

Review article

The international political thought of Martin Wight

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In the middle years of the twentieth century, several British scholars turned their attention to theorizing about international politics. These scholars are now themselves coming under expert critical appraisal. Two of the most prominent were E. H. Carr and Martin Wight. Both were primarily historians but came to International Relations when the opportunity offered. Each saw the world in a very different way but both believed that the destinies of mankind were governed by ineluctable forces. In the case of Carr it was historical materialism; in the case of Wight it was God's plan for the world as revealed in Christian eschatology. We are now in a position to view these interpretations with some authority. Michael Cox's fine collective study, *E. H. Carr: a critical assessment* (2000), like Charles Jones's earlier monograph, *E. H. Carr and international relations* (1998), did full justice to Carr's versatile genius, and Ian Hall's present work has done the same for Wight's. That Martin Wight was one of the most profound thinkers of international relations in the twentieth century was the opinion of a number of scholars also renowned in that field: Charles Manning, Hedley Bull, Sir Michael Howard, Sir Herbert Butterfield, Sir Adam Roberts, T. B. Miller and others. The Australian academic Coral Bell wrote 'he still seems to me the finest mind and spirit I ever knew.'¹

This reputation, especially outside the United Kingdom, has developed slowly. In the United States, although he so impressed the founder of the American postwar school of realism, Hans J. Morgenthau, that he was invited by him to lecture at Chicago from 1956 to 1957, he did not immediately make a widespread impact. This was partly because International Relations was, for some time, seen in the US as an almost exclusively American sphere of academic activity, and partly because, despite some notable exceptions (for example Kenneth W. Thompson, Inis Claude Jr, Kenneth Waltz and William Olson), American academics had for the most part embarked on the 'wild goose chase' of approaching the whole subject as though it were amenable to the techniques of investigation characteristic of the natural sciences. To one as steeped in history and philosophy as Martin Wight, this

¹ David S. Yost in Martin Wight, *Four seminal thinkers in international theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. xviii.

was absurd; to understand the present, let alone the future, one needed to have a profound sense of what had gone before, for the situations, and arguments, were frequently recurrent. Indeed, the distinguished military historian, Sir Michael Howard, said of him, 'if he has been ignored or downgraded in the United States, the result has been the impoverishment not only of American thinking but, disastrously, of American practice in the conduct of foreign affairs.'²

Robert James Martin Wight was born in 1913, the son of a Brighton doctor. He was therefore the product (like his older contemporaries E. H. Carr and A. J. Toynbee in England and Charles Manning in South Africa) of the affluent, rigorously educated late or post-Victorian middle class. His students were expected to emulate his own exacting standards, and he had no patience with the laid back attitudes and frequently disruptive behaviour of some who had entered university in the 1960s: life was a serious business and the world of scholarship a hard and demanding calling. He had a public school education (Bradfield) and then went on to Hertford College, Oxford, to read Modern History, in which he gained a First in 1935 (Sir Herbert Butterfield, the Cambridge historian with whom he later collaborated, was one of his examiners). After a year's research at Oxford, he joined the staff of Chatham House to work under the phenomenally prolific classical scholar, Arnold J. Toynbee, virtually sole author of the annual *Survey of International Affairs* volumes together with the monumental twelve-volume *Study of history*, a vast appraisal of world history from earliest times, as approached from the standpoint of the rise and fall of civilizations. Although not uncritical of Toynbee's premises and conclusions, Wight acknowledged his debt to one who remained an important influence.

Wight left Chatham House in 1938 to teach history at Haileybury, a public school founded to turn out men to run the empire, especially the Indian empire. He at once made a huge impression on his pupils, among these being Harry Pitt, the author of his entry in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*, and Denis Mack Smith, historian of modern Italy. Wight approached history not only as a record of the past but also as a key to an understanding of the moral dimension of the past, or as he put it, 'philosophy teaching by examples'.³ This commitment to moral issues and to the really big questions with which history abounds ideally fitted him for making a seminal contribution to the study of international relations. In 1940, being of military age (26), he was due to be called up. He registered as a conscientious objector and had to appear before a tribunal. The background to this says much about his thought-world and inner convictions.

During the early and mid-1930s, Wight was a strong supporter of the League of Nations. Many then saw it as a complete alternative to war and power politics. In western liberal circles the world after 1920 appeared as something of a quasi-state with the Covenant of the League as its constitution. The great perceived need was to 'perfect' this constitution, by plugging those gaps which still made war possible. The League had first been tested over Manchuria in 1931, but in 1935 came a more

² Michael Howard in Wight, *Four seminal thinkers*, p. v.

³ Martin Wight, *Systems of states* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1977), p. 3.

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crucial test: Mussolini's invasion of Abyssinia. The League imposed sanctions, but without the vital oil, and so Italy went ahead. Wight realized that the pro-League 'liberal' stance he had taken was untenable, leaving only two possible courses: either to meet realism with realism and beat the aggressors at their own game (Churchill's reaction), or to adopt the high moral ground of Christian witness and retreat to the catacombs. As a man of profound moral sensibilities, and much influenced by the views of the famous Anglican pacifist, Dick Sheppard, Wight chose the latter course. It was a courageous decision because his chronic asthma, from which he eventually died, would in any case have ruled out active service.

But many a young moralist might have thought like that. What made Wight different was his theological interpretation of world history. He seems to have concluded that from the mid-1930s international politics had entered a different 'ball-game', that the world of Hitler, Mussolini and Stalin was so brutal, so hideously un-Christian that what was about to happen could only be regarded as a divine judgement upon European civilization for the corporate sin of its apostasy.⁴ He saw his pacifism as a personal matter, indeed a 'vocation' (p. 32), and was under no illusion that aggression and fascism would be defeated in this way. Instinctively he was a 'realist', heard Churchill's speeches with admiration and followed the progress of the war avidly. Although knowing him fairly well during the last 20 years of his life, this reviewer only learned of his pacifism at his memorial service. Indeed the portraits hung around the walls of his room at the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE)—William III, Frederick the Great, Washington, Napoleon, Lenin, Roosevelt and suchlike 'men of power'—might have suggested the very opposite.

In 1941 he was recruited by Margery Perham of Nuffield College, Oxford, the doyenne of Africanists, to research into colonial constitutions, and his first published works lay in this field. But all the time he was reflecting on the upheavals of the 'crisis decade' of 1935–45 and developing his thinking on the lessons it provided. The result was a short, 68-page essay called *Power politics*, which Chatham House published in 1946. It made an immediate impact and at once showed the world of international relations that a new and profound analyst had arrived, with a vast repository of historical erudition to substantiate his ideas. Towards the end of his life Wight saw the enlargement and revision of this work as his main academic task.

Shortly after returning to Chatham House in 1946 he was appointed by the *Observer* to be its UN correspondent for the year 1946–7. His reports from Lake Success made such a telling impression on David Astor that he offered him the editorship, which Wight declined. They also greatly impressed Charles Manning, professor of International Relations at LSE since 1930, who resolved to recruit him for his department. Wight's readership at LSE between 1949 and 1961 was the basis for his great reputation in International Relations. What did he achieve during those twelve years? First, all his lectures were impressive: splendidly structured, spiced with wit, pungently expressed and delivered with an aura of great moral

⁴ Wight, *Systems of states*, p. 4.

authority. And his conduct of the post-graduate seminars was equally impressive. He and Professor Manning usually chaired them jointly, in their highly contrasting styles. To this reviewer these seminars were the most exciting intellectual experiences of his entire university life.

Manning first asked Wight to deliver a series of lectures on international institutions. Typically he began with the Conciliar Movement of 1409–49 (an attempt to replace the pope by a sort of parliament of Christendom). This was characteristic for he was fascinated by the medieval thought-world. He also deemed it of value to investigate a time when a states system was coming into being as well as when it was clearly going out of being. There followed the post-Napoleonic Congress System before he tackled the League of Nations and the United Nations. The main burden of these lectures was that the Congress System, like the Security Council, was designed to be a Hobbesian sovereign, whereas the League, largely the brain-child of Woodrow Wilson, was essentially Lockean in its conception and ideology. But Wight was not greatly interested in the League and the UN which he dismissed as ‘pseudo-institutions’. The *real* institutions of international politics, he held, were war, diplomacy, trade and the balance of power. The last he gave great prominence to and it forms the staple of several of the papers he later read to the Cambridge-based British Committee on the Theory of International Politics, with which he was much involved during the last years of his life.

His outstanding contribution to the subject in his LSE years was undoubtedly the series of magnificent lectures he gave in the late 1950s under the title ‘International Theory’. They were a sensation to all who were fortunate enough to hear them. They were attended by Geoffrey Goodwin, Manning’s successor in the LSE Chair, by Hedley Bull, and by all post-graduates whose intellectual curiosity transcended the bounds of their research. What did these consist of? The world of politics and of international politics at first sight looks a chaos. There are clearly so many diverse things going on, each the product of different objectives, indeed of different value systems. The first to introduce some sort of ordered analysis in all this was E. H. Carr in his great classic *The twenty years’ crisis* (1939). Carr divided political thought and practice into two categories, realism and utopianism. Wight built upon this, but took it further. The Carr dichotomy, he argued, like its later American counterpart, Morgenthau’s division into realism and idealism, was a product of a ‘diseased situation’ (Britain of the League-dominated years, and America during convalescence from isolationism). More useful, he held, would be a triple classification into ‘realism’, ‘rationalism’ and ‘revolutionism’, with the last further divided into its ‘hard’ (the Jacobins and Marxists) and ‘soft’ (Kant to Nehru) manifestations. This three-fold analysis, presented in different political contexts—human nature, international society, relations with ‘barbarians’, power and interest, foreign policy, diplomacy, war, international law, obligation and ethics—brought almost everything that went on in politics, and particularly international politics, into sharp focus, so that one began to see the philosophical springs to nearly all political outlook and behaviour. These three traditions, Wight believed, were best expressed in the thought and influence of three philosophical archetypes: Machia-

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velli, Grotius and Kant, and in a later series of lectures, delivered at LSE during his final year there, he further probed into the careers and philosophies of these three men, together with those of Mazzini, the outstanding example of a revolutionary nationalist before the twentieth century.

Some of those who have written about Wight, such as Roy Jones, Michael Nicholson, Hedley Bull and Tim Dunne, have been concerned at the 'intrusion' of religion into his international thought. This concern, Hall says, is a reflection of the deep-seated antipathy to religion in the contemporary western academy (p. 22). Lest a wrong impression may be given here, it should be pointed out that this was certainly not true of International Relations studies at LSE in the 1950s. Not only were Manning and all his staff, other than Northedge and Bull, church-going Christians, but they attended a theological discussion group to which all interested students were invited. Yet few 'church-going Christians', had they known his mind well, would have found in Wight a kindred spirit. More reflective of the age of St Anselm than that of Billy Graham, and influenced by the theology of Karl Barth, he had little sympathy for 'liberal' Christianity, was dismissive of any idea that God's kingdom could ever be established on earth by men (p. 26), and favoured the revival of the doctrine of the Antichrist. This should be seen, not as a person, but as a recurrent situation marked by 'demonic concentrations of power' (p. 37), and as an antidote to facile Christian optimism. This cast of mind caused Wight to run counter to the spirit of a largely American-dominated age. 'War is inevitable', he declared in a broadcast in 1953, 'but particular wars can be avoided,' and again, in a passage which his critics have been apt to quote, 'For what matters is not whether there is going to be another war or not, but that it should be recognized, if it comes, as an act of God's justice and if it is averted, as an act of God's mercy.'⁵ This clearly resonates with the conclusion of Joseph de Maistre, the counter-revolutionary Savoyard philosopher, whom Wight cites in *International theory*, that war has a supernatural significance as the punishment for original sin. De Maistre's view of the whole earth as a blood-drenched altar, he comments, reflects a clear apprehension of facts which pose an intellectual problem.⁶ As Michael Nicholson said, Wight 'made pessimism respectable in British international relations' (p. 17).

In 1961 Martin Wight accepted the Chair of History in the School of European Studies, of which he was appointed Dean, in the new University of Sussex. By doing so he lost the certain chance of succeeding Manning at LSE in 1962, but embraced a discipline closer to his training and inclinations. He was, first and foremost, a historian, as evidenced by his earlier publications including the superb contributions on Germany and other European countries to the Chatham House *Survey* volume, edited by Arnold Toynbee and entitled *The world in March 1939*. His approach to history is one aspect of his thought which has been comparatively neglected, but to which Hall devotes a chapter. Wight regretted that in historical studies there was no parallel to literary criticism (p. 44), and perhaps with F. R. Leavis in mind, sought to classify historians into 'the great' and 'hacks'. It would

⁵ Wight, *Systems of states*, pp. 12-13. But see Hedley Bull's introduction generally.

⁶ Martin Wight, *International theory: the three traditions* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), p. 216.

be tempting to reproduce these lists of many familiar names, but the reviewer owes to the author an inducement that the readers buy, or at least consult, the book. Let it suffice that Wight was strongly of the opinion that the best history reflected 'philosophical depth', and that the very greatest explored the irony and the tragedy of the past. For just these reasons he urged his students to read Thucydides as *the* great classic of international relations. Not surprisingly, therefore, in his years at Sussex he did not sever his connection with international relations, remaining a contributor to, indeed succeeding Butterfield as convenor of, the British Committee, for which he wrote a number of papers on states systems, as well as continuing work on the revised and expanded *Power politics*. This was still his major scholarly preoccupation when he suddenly died of an asthmatic attack in July 1972 at the comparatively early age of 58.

When Wight died, although his writings had not been negligible, his standing, like that of Lord Acton, depended more upon his teaching and the brilliance of his reputation than upon the corpus of his published work. In a letter to a friend written a few months before he died he lamented his failure to bring to fruition the great book he knew he had within him.⁷

Two developments over the past 35 years have helped to make good his paucity of publications and also to ensure his prominent place in the pantheon of political thinkers. The first of these has been the appearance of four notable posthumous works. The earliest to appear, in 1977, was *Systems of states*, which Hedley Bull, his junior colleague at LSE, compiled from papers on the subject which Wight had contributed to the British Committee between 1964 and 1972. This was a comparative study of historical systems, culminating in the now worldwide western system, from which theoretical conclusions can be drawn. Here Wight stresses the importance of a common culture for the cohesion and working of a system, leaving open the question of whether the western system, historically prone to recurrent fracture, has within it a sufficient sense of cultural unity to survive its expansion well beyond its original cultural heartland.

Bull next took in hand the revised and expanded yet unfinished *Power politics*, in editorial collaboration with Carsten Holbraad, a former student of Wight's at LSE. Here, in a text informed by his vast historical erudition, Wight examines many aspects of international relations, but usually with power as the leading theme. Happily Wight had all but one chapter—that on war—in draft form and here the deficiency could be supplied by a talk he had once given on the subject on the Third Programme, afterwards published in *The Listener*.

Thus far his posthumously published works had been taken from Wight's actual texts. The lectures presented a quite different problem, for they existed only in note form on scores of small sheets of paper. Hedley Bull, to whom they were passed after Wight's death, at first thought of sending copies of the notes to the various International Relations departments, but afterwards, with Gabriele, Wight's widow, agreed that they should be turned into prose and appear as a book. Before much had been done, Hedley Bull died, but publication following full

⁷ Letter to Matthew Melko, 1 November 1971. Wight, *International theory*, p. 15.

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scholarly treatment was undoubtedly the right solution, for *International theory: the three traditions* (1991) may well turn out to be the work for which Martin Wight will be chiefly remembered. Although it bears some of the marks of ‘work in progress’, its literary and architectural qualities have been widely admired.

The second development was the increasing scholarly interest in international relations since his death. With four posthumous works now available—the sequel to *International theory* appeared as *Four seminal thinkers* in 2004—there was sufficient published material to give Wight the intense critical scrutiny he had long deserved but not always received. Within a few years of his death he had attracted some hostility, a curious example of which was a jaundiced review of *Systems of states* by the Australian J. W. Burton.⁸ Clearly out of sympathy with Wight’s historical and humanistic approach, he claimed he would be little known outside the United Kingdom and ‘hardly at all’ in the US. The emergence of ‘the English school’ as a feature of academic attention and debate in the 1980s helped to focus this criticism, for Wight had by now come to be seen as one of its founding fathers, even though the term was not used in his lifetime. Manning did, indeed, sometimes refer to ‘London’, by which he usually meant himself, but most British scholars did not see their approach to international relations as being particularly distinctive; it seemed the natural way of doing it. In 1981, however, Professor Roy Jones of the University of Wales, Cardiff, published an article entitled ‘The English school of international relations: a case for closure’⁹ and in so doing ensured immortality both for himself and for the ‘school’ he sought to consign to the limbo of academic lost causes. Until then no one had heard of ‘the English school’, least of all the ‘school’ itself. But now, thanks to Professor Jones, everybody is talking about it, and it is being debated and appraised wherever, throughout the world, International Relations is taught. In consequence of this curious twist of irony, which would have intrigued Machiavelli and amused Wight, scholarly interest in figures such as Carr, Manning, Wight, Bull, Butterfield and Vincent has increased apace, with their ideas being dissected and their influence assessed.¹⁰ This immensely impressive study of Martin Wight by Ian Hall has now appeared and will give all who pursue the subject, or at least acknowledge its importance, plenty to think about for many years to come.

Ian Hall not only gives full consideration to Wight’s unique qualities, to what Sir Michael Howard described as ‘a depth and range of learning that was rare even in his generation and has now almost disappeared’,¹¹ but is also acutely mindful of his moral and spiritual complexity. Although not obtrusive in his teaching and academic writing, notable here is his religious faith and the theological, and more particularly the eschatological, foundations to his thought. Hall manoeuvres his

⁸ J. W. Burton, ‘Commitment to history’, *Times Educational Supplement*, 14 July 1977.

⁹ *Review of International Studies* 7: 1, 1981, pp. 1–13.

¹⁰ Three important pioneer works should be noted: Tim Dunne, *Inventing international society: a history of the English school* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998); Bruno Vigezzi, *The British committee on the theory of international politics 1954–85: the rediscovery of history* (Milan: Edizioni Unicopli, 2005); and Andrew Linklater and Hidemi Suganami, *The English school of international relations: a contemporary reassessment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹¹ Michael Howard in Martin Wight, *Four seminal thinkers*, p. vi.

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way through this intellectual minefield with the enviable subtlety of a medieval disputant and helps us more clearly to understand the 'enigma' which the late Michael Nicholson characterized Wight as being.

It is pleasant to record that only two small errors appear to have slipped into Hall's excellent study. James Mayall was never a student of Wight's (p. 11) and, had the immortal Gibbon written the work with which he has here been accredited (p. 49), English historiography would have been enriched with many 'another damned thick square book'.