do not know whether our deliberations helped Hedley, but they certainly improved my understanding of the political process, in London and elsewhere.

Hedley, to all our grief, died in 1985, just after the publication of the hard-cover edition of *The Expansion of International Society* and I think the rest of us were so depressed by the early loss of our two stars, both at the peak of their intellectual vitality, that it seemed the right moment to let the group itself fade into memory. But it still has some resonance in the field. I once heard a young Chinese scholar, at a seminar in Canberra, present Beijing's grappling with the line of thought we had been working on. For me, those long-ago meetings will always be among the happiest and most valuable experiences of my life. As will the earliest meetings of the IISS.

Alastair Buchan, who ran the Institute single-handedly (save for one faithful secretary) in those days, knew just about everyone in the relevant 'Establishment' (I once saw the then Archbishop of Canterbury at any early meeting). Policymakers came to talk to us, only 20 or so people, round a single table bearing some sandwiches and wine. The Mandarins would drift up from Whitehall, and the rest of us down from the LSE or Fleet Street, or Australia House or King's College. Alastair himself died grievously early, as had Martin and as Hedley himself and a younger colleague John Vincent, were to do. I know that Hedley valued and mourned him as much as I did. Sometimes I felt that the gods were fighting against us, through those grievous losses from our common endeavour to secure rational policies in the Cold War. But disaster was avoided in that conflict, and may with luck be avoided again in the new world dilemmas that now confront policymakers. The stream of intellectual analysis that goes back to Thucydides and Sun Tzu flows on still.

ENDNOTES

¹ Michael Joseph Oakeshott, 'Political Education'. Inaugural lecture at the London School of Economics, delivered on 6 March 1951.