
Presented by Christopher Dandeker

Most of Michael Howard’s writings remind one of the apocryphal story about a rueful author who reported to a demanding editor that he did not have time to write a short book. Howard is a master of the short book and, like his *War in European History*,¹ *The Invention of Peace*,² and his biography of *Clausewitz*,³ *War and the Liberal Conscience* is a fine example. Indeed, he once commented (in a public lecture at King’s College London) that it was the favourite of his own works. Why should it be a favourite of yours? This is not just a matter of its elegant style and accessibility, but one of substance and continuing relevance to all students and practitioners of international and military affairs.

Howard’s short books are deceptive: they make academic writing look very easy, yet each page is full to the brim with stimulating ideas and will prompt serious reflection about the argument being made. The polished style lets the reader gain deep insights into the complexities of military and diplomatic history, strategy, international relations, the philosophy of war and the social and political context in which the causes, course and consequences of war occur. Howard pioneered the “war and society” approach in the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, developing it further later on in Oxford as the occupant of the Chichele Chair in the History of War and Fellow of All Souls College Oxford, and subsequently as Regius Professor of Modern History, also in Oxford.

For those who wish to find out more about Michael Howard’s life and work, there is his fascinating autobiography⁴ and the on-going biographical study written by Professor Brian Holden Reid, also from the Department of War Studies at King’s College London (who is the official biographer of Howard). A preliminary, lengthy and perceptive piece on Howard appeared in the *Journal of Military History* in 2009.⁵ Holden Reid reports Howard as saying of *War and the Liberal Conscience*: “It is perhaps the book that I have most enjoyed writing and I am most pleased to have written” (ibid., p.897). One reason for this is that Howard is sympathetic to the ideas and ideals of the liberal conscience, but seeks to establish the ways in which such values and beliefs need to be tempered by the realities of a world of States: what one desires may not, after all, be fully possible.

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¹ Oxford University Press, 1976.
³ Oxford University Press, 1983.

Published/ publié in Res Militaris (http://resmilitaris.net), vol.6, n°2, Summer-Autumn/ Été-Automne 2016
War Studies in King’s continued to refine and deepen Howard’s pioneering approach to the study of war, which was based on the fundamental idea that war could only be understood in its total historical and social context. It required the contribution of a variety of disciplines, including philosophy and military ethics, military and international history, strategy, international relations and sociology to name the main ones – but history was the *sine qua non* of this perspective.⁶ In many ways, Howard’s approach to war reflected that of Marc Bloch and the French *Annales School* to historical affairs. Bloch’s wonderful study of *Feudal Society*⁷ epitomises this total approach to, in Durkheim’s formulation, ‘social facts’.⁸ Holden Reid argues that the three major intellectual influences on Howard were Basil Liddell Hart, Hans Delbruck and, interestingly, Raymond Aron.¹⁰ He notes how Howard “was attracted to the broad sweep and also the vantage point of Aron’s historically informed works, especially War and Peace Among Nations”.¹¹ The last thing that Michael Howard was in his intellectual development was a dry and specialist English historian.¹²

Howard wears his deep learning lightly; his familiarity with not just Anglo-American history but the history of Europe – especially German history – is profound and is his metier; after all, he is renowned for what was for many years the definitive, monograph length work on the Franco-Prussian War.¹³ *War and the Liberal Conscience* was prepared as the George Macaulay Trevelyan Lectures delivered in the University of Cambridge in 1977 and has the elegant structure of a coherent lecture series, as does his work in other short books even if these other works were not themselves delivered originally in a lecture series format. The choice of ‘conscience’ in the title is interesting as Howard states that this word “implies not simply a belief or an attitude but also an inner compulsion to act upon it” (p.11); clearly, he is interested in how beliefs of a certain kind affect action, in this case the conduct of States and those who seek to influence the policies of governments.

He traces the evolution of political and philosophical ideas from *inter alia* Erasmus, Grotius, through a complex lineage of writers to Montesquieu, Rousseau and Thomas Paine into what was to become the liberal theory of international relations, which addressed the conditions of the possibility of war and of peace. At the heart of this theory are the following ideas, which, Howard suggests, have become remarkably resistant to the challenges posed by the realities of war and international affairs – whether one considers

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⁶ Some years ago Howard mused (in a conversation with this author) that perhaps war studies should only be approached as a postgraduate subject at MA or PhD level. This point was sometimes made in the 1960s about sociology. Indeed, war studies at King’s was for many years only studied (as a degree programme in itself) at the postgraduate level until the establishment of an undergraduate degree in the early 1990s.


¹¹ In another context, Anthony Giddens was instrumental in connecting parochial British sociology with continental traditions of social and political theory in a series of works starting with his *Capitalism and Modern Social Theory: An Analysis of the Writings of Marx Durkheim and Max Weber*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1971.

¹² It was published by Routledge in 1961.
the period of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries or the two world wars of the first half of the twentieth: first, the creation of a proper system of representative government that reflected broad public opinion rather than the narrow interests of a governing elite, including the military establishment and arms industry (later known, especially in the USA during the final phase of Eisenhower’s Presidency, as the ‘military-industrial complex’); second, the breaking down of parochial national boundaries, worldviews and interests through free trade and the exchange of ideas by means of cross-national – ideally global – forms of communication; third, the creation of institutions of conflict resolution on the international, not just the national stage – such as the League of Nations and later the United Nations. Some would add the European Union to this list. In this interplay of national and international contexts, the idea of a peaceful community of nations was enshrined, one that signally failed to see that nationalism could acquire a violent and aggressive character not just a peaceful one. These ideas would later become formalised as the influential if flawed “democratic peace theory”.

Despite all the forces that promoted peace created by late nineteenth century globalisation and interdependence, important international agreements on a wide range of issues, and the will and good intentions of liberals inside and outside government, “liberals and socialists in 1914 underestimated the true dangers: those arising from the forces inherent in the state-system of the balance of power which they had for so long denounced, and those new forces of militant nationalism which they themselves had done so much to encourage” (p.72). Unfortunately, nationalism does not always reflect the designs and expectations of those who wish to encourage it in the hope of spreading peace and prosperity. Others may seek to foment and shape nationalism with quite different ends in view – Hitler was only the most infamous and destructive of these. The contemporary European Union, no doubt, is reflecting on these themes, not least in the eastern part of the continent.

Thus at the heart of Howard’s account are the three strands of social and political theory to be found quite widely in sociology, politics and international relations. Two of them are peculiar twins – Liberalism and Marxism: the latter is in fact a variation of the liberal idea that war is confined to specific historical circumstances. However, for Marxism, capitalism and liberal democracy are the problem, which socialism and peace will supplant. Meanwhile, Liberals think it is capitalism and democracy that will bring peace, not a final conflict that will trigger the end of capitalism hoped for by Marxism. Both Liberalism and Marxism, with their different form of optimism, assume that war is not inherent in social life or human nature, which is precisely the assumption of political realism. For the latter, the risk of war is inherent in the international State system if not in human nature (we are all familiar with the different strands of modern political realism). Although war cannot be abolished it can be deterred, and if it has to be fought it can be fought justly in both its initiation and its conduct (this is the focus of Just War thinking and the principles of *ius ad bellum* and *ius in bello*) by drawing on ideas developed in the

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history of the liberal conscience. Howard’s objective is to support the liberal values he holds dear, but to temper them with the insights of political realism that the objective – not wistful - study of history provides.

A stateless (thus borderless) world is not one to be wished for, but one to be feared: as Howard argues in other writings, for example in his essay *The Causes of War*, following Clausewitz, that war is “a clash between major interests that is resolved by bloodshed – that is the only way in which it differs from other conflicts”. He goes on to claim that “[i]f one had no sovereign states one would have no wars, as Rousseau rightly pointed out – but, as Hobbes equally rightly pointed out, we would probably have no peace either. As states acquire a monopoly of violence, war becomes the only remaining form of conflict that may legitimately be settled by physical force”. Thus peace is made possible by the retention of the State system, not its abolition; the loss of a State’s authority to monopolise the means of legitimate violence in a given territory (to use Weber’s phasing) is likely to cause violent conflict and disorder, as one can observe today in Libya and elsewhere. Liberal states confronting the challenge of violence from stateless or quasi-state entities constitutes a vexed problem for the 21st century.

Furthermore, the possibilities of peace or war are not deducible from the structure of the State system, fundamental though that is in any convincing explanation – or its regional contexts. Much depends on the decisions of political leaders: what they do or do not do and believe matters and in emphasising this point, the liberal conscience was right. Wars are deliberate acts of policy even if such acts might be based on faulty information or overly optimistic calculations of the chances of success. As Howard argues “[h]owever inchoate or disreputable the motives for war may be, its initiation is almost by definition a deliberate and carefully considered act and its conduct, at least at the more advanced levels for social development, a matter of very precise control. If history shows any record of ‘accidental’ wars, I have yet to find them”. As recent discussions of the origins of the First World War demonstrate, whatever the impact of the structural dynamics of the international system, in the final analysis the war was the outcome of those individuals who made the key decisions. In essence, one might say that “there are always choices” – a key theme in Margaret Macmillan’s account of 1914.

All this means that the quality of political leaders matters, as do the kinds of accountability they have to their electorates, and the advice they receive from their advisers

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17 This is an important theme in Geoffrey Blainey, *The Causes of War*, Free Press, 1973. Optimism can be well founded or not: consider Hitler’s views on the weakness of France and similar fatally flawed views of the Soviet Union.


19 Some writers focus on allocating responsibility for war while others prefer to concentrate on how it occurred, implying that such were the complexities of action and interaction amongst the players that the research question of how war occurred is more important than why. For the main protagonists in this debate, see on ‘how’ Christopher Clark, *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914* (London, Allen Lane, 2013), and on ‘why?’”, Margaret Macmillan, *The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914* (London, Profile, 2013).
– both military and civilian.\textsuperscript{20} In the giving of advice – to illuminate the policy context of decision-making – academics have a role to play and in the wider communication of ideas to the public. To offer advice on the possibilities of war and peace was a role that Howard performed – especially during the Cold War. As in earlier periods, issues of strategy and public opinion’s view of them and the technologies that were to be used by States in defending their interests provided opportunities for academics to contribute to policy analysis and debate. While in the 1930s the debate over the appeasement of Nazi Germany dominated debate, it was connected with attitudes towards disarmament and the role of the League of Nations, which in turn raised the old Hobbesian issue of the value of covenants without swords. From the 1960s onwards, Howard became an important contributor to debates about nuclear strategy and other security issues. Echoing the 1930s, the Campaign for Disarmament (CND) and debates about ‘the peace movement’ led to encounters, including Howard, of holders of different positions on these issues. Holden Reid suggests that one reason for the impact of Howard’s writings and media contributions, which “enjoyed and influence out of all proportion to the body of his work on contemporary issues”, was the “elegance of his style. In the bleak, glacial landscape of nuclear strategy, the exchange of ideas often degenerated into a sterile offering of clichés and commonplace jargon. Howard’s writings had the shattering and prolonged effect of a sharp, surging mountain stream tumbling down a hanging valley”.\textsuperscript{21}

Important though the matter of style was, there were more prosaic factors at work too, not least (especially relevant in those years before the internet and the revolution in communications) the geographical convenience of the location of the Department of War Studies at King’s College London, close to central government departments such as the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and national press and media agencies (such as Bush House opposite King’s\textsuperscript{22}). He was well placed to use his talents when the call came. One lesson he gave, which has stood the test of time, is the need for academics who wish to contribute to policy debates to do so concisely and clearly with the minimum of jargon. It helps if one is comfortable being and talking in the company of non-academics – too few contemporary academics have that facility. Howard, of course, had the experience of not only serving with distinction during the Second World War in the British Army (the Coldstream Guards) but later on of teaching officers about strategy and international affairs. British military audiences are notoriously intolerant of obscurantism and of academics who are clearly most at home talking only to other academics.

Howard’s academic contribution to policy and public debate and the interplay of political beliefs, morality and political action, was one that his successor Lawrence Freedman continued when he took on the Chair of War Studies in King’s College London in 1982 – more or less at the same time as the outbreak of the Falklands War. One of his

\textsuperscript{20} A central problem in Max Weber’s political sociology, which is best highlighted in his essay “Parliament and Government in a Reconstructed Germany” in Economy and Society, two volumes, edited by Guenther Roth & Claus Wittich, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977, pp.1381-1469.

\textsuperscript{21} Holden Reid, JMH, p.892.

\textsuperscript{22} Bush House, which for 70 years served as the BBC World Service headquarters, is now part of the accommodation of King’s College London.
most high-profile policy interventions was in providing ideas that were used in Prime Minister Tony Blair’s speech to the Economic Club in Chicago in 1999 on what needed to be taken into account by a government when thinking about the appropriate and effective uses of force in international affairs.  

At the beginning of this review the question was put: why this book – a favourite of Howard’s – should be one of yours? The heart of the answer is that, whatever one’s political beliefs and their place on the spectrum marked by the traditions of Liberalism, Marxism and political realism, it provides one with an intellectual map on which to place them and asks profound questions about how those beliefs shape or seek to shape political realities, especially those to do with war and peace. It asks the reader to consider whether one’s beliefs about war stand up to the test of reality and can be morally robust.

It may not be possible to abolish war but it can be shaped by the principles of the liberal conscience even if, as we so often see today, one’s protagonists do not care to do so. War may be a terrible thing but it is not completely beyond our humanising influence. As Holden Reid has argued, Michael Howard “has made the humane study of war as a social phenomenon, the province of a lifetime’s work and study”.

This humane interest and approach means that, on occasion, the liberal values that one believes in need to be defended by force. As Holden Reid says, “Howard revealed his own philosophy when he concluded that if a single or group of states “renounce the use of force while others do not, then not only their own survival but that of their value-systems can be at a very high risk”. Values were worth fighting for, as Howard had realised throughout his career.”

Christopher Dandeker, PhD, FAcSS, FKC
Professor Emeritus, Department of War Studies
King’s College London.

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23 There was a specific context for this contribution, namely the Kosovo conflict. See the memorandum by Sir Lawrence Freedman on 18th January 2010 to the Chairman of the Iraq Enquiry, Sir John Chilcot, and related documents at http://www.iraqinquiry.org.uk/media/96241/2010-01-18-Letter-Freedman-to-Chilcot.pdf.