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## Atonement, Scapegoats, and the Oxford Debating Society

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Joe A. Thompson

"Oxford Atones" read a newspaper headline after the Oxford Union Society defeated by 416 votes to 187 the motion "That this House would not fight for Queen and Country" on 9 February 1983, exactly fifty years after the union had carried by 275 votes to 153 the resolution "That this House will in no circumstances fight for its King and Country." Most commentators welcomed the "atonement" of Oxford, where, as John Gray wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*, "intellectual trends are first revealed." The second Oxford debate was therefore "encouraging and even inspiring. It showed signs that many of history's hard lessons had been learned."<sup>1</sup>

But for what was Oxford belatedly atoning? Why did undergraduate debates receive so much attention? And what were the "hard lessons" of history to be learned from the Oxford episode?

### I

For Max Beloff, the celebrated political writer and academician, the second debate was occasion for personal atonement. In 1933, as an undergraduate, he had spoken for the motion; in 1983, with the certitude of hindsight, he had "a duty" to atone because the original resolution had been "factually and morally" untrue. It was factually false because many of those who had voted for the proposition had died fighting in the Second World War. It was morally false because the debate at Oxford had "in some slight way" encouraged fascist belligerence by implying that Britain was too anemic to fight.<sup>2</sup>

For John Gray, and for other commentators who welcomed the reversal of the outcome of the 1933 debate, Oxford had a far heavier burden on its conscience. It rested on Winston Churchill's interpretation of the "ever-shameful" motion. In June 1942 Churchill had allowed himself to be quoted as saying that "the



effect of the Oxford resolution was shattering . . . to our prestige. We have actual proof now that Mussolini was so affected by it that he definitely came to the conclusion that Britain might be counted out, and it is probable that it had a decisive effect on his decision to bring in Italy on the side of Germany."<sup>3</sup> In his memoirs, Churchill broadened the indictment: as a result of the motion, "in Germany, in Russia, in Italy, in Japan, the idea of a decadent, degenerate Britain took deep root and swayed many calculations."<sup>4</sup> In Churchill's view, the Oxford undergraduates had an implied responsibility for the Second World War.

Ironically, Churchill's son, Randolph, helped turn the Oxford vote into a worldwide news story. Its organizers had no thought of causing even a local stir. As Martin Ceadel, the historian of the debate, has written, it was "an unremarkable Thursday-night's relaxation at the Oxford Union" and the outcome was "most simply" explained by the oratory of the invited speaker, C. E. M. Joad, a popular philosopher and pacifist, and the union's convention that "it is good debating that wins votes."<sup>5</sup> But a lively piece of undergraduate entertainment became national news when a senior editorial writer for the *Daily Telegraph* planted an anonymous letter on the center-page of the *Telegraph* denouncing the Oxford motion as "an outrage upon the memory of those who gave their lives in the Great War."

The letter writer, J. B. Firth, suggested that "decently-minded Young Oxford" should work without delay to get the "offensive motion" expunged from the minutes of the Union Society. Randolph Churchill acted on this suggestion. On 14 February he circulated a letter to life members of the union demanding that the offending motion be expunged from the minute book. But his personal effort to save the honor of Oxford failed when on 2 March the union rejected by 750 votes to 138 a motion to expunge the motion of 9 February. The vote was unrelated to the sentiments of the original resolution but turned on Churchill's effort to expunge a motion of the House. *The Times* summed up the outcome with the headline: "The Oxford Union: Mr. R. Churchill's Visit Resented."

Randolph Churchill's intervention made the Oxford debate a major news story, but it was his father who insisted that it was an event of historical importance. In his memoirs the episode assumed legendary significance as an event that encouraged the dictators to believe that the British would not fight. Historians



have found little evidence to sustain Churchill's claim. Although reports of the Oxford debate circulated in Germany, no one has uncovered evidence that Hitler knew of the episode or was influenced by it. Moreover, when Hitler embarked on an adventurous foreign policy he did not need to draw upon an undergraduate vote for encouragement: Britain's foreign and defense policies throughout the 1930s led him to believe that he would have a free hand in Europe.

Mussolini did read English, and had seen accounts of the Oxford debate. According to Denis Mack Smith, fascist propaganda magnified the Oxford vote "into the unanimous opinion of students at Oxford and Cambridge, and then into a pacifist vote by all British youth; and Mussolini refused to listen to anyone who questioned this reasoning."<sup>6</sup> But Mussolini had a more fundamental reason for dismissing Britain as a fighting power. To his mind a growth in population was more important than an increase in arms production in deciding which country would win a major war. According to the Italian office of statistics, Britain and France had declining populations, and Mussolini believed that in twenty years their populations would be reduced by almost half and be composed only of the old. For the same reason he claimed that the United States would soon cease to be a serious nation.<sup>7</sup> For Mussolini, then, the Oxford vote was only a symptom of a deeper and more fundamental weakness of British society, and the undergraduate debate had no direct and serious influence on his calculations.

## II

But 1983 did more than give Lord Beloff and the Oxford Union Society a chance to atone for past sins, real or imagined. It was a time for preaching. The lesson to be learned, said Beloff, was that nonviolence may be right for private citizens but it could never be "the basis of national policy." Lord Hume, the former foreign secretary, mixed indictment with admonition. He claimed that a powerful and electorally influential pacifist movement, not Oxford debaters, had hampered British defense preparations in the 1930s. In 1983, he was fearful once again as he saw "unilateralists sending out signals to a dictatorship that is mobilized with enormous armed forces and practices its doctrine in Czechoslovakia, Afghanistan and Poland." The implication was



obvious: 1983 could become 1933 unless the neutralist movement of the 1980s was denied the influence of the pacifist movement of the 1930s. The latter had not prevented war and "left Britain unprepared for it when it came."<sup>8</sup>

Lord Beloff may be right about nonviolence; even most British pacifists abandoned political claims for their beliefs in 1939 and based their arguments solely on ethical grounds. And Lord Hume may be justified in crying up the dangers of unilateral disarmament in 1983. But their "lessons" of history are suspect for two reasons. Firstly, their range of parallels is too limited. It is not possible to argue, for example, that neutrality or non-alignment will always endanger national and international security. The examples of Switzerland and Sweden argue one way and those of Belgium and Holland quite another. To draw a lesson from one age or one country has obvious hazards. Moreover, their generalizations about the 1930s do not inspire confidence because they rest on a superficial historical analysis.

Three points must be made about military unpreparedness and the "pacifists" of the 1930s. Firstly, it was budget-cutting governments during the 1920s that left British services poorly prepared for the 1930s. During Admiral Lord Beatty's term as First Sea Lord (1919-1927), the Board of Admiralty repeatedly pleaded to be allowed a small but steady building program which would prevent the fleet from becoming obsolete, stop the loss of skilled men from shipbuilding and armament industries, and avoid a more expensive upsurge of construction when and if an emergency arose. The Board of Admiralty was rebuffed and by the early 1930s the sea-going fleet and defense industries were in a parlous state. Naval historians have recorded the sad effects of the "(almost) unilateral disarmament" of the 1920s. During the Abyssinian crisis of 1935-1936 the entire reserve of anti-aircraft ammunition was sent to the Mediterranean fleet, leaving the home fleet with none. In order to catch up in 1936 and 1937 the Admiralty ordered armour plate from the Skoda works, but little had been delivered before Hitler invaded Czechoslovakia and diverted British orders to his own forces. "You cannot build ships in a hurry with a Supplementary Estimate," Lord Fisher had warned years before, but this is what Britain tried to do in 1935-1939.<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, when commentators refer to a pacifist movement with a "constituency of millions" during the 1930s, they are using



the term "pacifist" to include those who sought to avoid war through international cooperation, if necessary by the controlled use of force, as well as those who believed that war was always wrong. In the early 1930s the distinction between these anti-war viewpoints was not often made but it is misleading if commentators of the 1980s fail to do so.<sup>10</sup> It is possible that the first group, the internationalists, were unrealistic about the chances of disarmament by international agreement after Hitler came to power, especially after Germany left the Disarmament Conference and the League of Nations in 1933, and about the security system of the league, but they did not favor unilateral disarmament and they did not oppose the use of force to deter aggression and uphold international law.

Thirdly, the national government did not initiate supplementary estimates before 1935 because its leaders feared that a "pacific democracy" would reject a rearmament program.<sup>11</sup> The politicians simply waited until the public mood changed. But the government's reading of public opinion before 1935 was not necessarily correct. There was an upsurge of pacifist sentiment in the early 1930s, and opposition parties berated the government for the failure of the Disarmament Conference, but opinion polls in 1934 reflected an anxious and confused rather than a strictly pacific public.

In the spring of 1934 a number of Lord Rothermere's newspapers polled readers for their views on the league, disarmament, and rearmament in the air. The *Bristol Evening World* concluded that the polls showed "a peaceful motive underlying a desire for a strong defense."<sup>12</sup> The Rothermere plebiscites were limited and local, but even the famous Peace Ballot of 1934-1935, involving more than 11½ million voters, was not, in spite of its popular name, a rejection of arms. Of particular interest were the answers to the two parts of question five:<sup>13</sup>

Do you consider that, if a nation insists on attacking another, the other nations should combine to compel it to stop by

(a) economic and non-military measures?

Yes: 10,096,626 (86.8%)      Doubtful: 27,369 ( 0.2%)

No: 636,195 ( 5.5%)      No answer: 862,707 ( 7.4%)

(b) if necessary, military measures?



Yes: 6,833,803 (58.7%)	Doubtful: 41,058 ( 0.4%)
No: 2,366,184 (20.3%)	No answer: 2,381,485 (20.4%)

Winston Churchill later cited the returns on question five as evidence that Britons were "willing and indeed resolved, to go to war in a righteous cause," provided that all action was taken under the auspices of the league.<sup>14</sup> Philip Noel-Baker, an ardent supporter of the league, went further and claimed that the British people were ready to fulfill their obligations under the covenant and stop Mussolini by armed force if that was required.<sup>15</sup> These judgments are suspect: the image of a stout-hearted people eager to defend the league fitted too neatly with policy preferences of Churchill and Baker. A perceptive observer, Harold Nicolson, an experienced diplomat and member of Parliament, observed, soon after the votes were in, that the ballot was not an expression of national determination but an "expression of ill-considered national desires. In other words, it expressed what the country wanted to *happen*; it did not express what they were prepared to *do*."<sup>16</sup>

Still, the opinion polls of 1934 suggest that the government might have adopted Churchill's strategy during the early 1930s: to speak frankly and to campaign for "Arms and the Covenant." The public might have been reconciled to a rearmament program linked to international obligations. Instead, the government passively waited for events to educate the country. For this it drew Churchill's celebrated rebuke: "I have heard it said that the Government had no mandate for rearmament until the General Election (in 1935). Such a doctrine is wholly inadmissible. The responsibility of the Ministers for the public safety is absolute and requires no mandate."<sup>17</sup> After 1935 the government could blame neither the opposition nor a pacific public. It commanded enormous majorities in Parliament ready to vote for any measure of defense requested by the ministers.

### III

The first Oxford fighting resolution was not meant to provoke the public. It gained attention and notoriety only when critics sought to expunge the motion. The worldwide publicity, followed by Churchill's effort to discredit the debate, did much to create the legend that the Oxford vote had influenced Mussolini and



Hitler. The first myth gave rise to another, more general and complex, that the "pacifists" were largely responsible for obliging British politicians to negotiate with the dictators from weakness. Both legends offered convenient scapegoats and diverted attention from the fact that many, in and out of government, were responsible for the failure to deter Hitler.

The recent Oxford debate shows how powerful is a certain view of the 1930s; it holds in its grip the minds of many in Britain, especially the survivors of the age. Their present frame of reference is largely determined by what they believe occurred during the previous years. The urge to draw lessons from the 1930s also betrays a strong and persuasive belief that the future will closely parallel the recent past. But the popular view of the 1930s preached by those who recently welcomed the "atonement" of Oxford rests on a false premise and inadequate information. The victorious debaters of 1983, perhaps unwittingly, have placed at the service of contemporary propagandists a shallow and distorted history.

The Oxford debates do confirm one melancholy truth: that failure creates a need for scapegoats. Therefore, if the politicians miscalculate in the 1980s, as they did in the 1930s, there will be a new search for scapegoats, and more speeches of atonement and recrimination, perhaps in an Oxford Union debate of 2033.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>*Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 1983. Gray teaches philosophy at Jesus College, Oxford.

<sup>2</sup>These and other comments made on 9 February 1983 are gleaned from various newspaper accounts. In time, surely, a full transcript of the speeches will be printed.

<sup>3</sup>Given in a speech by Lord Mottistone in the House of Lords. *Hansard* 132 (21 June 1944): 335.

<sup>4</sup>Winston S. Churchill, *The Second World War*, vol. 1, *The Gathering Storm* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1948), 85.

<sup>5</sup>The information in this paragraph, and the following, is taken from Ceadel's article, "The 'King and Country' Debate, 1933: Student Politics, Pacifism and the Dictators," *The Historical Journal* 22, no. 2 (1979), 397-422.

<sup>6</sup>Denis Mack Smith, *Mussolini* (New York: Knopf, 1982), 194-95.

<sup>7</sup>Mack Smith, *Mussolini*, 209.

<sup>8</sup>The observation of John Gray, *Wall Street Journal*, 17 February 1983.



<sup>9</sup>Naval problems and policy are discussed in Stephen W. Roskill, *Naval Policy between the Wars*, 2 vols. (London: Collins, 1968-1976).

<sup>10</sup>The distinction is clearly drawn by Martin Ceadel, *Pacifism in Britain 1914-1945: The Defining of A Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), especially in chapter one, "Pacifism and Pacificism."

<sup>11</sup>See John Ramsden, *The Age of Balfour and Baldwin, 1902-1940* (London: Longman, 1978), 342; and Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 5, 1922-1939 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1977), 775-76 and 797-98.

<sup>12</sup>*Bristol Evening World*, 21 April 1934.

<sup>13</sup>A fuller discussion is found in J. A. Thompson, "The Peace Ballot and the Public," *Albion* 13, no. 4 (Winter 1981), 381-92.

<sup>14</sup>Churchill, *Gathering Storm*, 170.

<sup>15</sup>Philip Noel-Baker, *The First World Disarmament Conference, 1932-33, and Why It Failed* (Oxford: Pergamon, 1979), 141.

<sup>16</sup>Harold Nicolson, "British Public Opinion and Foreign Policy," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 1 (1937): 59.

<sup>17</sup>Martin Gilbert, *Winston S. Churchill*, vol. 5, 1922-1939, 796.