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Building: Letters 1960-1975



ISAIAH BERLIN
Building
LETTERS 1960-1975

Edited by Henry Hardy and Mark Pottle



Synopsis

The third volume of Isaiah Berlin's remarkable letters takes readers from 1960 to 1975. In the period covered here—Isaiah Berlin creates Wolfson College, Oxford; John F. Kennedy becomes U.S. President (and is assassinated); Berlin dines with JFK on the day he is told of the Soviet missile bases in Cuba; the Six-Day Arab-Israeli war of 1967 creates problems that remain with us today; Richard M. Nixon succeeds Johnson as President and resigns over Watergate; and the long agony of the Vietnam War grinds on in the background. At the same time Berlin publishes some of his most important work, including *Four Essays on Liberty*—the key texts of his liberal pluralism—and the essays later included in *Vico and Herder*. He appears on the radio, on television, and in documentary films, and gives numerous lectures, especially his celebrated Mellon Lectures, later published as *The Roots of Romanticism*. Behind these public events is a constant stream of gossip and commentary, acerbic humor, and warm personal feeling. Berlin writes about an enormous range of topics to a sometimes dazzling cast of correspondents. This new volume leaves no doubt that Berlin is one of the very best letter-writers of the 20th century.

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Customer Reviews

"He was one of the greatest talkers—a lecturer, broadcaster, raconteur—who has ever lived. . . . Superbly edited and annotated . . . these extraordinary letters, transcribed with great difficulty and care, by those attuned in every sense to their author and accustomed to his ways, replicate to an extraordinary degree that torrential conversation with its preternatural mix of

gossip, philosophy, and politics."Washington Times on "Enlightening" Berlin's erudite, amusing, and gossipy letters stand as a monument to a lost age. This important thinker's correspondence will appeal to anyone with an interest in philosophy, political history, or the cultural milieu of the early 20th century."Library Journal on *Enlightening*

Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) was a noted political philosopher and is widely regarded as one of the leading liberal thinkers of the 20th century. He was awarded the Erasmus, Lippincott, and Agnelli prizes for his contributions to philosophy. Henry Hardy has edited more than 15 volumes of Berlin's letters and writings. Mark Pottle is an Oxford historian.

"Building" is the third volume of the complete set of Isaiah Berlin's correspondence, four in all,, and comprises the years 1960-1975. These are years of Berlin's fame, if one wants to call his business that. He seems to be on call for numerous events, and is even asked to sign a protest against the Kennedy's failed invasions of Cuba. Not one to be suckered into such conventional protest letters, he refuses--because he recognizes Castro as the dictator he was. The volume reveals his invitations to all manner of events, including a tea at Buckingham Palace. Enticed into spending time as guest scholar at Harvard, he bemoans his loneliness there to his distant wife Aline. Yet he enjoys being close to Washington and New York City where he has many friends. Throughout this book one gathers the sense that Berlin was a respected figure.in demand as a admired public figure. Chatty, unbuttoned, friendly, this is a book that reveals all, one could say. Many of his comments are delightful, as when he calls Princeton University having a "reactionary establishment Charley's Aunt spa atmosphere/"This is a delight, and a perfect book to complete one's collection of the other three volumes of Berlin correspondence...

This is the third volume of Sir Isaiah Berlin's letters, covering the period of 1960-75, with a final volume to come. This 600 page collection, once again edited by Henry Hardy (plus this time Mark Pottle), repeats the many virtues of the previous volumes. Its extensive annotated footnotes are indispensable, since otherwise we non-Oxford Americans would likely not have the slightest idea of the individuals, ideas, or places that pop up. I must admit, the notes can become a heavy burden, they are so extensive, but they are essential to the flow of correspondence. Hardy's technique is just a model for this kind of thing, comparable to the Jefferson papers, Justice Holmes letters, and the Henry Adams correspondence.The first section of letters covers the period 1960-65, with Berlin continuing as Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory and fellow of All Souls. The range of

correspondents is just amazing, since Berlin was truly an international "public intellectual" of the first order. Appearing are academics, musicians, politicians (including American), Israeli figures, and various other folks from around the world. We see Berlin engage in some academic warfare with E.H. Carr and Isaac Deutscher (the dreaded historical determinists), including his major role in the unsuccessful fight to get All Souls to develop graduate teaching resources. While all this is going on, Berlin is also a director of the Royal Opera House, and his letters demonstrate an expert's knowledge of operas past and present. But this pleasant life style was to change dramatically, when Berlin gets involved as the moving force and first president of a new Oxford college, Wolfson, aimed at graduate education. This is the focus of the remainder of the letters, 1966-75. What an unbelievable challenge this presented to Berlin is detailed in the letters. Constant negotiation with the Wolfson family and the Ford Foundation for funds; fitting a new college into the medieval Oxford University structure; and an endless parade of meetings, press interviews, and soothing disturbed egos. Yet, he continues with his published work and his teaching visits to foreign universities, primarily American. By 1975, after a decade of ceaseless effort, Wolfson is dedicated and Berlin can take his leave. But not for leisure and writing; instead he is elected to head the prestigious British Academy, and receives the highly prestigious OM awarded by the crown. His involvement with Israel deepens, sometimes leading to frustrations. Twenty-two years remain for Berlin at this point, the focus of the final volume. The editors have included a detailed chronology of the pertinent years; just to read it is amazing as to the volume and breadth of Berlin's activities. To follow the course of Berlin's correspondence is to receive an outstanding education in all manner of things--as well a great deal of enjoyment.

"To understand is to perceive patterns" (I. Berlin). I don't pretend to understand Berlin's pattern but the selection of his letters shows he did know everyone, loved music and opera, was reflexive, personal, caring, funny, sarcastic, intellectually fearless, and a very wonderful liberal.

Couldn't be better.

If you love Isaiah Berlin, you'll love the letters and the extensive footnotes.

These are really the best way to get to know a philosopher. At least in the sense of who the philosopher is as a person. Clearly, reading the philosophy of the philosopher is the best and only way to learn their philosophy! I should have mentioned that I guess. It is a shame we do not have

correspondence like this for many more philosophers. (I know the Ray Monk volumes on Russell make use of his letters but the letters themselves would be something for everyone to see.) The first two volumes were interesting at least but things become only more active as IB reaches his zenith. Fascinating.

Why is this second Kindle Volume more than TWICE the cost of the first Kindle Volume (Enlightening: Letters 1947-1960)? This is a very steep price for a Kindle Volume! I will not pay it.

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