

## Preface

It was seldom easy to be a heretic in Britain in the twentieth century, and even harder to persist in it.

Heresies need orthodoxies, after all, and twentieth-century Britain lacked orthodoxies in politics and literature, at least for long. The Victorians had bequeathed ideologies, with an intelligentsia which moved from one limited consensus to another at high speed. The late nineteenth century was the first age, so to speak, in which intellectuals changed their minds again and again. The twentieth century inherited that alarming tradition. After 1908 under Asquith the Edwardians moved to a free-market welfare state; later collectivism became fashionable, between two world wars; then, in the 1970s and after, the world moved back to free-market welfare. In December 1994 Labour abolished Clause Four after nearly forty years of strife and hesitation, and the media, at a loss for a story, turned to sex-scandals and phone-hacking. Nobody mentioned it, but the spirit of Asquith had ultimately survived and won.

That ultimate triumph was not without dust or heat. This book is about that heat and that dust, including a critical tradition that rashly abdicated all truth-claims and an intelligentsia reluctant to admit it had once put faith and hope in exterminatory dictators in Russia, Germany and China. The Mitford sisters, who had done just that, were cheerfully trivialised into a musical dubbed *La Traviata*. Those who seek a more sobering metaphor of the age might prefer Noel Coward's *Brief Encounter* (1945) – the story of a happy marriage almost wrecked by adulterous longings and gently restored, at the end, by a sense of duty. For a time the British forgot the plot of their own history after 1689, though the Glorious Revolution was the first great revolution of modern times and the most long-lasting in its effects. Some loftily dismissed it in the 1930s as the Whig interpretation of history. Passion and torment, as in Coward's play, and a happy ending.

There was also, as in Coward, laughter. The British genius since Shakespeare has been above all comic, and the fact is easier to accept if you recall that Samuel Johnson once thought so too. The British talent down the centuries was to distinguish seriousness from solemnity, and

to study its literary tradition is to salute, above all, its wits and its clowns. They helped a nation to survive. In this book of memories I applaud the heretics who amused and taught me and, at the close, one I taught and amused. Memories and musings easily outrun what survives in print. So this is a book wide open to the charge of name-dropping and eager to earn it.

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