

Lecture, books and music mark Berlin centenary

Oxford has been celebrating the centenary of the birth of Sir Isaiah Berlin, one of the most prominent of its 20th-century thinkers, with a series of events and publications stressing his continuing importance.

Berlin, a philosopher, historian of ideas and political theorist, spent his early years in Riga and St Petersburg (then Petrograd), where his formative experiences included witnessing both the Russian Revolutions of 1917. His family moved to Britain in 1921, and Berlin went to St Paul's School before studying Greats and PPE at Corpus Christi College. He was the first Jew to be elected to a Prize Fellowship at All Souls and went on to become Chichele Professor of Social and Political Thought and founding President of Wolfson College. Berlin died in 1997 and is buried in Wolvercote cemetery.

On the day of the centenary, 6 June, Wolfson's annual Isaiah Berlin Lecture, amalgamated for the occasion with the British Academy equivalent, was given by Dr James Billington, Librarian of Congress. As part of the same celebration at Wolfson, Murray Perahia gave a piano recital (Berlin was a lifelong music lover) and an exhibition entitled *Images of Isaiah* was mounted. Other commemorative activities included a seminar on Berlin's thought, held at All Souls, and the unveiling of a blue plaque outside Berlin's former home, Headington House, by two of his stepsons, to mark the four decades he spent there. Outside Oxford, events inspired by the

centenary took place as far afield as Toronto, Madrid, Potsdam, Riga and Jerusalem.

In his work, Berlin argues that values and cultures are irreducibly plural, and that this pluralism requires us to be deeply tolerant. The distinction he made between positive and negative liberty – 'freedom to' and 'freedom from' – still provides the starting point for discussions about political

freedom. Dr Henry Hardy of Wolfson College, who edits Berlin's work, said: 'In my view, his ideas are ever more relevant. Globalisation and population movement make questions of multiculturalism and tolerance central to our time.'

Dr Hardy and Oxford alumna Jennifer Holmes have co-edited a second volume of Berlin's letters, *Enlightening: Letters 1946–1960* (Chatto and Windus). The letters reveal Berlin's sharp observations on the events of the post-war years and on the politicians who shaped them, many of whom he knew personally. Dr Hardy has also edited *The Book of Isaiah: Personal Impressions of Isaiah Berlin* (Boydell Press), a collection of memoirs by those who knew Berlin or were influenced by him. In addition, Wolfson College commissioned a compilation of quotations from letters and extracts from recollections about Berlin's Wolfson years, *Isaiah Berlin and Wolfson College*.

A selection of Berlin's lectures and broadcasts is available online, both on the Oxford University website and on Oxford's iTunesU channel

