From colonialism to theology: encounters with Martin Wight’s international thought

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After I accepted the invitation to give the lecture on which this article is based I went back and forth trying to settle on a topic. I didn’t want to present ideas of my own which might or might not have some relation to the ideas of Martin Wight. I finally decided to say something about my encounter with his published writings, which has lasted for some 30 years and led me ever deeper into his intellectual world. An academic career is a series of intellectual encounters, a few of which leave a permanent mark. Wight has left me with a number of ideas and suggestions, the cumulative effect of which is the view I hold of international relations. He might be surprised to know the impressions his writings have made on me; he might disagree with some of them. But those are the normal hazards of being intellectually influential. I shall try to show how I initially came into contact with his writings, entirely by accident, and eventually found myself wandering in a fascinating intellectual world of which previously I had scarcely been aware.¹ It is an intellectual world I have never left, or wanted to leave.

I

Martin Wight’s writings range far more widely than those of most leading historians and theorists of international relations. His thought escapes from the parochialism of particular academic disciplines and departments. It also escapes from the provincialism of the present, our preoccupation with current affairs and immediate problems of foreign policy, which is a preoccupation with ourselves and our societies at this moment. Wight grappled with some of the great questions and controversies of his era. But in doing that he tried to get beyond his time, by recalling other times when similar questions and controversies were current. What was the point in doing that? Let him speak for himself:

One of the main purposes of university education is to escape from the Zeitgeist, from the mean, narrow, provincial spirit which is constantly assuring us that we are at the peak of

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¹ This is not an attempt at intellectual biography. For an excellent recent study see I. Hall, The international political thought of Martin Wight (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
human achievement, that we stand on the edge of unprecedented prosperity or unparalleled catastrophe ... It is a liberation of the spirit to acquire perspective ... to learn that the same moral predicaments and the same ideas have been explored before.2

What makes Martin Wight’s international theory so compelling, and so attractive to me, is the exceptional historical learning that informs it. Wight was above all a historian of ideas, and that gave everything he wrote a remarkable depth of perspective. His approach to scholarship was nevertheless a broad interdisciplinary approach. Among the disciplines through which he moves, with obvious ease, are not only various branches of history but also constitutional law, international law, political theory, moral philosophy, religion and theology.

Martin Wight was a polymath. One telling indication of that is the variety of books he reviewed. Their range is wide; their authors distinguished. They range over such topics as British history, American history, European history, diplomatic history, British colonial administration, international legal history and theory, political theory, philosophy of history, Christianity and history, Christian ecclesiology and theology, political messianism, nuclear weapons and much else. The authors reviewed include many famous inhabitants of the twentieth-century academic pantheon: Salvador de Madriaga, John Middleton Murry, Arnold Toynbee, A. L. Rowse, R. G. Collingwood, Keith Hancock, John U. Nef, Harold Laski, Eric Voegelin, Arnold Brecht, J. L. Talmon, Karl Popper, Friedrich Meinecke, E. H. Carr, Hans Morgenthau, Reinhold Niebuhr, Hans Kohn, Hugh Seton-Watson, A. J. P. Taylor and Herbert Butterfield, among others.

Wight’s writings are often seemingly unfinished, or inconclusive. That was a source of frustration until I began to notice that they almost always give fascinating intimations of other issues or subjects we might study with profit. He is one of those rare thinkers about whose thought we can ask: ‘Where might this lead to?’3 Many of my writings are essays which began with one of his insights or asides. I’ve spent a significant part of my career happily wandering through his intellectual world, finding it endlessly fascinating, learning a great deal, and trying to make a contribution to it, if I could. I’ve recurrently found in his writings a thought or observation, a short passage or even a phrase, that gives an intimation of an important subject to pursue. I can discuss here only a few that had a significant impact on my thinking.

Martin Wight left behind a body of writings that were published through the efforts of his colleagues and students—Hedley Bull, Carsten Holbraad and Brian Porter in particular—and also his wife Gabriele. Those works taught me how to reflect on international affairs: what sort of questions to ask. They helped me understand the deep historical significance of the system or society of states. I learned to mark the differences between states systems and other important arrangements of world affairs, such as European empires or the medieval respublica Christiana. But

3 This is a ‘constant refrain’ of St Augustine, with whom some of Martin Wight’s work has affinities. See Peter Brown, Augustine of Hippo (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), p. 145.
those lessons did not occur until some years after my initial chance encounter with Wight as a writer on British colonialism in Africa.

II

Martin Wight’s intellectual world has different points of access, including back doors as well as front entrances. I first entered through one of the back doors. I initially came across his work in the mid-1970s, when I was involved with Carl Rosberg in co-authoring several studies of post-colonial African states. One day, while rummaging in Carl’s extensive library of Africana, I came across three volumes written by an author named Martin Wight. They caught my attention because they addressed constitutional issues of British colonialism. Those books were written when Wight was involved with Margery Perham’s colonial research unit at Oxford, between 1941 and 1946. They give an interesting insight into British thinking on the constitutional development of the country’s colonies. They also reveal one of Wight’s several intellectual personas. That was my first encounter with Martin Wight’s intellectual world. He was an authority on British colonial history and theory, including constitutional developments in Britain’s African colonies.

Wight’s book *British colonial constitutions* had a permanent impact on my own work and I continue to make reference to it. It awakened me to the significance of Britain’s efforts to establish constitutional government and the rule of law in its colonies, and its desire to bequeath those institutions to its colonial subjects. What I found most interesting, however, was not those endeavours per se, but the way those arrangements disappeared almost immediately after decolonization—particularly in Africa. Instead of fledgling constitutional democracies, what rapidly came into existence were personal dictatorships of one kind or another. That got me thinking about the ironic discrepancy between the British theory of an orderly constitutional transfer of power and the practical outcome of civilian or military authoritarianism in many, indeed most, new African states.

Wight’s books on colonialism prompted me to reflect on the great transformation of western empires into newly independent regions of the states system. That got me involved in studying formerly colonial African states which clearly were not politically integrated, or even affected to any significant extent, by their independence constitutions. They were arbitrary. They were arbitrary in the manner of their governance when viewed from the perspective of constitutional law. They were also arbitrary when viewed in relation to the polyglot mixture

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of African peoples residing inside or across their international borders. Yet those new, artificial and insubstantial states didn’t disappear after independence. They didn’t dissolve or disintegrate into the indigenous social structure which survived European colonialism. They weren’t conquered or annexed or partitioned by foreign powers.

The new states of Africa remained on the map exactly where they had been left at the time of decolonization, bleak witnesses to the legacy of European empires in that continent. How did Africa’s state jurisdictions exist if they had so little institutional substance or societal coherence, if they were prone to internal instability and even anarchy in some places, and if they were no longer kept whole by the sword and the law of colonial governments? An initial attempt to answer that question, which emphasized the significance of international organization and international law, was made in an article I wrote with Carl Rosberg. In making that argument we were getting involved, somewhat inadvertently, in the study of international politics and international law. I began to conceive of African states as girdled by a post-colonial international system which respected their sovereignty. That was their main embodiment as states. Their statehood was primarily juridical: it rested on the surrender of sovereignty by the colonial powers and its recognition by virtually every other independent government. As Hedley Bull and Adam Watson put it, they were ‘not states in the strict sense, but only by courtesy’.

In 1980 I was wandering through the stacks of the Bancroft Library at the University of California. I was looking for books on the historical development of modern states, as seen from an international angle. I came across two recent studies on the international system by the same Martin Wight of whom until that time I had thought exclusively as a historian and a constitutional authority on British colonialism: *Power politics* and *Systems of states*. Those volumes quickly led me to the foundation texts of the leading traditional international society thinkers, namely Hedley Bull, Herbert Butterfield and Martin Wight. These studies were my second entry into the intellectual world of Martin Wight, this time by the main front entrance. It was something of a revelation to learn that he was a leading scholar of international affairs.

I began to think about the decolonization of European overseas empires and the emergence of numerous new states in the former imperial territories as a great episode of change with profound consequences for international society and the peoples involved with it. Hedley Bull and Adam Watson later captured that episode in a book they coedited: *The expansion of international society*. That volume had a great influence on my thinking. Martin Wight once characterized the new states
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of Asia and Africa as ‘the debris of empire’. My earliest writings on international affairs explored that topic. 12

III

Wight was not only a historian of ideas. He was also a historian of political thought. He wrote a celebrated essay provocatively entitled ‘Why is there no international theory?’. He argued that political theory—the domestic theory of the sovereign state—is a fully developed ‘theory of the good life’ devoted to ethical and legal questions arising from the relation of the state and the citizen. By contrast, international theory is merely a residual ‘theory of survival’.13 Political theorists seek knowledge of the domestic requirements for a life of order, justice, liberty, equality or whatever values they consider most important for the good life. Wight thought of those domestic conditions and arrangements as giving evidence of a respublica. In marked contrast, ‘International politics is the realm of recurrence and repetition.’14 There cannot be a political theory of international relations because ‘there is no respublica there’.15 The problem of international theory is reduced to that of survival of the various separate states and citizenries which comprise the system of states. Survival is a question of means and expedients and not one of ends or values.

That argument struck me as curious and contradictory because it seemed to postulate a fundamental opposition between domestic politics and international politics. It also seemed out of the spirit of Martin Wight’s international thought. I didn’t think that opposition existed. I didn’t think political theory and international theory were fundamentally at odds or even basically different. I thought they were two aspects of one theory, just as domestic policy and foreign policy are two facets of public policy. The good life can be an object of public policy in both spheres, with the important qualification that it could never be fully realized in either, owing to the imperfections of the human condition. Public policy is always imperfect, domestic policy no less than foreign policy, because it always involves unforeseen or undesirable consequences, at least to some degree. That point is essential to Wight’s theological commentary, as I indicate below.

I tried to advance that argument using the hardest case, namely that of classical realism, by making reference to Thomas Hobbes (whom Wight refers to in his argument) and Arnold Wolfers (a leading American realist of Wight’s era). Survival presupposes the value of independence. As Wolfers points out, ‘It would make no sense to say or assume that nations must seek power adequate for survival if high

References

13 Martin Wight, ‘Why is there no international theory?’, in Butterfield and Wight, Diplomatic investigations, p. 33.
14 Wight, ‘Why is there no international theory?’, pp. 19, 26.
15 These are the ironic words of Michael Donelan. He is critical of the traditional separation of international theory and political theory on the Kantian grounds that ‘there is now a primordial community of mankind’. See Michael Donelan, ed., The reason of states (London: Allen & Unwin, 1978), p. 77.

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value were not placed on the existence of independent nations.’16 I would add that survival presupposes the value of security as well. The sovereign is charged with the heavy responsibility of safeguarding the subject: in the language of Hobbes, ‘the safety of the people is the supreme law’. To that end, the sovereign must wield both ‘the sword of war’ and ‘the sword of justice’.17

Wight notes that the theory of survival is anything but unimportant because it ‘involves the ultimate experience of life and death, national existence and national extinction’.18 I would say—again following Hobbes—that survival involves the greatest good and the most fundamental right: the goodness of life as such, of being alive and enjoying life; and the corresponding natural right of self-defence. The greatest evil is death and the most egregious wrong is to be killed unjustly. If there were no basis for the good life inside states, there would be no point in their survival.

Martin Wight’s essay made me more fully aware that domestic political theory had a companion international subject which was almost its twin: I am referring to public international law.19 I think the writings of Grotius on war and peace or those of Vattel on the law of nations are good examples of that unity of political theory and international jurisprudence. I also think Wight’s self-description as a Grotian in effect commits him to the argument I am making.20

IV

Martin Wight’s historical knowledge is beyond comparison, in both breadth and depth, with that of any other twentieth-century historian of international ideas that I have read. He is particularly adept at detecting, gathering and organizing vital insights scattered in the commentary of numerous statesmen and thinkers. He shows how their observations and reflections fit into a larger picture or pattern—one of which they themselves may be unaware. But his writings also reveal circumspection, even hesitation, in drawing conclusions. One noteworthy characteristic of his thought is the not infrequent absence of fully developed resting points on the major topics he addresses. Another is his tendency to break off prematurely from attempts to answer the momentous questions that his approach raises.

Martin Wight studied deeply and wrote at some length on empires. He wrote on the Roman empire and other ancient imperial enterprises. He wrote on the medieval respublica Christiana. Above all, he wrote on the British empire.21 But as far as I am aware imperialism does not feature as a systematic category in his international theory. He never explored more completely and separately the essential distinction his work raises between authentic international relations and quasi-

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18 Wight, ‘Why is there no international theory?’, p. 33.
21 Wight, British colonial constitutions.
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international relations. For example, he might have brought together his frequently brilliant commentaries on the political and religious ideas of Latin Christendom; that would have given him an opportunity to spell out the differences between a modern international world of sovereign states and a medieval imperial theocracy of ecclesia and regna, perhaps along the lines of Garrett Mattingly’s fascinating study of Renaissance diplomacy.22

I’ve always found the absence of more fully developed commentary on these subjects puzzling and disappointing. But perhaps those gaps are best seen as the unfortunate consequence of Wight’s premature death and far from completed academic career. Even in his finished work, however, Wight often does not push his insights and reflections to their final conclusions. After tracking down his quarry, he breaks off the hunt and leaves it for others to catch. That may indicate excessive intellectual diffidence or perhaps a conviction that the subject does not lend itself to any final conclusions.

What I have in mind is evident in his celebrated essay on ‘Western values in international relations’ which, although only an article in an edited book, nevertheless is a tour de force. But even in that wonderful essay important questions are left floating in the air. At the end Wight raises the vital question of justice versus survival in international affairs, by introducing the maxim ‘Let justice be done, though the world perish.’ (Fiat justitia et pereat mundus.) He remarks: ‘The maxim has been applied in many different circumstances, and with many different interpretations both of “justice” and of “the world perishing”.’ He identifies two instances of contradictory use by defenders of England’s honour and interests. ‘Perish the interests of England, perish our dominion in India, rather than that we should strike one blow or speak one word on behalf of the wrong against the right.’ ‘If the welfare of England requires it, international agreements can go to the Devil.’23

Wight speculates that nuclear weapons may change that: ‘It is indeed only since 1945 that it has been possible to imagine that the price of justice may literally be the ruin of the world.’24 The implications of that comment obviously are profound. But it is left hanging in the air. He remarks that between the two quotations ‘lies the moral sense we are considering’. He is alluding to Grotianism. But its importance for understanding this mind-boggling issue is not investigated. Instead, we are left with a tantalizing remark: ‘These assumptions seem to lie within the province of philosophy of history, or belief in Providence, whither it is not the purpose of this paper to pursue them.’25 Presumably for Wight, the traditional Christian, it rests in belief in Providence.26

23 Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’, in Butterfield and Wight, Diplomatic investigations, p. 130.
24 Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’, p. 130.
25 Wight, ‘Western values in international relations’, p. 131. Here Wight may be alluding to the discussion of the proverb by Kant in the appendix to Perpetual peace.

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What were Martin Wight’s predilections as regards the theoretical ideas he explored? He operates with remarkable detachment from the subjects he studies: if he has a penchant for any one of them, it is placed under strict scholarly discipline. He is fair-minded and even-handed in dealing with what almost always are controversial subjects. He gives the benefit of the doubt. He recognizes merit. He criticizes with restraint and respect. In one of his essays Thucydides receives pride of place as the greatest international thinker. He is a good friend of Grotius and natural law. He admires Hobbes. Kant has a valued place in his thought. Marx and Lenin are approached with composure. But one or two twentieth-century Kantians come in for heavy criticism. Woodrow Wilson in particular is a target of Wight’s antipathy. He fights hard to keep his account of Wilson’s statecraft cool and scholarly.27

Why Wilson, who is, after all, a man of goodwill and an academic as well? Wight provides an answer: goodwill is not good enough for a statesman. He must understand the political world in which he is obliged to operate and come to grips with that. The practical world of human experience does not readily surrender to abstract theories about it. Wilson is a moralist: he personifies American Puritanism. His ideas and convictions have a discernible flavour of high-minded enthusiasm and political naivety, which invite gratuitous policies and underrate self-interest. Can a vision of the future based on good ideas trump the awkward circumstances of the present? In 1919 Wilson arrived at the summit of world affairs, and proceeded to treat its diplomacy with a dislike bordering on contempt. He had a better and purer idea which he was going to put into effect.

Wilson personifies the refusal of many intellectuals and some scholars to recognize or acknowledge that the international world is deep, old, recalcitrant, confusing and—at some points—incomprehensible. It is one thing for scholars to put forward tidy theories that soar far above the cloudy and perplexing world of political reality. But when a Princeton professor of political science becomes president of what has just arrived on the world scene as the greatest of the great powers, and immediately sets about applying his academic ideas to the reform of world affairs—that is deeply worrying.

In marked contrast to his view of President Wilson, Wight registers his admiration for the modesty, reticence and scepticism of another American statesman, George Kennan. He quotes directly from one of Kennan’s written comments: ‘we [Americans] should have the modesty to admit that our own national interest is all that we are really capable of knowing and understanding’. Wight locates Kennan’s statement ‘at the heart of Rationalist country’.28 Woodrow Wilson was catapulted into world affairs at the highest level, but lacked the good sense to lean heavily on his experienced advisers. George Kennan arrived at his considered views after a long apprenticeship as a diplomat.

In noticing Wight’s pronounced antithesis between Wilson and Kennan, I was reminded of Burke’s comment on statesmen as compared to university professors:

28 Wight, International theory, pp. 120–21.
A statesman differs from a professor in a university; the latter has only the general view of society; the former, the statesman, has a number of circumstances to combine with those general ideas, and to take into his consideration ... A statesman, never losing sight of principles, is to be guided by circumstances; and, judging contrary to the exigencies of the moment, he may ruin his country forever.  

Wight declared himself to be a Rationalist or Grotian. He is a man of the middle: a moderate. But the middle way in international affairs is no high road: it is a meandering track through forest and heath where it is easy to lose one’s way, and also one’s grip. I’m tempted to think Martin Wight would agree with Benjamin Disraeli’s remark: ‘Finality is not the language of politics.’ The theorist and practitioner to whose thought Wight is particularly drawn, in that regard, is Burke. Edmund Burke, MP, surely would have subjected President Woodrow Wilson’s international pronouncements to scornful criticism. Wight makes the following comment after quoting from Burke:

Politics is the perpetual movement from one stage of the provisional to another. There are no complete solutions, only the constantly repeated approximation towards the embodiment of justice in concrete arrangements, which do as constantly dissolve with the passage of time. Thus to be a Rationalist politician is to exist in a state of moral tension between the actual and the desirable.

In his concluding comment on the foreign policy of Anthony Eden’s government in the Suez crisis—which he compares to the role of Brutus in attempting to save the Roman Republic—Wight makes the same point in a more concrete way:

Was Brutus the hero of liberty, ‘by awful virtue urg’d’ to the last extremity in defence of principle, or a traitor in the senseless hope of restoring a regime past restoration? ... Reduce the heroic scale; make it international society and not the Roman Republic; and Eden explored the same region of the moral universe of politics, with similar high-mindedness and self-righteousness, blindness and clear-sightedness, misjudgement and courage.

Wight regarded this ambivalent and indeterminate situation as the permanent predicament of international politics. All the goodwill in the world, and all the scientific study, is not enough to change it. Here I believe he is making plain his fundamental outlook. His position on this foundational issue is very near to that of Reinhold Niebuhr and Herbert Butterfield. Niebuhr saw political and diplomatic activity as permanently poised between human ideals and difficult circumstances; the tragedy of the human condition as epitomized in Brutus or Eden. Butterfield saw tragedy and other fundamental human predicaments as lodged in the nature

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29 Quoted by A. Coll, 'Normative prudence as a tradition of statecraft', Ethics and International Affairs 5, 1991, p. 45.
30 'You will have guessed that my prejudices are Rationalist, but I find I have become more Rationalist and less Realist ... during the course of giving these lectures': Wight, International theory, p. 268.
of international relations and resistant to any ideologies or policies that might seek to overcome them.35

VI

Wight’s scepticism was deeply rooted not only in extensive historical knowledge but also in traditional Christian theology. Hedley Bull has pointed out that Wight ‘was something of an odd man out both as an historian and as a student of International Relations … because the questions which concerned him most were ethical and theological … at a time when this was unfashionable’.36 Unless we take hold of the discernible Christian sensibility and perception of Martin Wight’s thought we shall not fully understand it. I’ve become increasingly aware of that as I’ve read and reread his work over the years. His writings have transported me into intellectual worlds involved with theology about which previously I had been almost entirely ignorant.

Many scholars of international relations display an exclusively secular view of their subject. If religion captures their attention, it is as a historical or sociological factor: something that can be used to explain something else. It is not treated as a part of their toolkit for understanding international relations: a way of looking at the world and reflecting on it. They fail or refuse to recognize that theology is an academic subject, and one of very long standing. It is comparable to philosophy and law in that regard. I held that secular view until I began to read Martin Wight with an eye on his theological commentary. He changed my outlook fundamentally. I came to appreciate that theology is a valuable body of knowledge for grasping the international ways of the world, and that knowledge of theology—Christian, Muslim or other—can be quite separate from one’s religious convictions or lack thereof.

Wight was a traditional Christian, however, and that committed him to a certain theology concerning the nature of God and the relation of Christian men and women to that deity. A traditional Christian—either Protestant or Catholic—is someone who recognizes the permanent place of sin and grace in human affairs and cannot subscribe to any doctrine of the progress and perfection of humankind.37 Humans may perhaps mature in their moral refinement and they may also progress in the technical sophistication of their lives. There is civilization and there is science, both of which are human achievements of the greatest importance. But even if some people are well-meaning and sincerely try to do their best, even if human societies can and do advance at certain times or places, humankind, as such, cannot progress. The leopard cannot change his spots: human nature is permanently fixed by God’s act of creation. The gravest Christian sin is

37 Sin is to be understood as flawed human nature, grace as mercy or kindness. See L. Stelton, *Dictionary of ecclesiastical Latin* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1995), p. 111.
committed when people think they can create heaven on earth, which is the sin of pride in which they attempt to take the place of God. In Christian theology that sin is associated with a doctrine called Pelagianism, named after a Roman British servus Dei, a servant of God, whose teachings Augustine was determined to have condemned as heresy. Martin Wight arguably is an Augustinian in his view of history and world affairs.38

Hedley Bull draws our attention to the importance of theology in Wight's thinking:

In his 1948 article in the Ecumenical Review he attacks the Pelagian belief that 'we are on the whole well-meaning people doing our best, who will somehow muddle through', together with secular optimism, 'the belief that because we are well-meaning and doing our best, things will therefore tend to come right; or (for optimism sidesteps subtly into fatalism) that what does happen will be for the best anyway'. Neither of these beliefs, he says, is Christian. 'We are not well-meaning people doing our best; we are miserable sinners, living under judgment, with a heritage of sin to expiate ... We will not somehow muddle through; if we ... cast ourselves upon God's mercy we have the promise that we shall be saved—a totally different thing, which carries no assurance of muddling through in this world.'39

Wight was critical of the same intellectual hubris that Reinhold Niebuhr portrayed as the 'ideological taint' of modern social thought,40 which was and still is a predilection of some scholars of international relations.41 The following passage by Niebuhr could have been written by Wight.

[Man's] basic sin is pride. If this pride is closely analyzed, it is discovered to be man's unwillingness to acknowledge his creatureliness. He is betrayed by his greatness to hide his weakness. He is tempted by his ability to gain his own security to deny his insecurity, and refuses to admit that he has no final security except in God. He is tempted by his knowledge to deny his ignorance.42

In another passage Niebuhr writes: 'Proud men and successful civilizations find it difficult to know God, because they are particularly tempted to make themselves God.'43

A traditional Christian is somebody who is deeply sceptical about the possibilities of human perfectibility and the fulfilment of human destiny in the city

38 See the insightful comments on this point in Roger Epp, 'The "Augustinian moment" in international politics: Niebuhr, Butterfield, Wight and the reclaiming of a tradition', International politics research occasional paper 10 (Aberystwyth: Department of International Politics, University of Aberystwyth, 1991).
41 In noticing Wight's deep and abiding opposition to Pelagianism (in its modern idiom of secular faith in progress), Bull locates a religious root of his international thought. Here is how one commentator sums up the Pelagian doctrine: 'We are born characterless (non pleni), and with no bias towards good or evil (ut sine virtute, ita et sine vitio). It follows that we are uninjured by the sin of Adam, save in so far as the evil example of our predecessors misleads and influences us (non propagine sed exemplo). There is, in fact, no such thing as original sin, sin being a thing of will and not of nature.'
of man. He or she accepts the second best, or the best in the circumstances. Pelagianism seeks to create heaven on earth which, for a traditional Christian, is both impossible and profane. According to Peter Brown, Pelagius ‘appealed to a universal theme: the need of the individual … to feel free to create his own values in the midst of the conventional, second-rate life of society’. In his magnificent biography, Brown captures the kernel of Augustine’s theological opposition to Pelagianism: ‘The deadly perfectionism of the Pelagians was distasteful to him: he also was trying to be perfect; but [in Augustine’s words] “in their exhortations, let them urge the higher virtues; but without denigrating the second-best.”’ The traditional Christian’s attitude to politics is one of pessimism about what might be achieved and gratitude for what is achieved; but it is emphatically not an attitude of hope or confidence that anything can be achieved if we only put our minds to it and keep an open heart. Hope is a theological virtue; it is not a political virtue.

The first virtue of politics is almost the opposite: prudence.

In politics, including international politics, we should of course strive to do our best. But we should be under no illusions about what we may hope to achieve by our efforts, for all that we can reasonably expect is a temporary adjustment to a recurring situation or difficulty which admits of no permanent or final solution. Wight comments on this point: ‘If this is indeed the character of international politics, it is incompatible with progressivist theory.’ Hedley Bull remarks in this connection on the international thought of Martin Wight:

In his attitude to international affairs he was remarkably free of the impulse that drives so many students of the subject to advocate policies or canvass solutions to the problems of the day. Wight emphatically did not stand for an attitude of what today is called political commitment, and this was because his commitment, while it was very powerful, was not political in nature, but intellectual and moral—and, most fundamentally of all, religious.

The ability to hold oneself aloof from the subject one is studying, while yet appreciating the difficulties and dilemmas that the activity presents to the people involved with it—that combination of detachment and empathy is a striking feature of Martin Wight’s thought. It is the same scholarly disposition that Herbert Butterfield associates with the narrative historian.
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Wight was a historian of ideas, but he never lost sight of the fact that ideas begin and end with human beings, with their thinking and their thought.\(^{51}\) To know other people we must know what they think. To know other worlds we must grasp the ideas of the people who inhabit them, and we must appreciate what those ideas mean to them. To frame and pursue an intelligent and humane foreign policy we must know what the people on the receiving end are thinking, what they are like, and how they see us. Wight identifies that humane scepticism with the rationalist ethics of diplomacy, and he discerns it in the commentaries of George Kennan. We lose sight of those ethics of human imperfection when we start to believe that our ideas are superior and begin to expect that other peoples with different ideas ought to become enlightened and agree with us. That expectation is not only intolerant; it is dangerous. The greatest danger is that it may lead to doctrinal warfare, which is a subject on which Martin Wight wrote with characteristic discernment and insight.\(^{52}\) I think we are all well aware that that expectation is unfortunately held by some leaders of major western powers and their advisers at the present time, with regrettable consequences for international peace and security.\(^{53}\)

VII

What distinguishes Martin Wight from most other scholars of International Relations is the fact that he has so many different dimensions and can be approached from so many different directions. To read his books and articles is not only to learn about history and international relations. It is also to enter the worlds of law and philosophy, religion and theology, and more. Yet Martin Wight was more typical of his time than we may realize. His subjects were also of interest to many other scholars of his day. I have become more fully aware of that over the past decade as a result of perusing the huge academic treasure of scholarly publications that are now available on electronic websites, and one in particular: Jstor or Journal Storage. I was struck by the large number of mid-twentieth-century commentators on world affairs and related subjects—not only British but also American, European and others—who shared the same humanistic approach and wrote in the same idiom as Martin Wight.

A good way to enter his intellectual world is to read the works of some of these authors, almost all of whom were making their contribution in the middle decades of the twentieth century. I can call your attention here to only a small personal selection of those thinkers, with some of whose writings Martin Wight clearly was familiar: Garrett Mattingly on Renaissance diplomacy and the Spanish Armada; C. V. Wedgwood on the Thirty Years War; John U. Nef on war and human progress; René Albrecht Carrié on diplomatic history; Gerhard Ritter on the German Reformation and Frederick the Great; Friedrich Meinecke on power

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51 That is also R. G. Collingwood’s basic point about the notion of history. See *The idea of history* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), part V.
52 See *Power politics*, p. 139.
Robert Jackson

politics and reason of state; Jacques Maritain on sovereignty and natural law; Harold Nicolson on diplomacy and peacemaking; Alfred Vagts on intelligentsia versus reason of state; A. F. Pollard on the balance of power; Martin Foss on the idea of perfection in the western world; Heinrich Rommen on Francis Suarez and natural law; Leo Gross on the Peace of Westphalia and the crime of aggression; Charles H. Alexandrowicz on new and original states; Majid Khadduri on Islam and the modern law of nations.

Those authors and others like them inspired me to try to escape from the ‘mean, narrow, provincial spirit’ of my time and to gain the academic perspective that scholarship demands. They show up in the footnotes of my books and on my reading lists, to the dismay of some of my students who consider them old-fashioned and irrelevant, but to the delight of other students who see them as enlightening and horizon-widening.