

This September sees the publication of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* – a £25 million project of 50,000 essays published simultaneously in 60 volumes which will be the largest British work of biographical reference ever printed. Why are we so interested in other people's lives? What is the secret of writing a good biography? **Nicola Lacey** and **Anthony Howe** share their experiences.

Other people's lives

For the last four years, I have spent much of my time with HLA Hart, the eminent legal philosopher who died in 1992. Born into a Jewish family in Harrogate, Yorkshire, in 1907, Herbert Hart was a brilliant student at Oxford and had a glittering career at the Chancery Bar in the 1930s before becoming a highly placed counter-espionage officer in MI5 during World War Two. In 1945, reluctant to return to a career which he had come to see as mainly involving saving rich people money, he returned to Oxford as Philosophy Fellow at New College. Here, despite suffering agonising feelings of insecurity about his capacity to take up academic work after such a long break, Hart quickly became a leading figure in the group of linguistic philosophers around JL Austin and Gilbert Ryle. In 1952 he was elected to the Chair of Jurisprudence, and over the next decade established himself as the world's leading legal philosopher. In *The Concept of Law*, he developed a theory of law as a system of social rules which claimed to contribute not only to analytical jurisprudence but also to descriptive sociology. And in works such as *Law, Liberty and Morality*, Hart was a passionate and influential advocate of liberal social policy, taking up causes such as the abolition of capital punishment and the decriminalisation of abortion and homosexuality.

When I began work, Hart's papers were not in the public domain; to be precise, they were languishing in the somewhat chaotic spare bedroom of the Harts' house in Oxford, untouched except by his widow, Jenifer, who had put them in order and drawn on them in her own autobiography. They included diaries and personal letters, and since I was also able to interview many of his closest family and friends, and had known him myself, I had reason to be optimistic about the resources available for developing a rich interpretation of his life. But I was quite unprepared for what I found in his letters and diaries. For they provided a fascinating counter-narrative to his successful and apparently happy life as Oxford professor, family man married to a beautiful and brilliant woman, and famous scholar. His complex interior world was marked by anxiety about his capacity to relate to others, about his sexual identity, and about





the quality of his work. This personal material turned out to shed powerful light on the development of his ideas and the course of his career because Hart himself moved back and forth in his diaries between

personal and professional preoccupations, and sought to draw links between the two. The final result is an affectionate but very frank portrait of a man generally thought of as the impersonal, academic icon 'H.L.A. Hart', and I have no doubt that many readers will be surprised by it. The key to my interpretation of his life was my judgement that the relationship between his interior and public worlds was essential to any understanding of him as a whole person, and that an insight into his personal perplexities should augment rather than diminish our assessment of his achievements as a public intellectual.

Writing a biography has been a fascinating experience, quite unlike any other. One thing in particular stands out in my mind. This is the way in which biography blurs the boundaries between work and leisure, public and private, intellectual and emotional responses which generally, if imperfectly, delimit academic research. This had both positive and negative aspects. I loved the informality and spontaneity it brought into my research life – I often found myself doing research around the dinner

table, and learnt just as much from casual conversations and email exchanges as from formal interviews and visits to archives. But I felt torn by the need to reconcile competing demands: concern for Hart's family in the light of some of the very personal material I was uncovering, along with an awareness of the extraordinary trust which Jennifer Hart had placed in me, vying with the need to produce an independent and wide-ranging interpretation; the overwhelming feeling of responsibility to 'do justice' to my subject, combined with the recognition that it was up to me to work out the criteria for 'justice' as I went along.

In confronting these dilemmas, other biographers were a huge support to me, and I'm delighted to discover that life-writing is going on in many parts of LSE. Biographies are, after all, windows on the linkages between individual and institution, agency and structure, which make up our social world. As such they deserve to have a place in the UK's premier social science university. ■



Nicola Lacey

is Professor of Criminal Law at LSE. Her *A Life of H.L.A. Hart: the nightmare and the noble dream* (ISBN 019274975) is published by Oxford University Press this autumn, see www.oup.co.uk © Nicola Lacey

Biography extras



• **Professor Meghnad Desai** has this year published a biography of Indian film star Dilip Kumar. He describes

Nehru's Hero: Dilip Kumar in the life of India (Roli, 2004) as his 'greatest achievement'. Examining Kumar's films – some of which Professor Lord Desai has seen more than 15 times – he discovers parallels between the socio-political arena in India and its reflection on screen. He discusses issues as varied as censorship, the iconic values of Indian machismo, identity and secularism, and analyses how the films portrayed a changing India at that time. The book has also changed Professor Lord Desai's life in that he is now engaged to marry its editor, Kishwar Ahluwalia.

• Chatto & Windus are to publish a book by LSE alumna **Cherie Booth QC** (LLB 1975) in September about people who have lived at 10 Downing Street. The provisional title is *The*

Goldfish Bowl. The publishers say: 'Set against the background of the changing place of women in our society, this illuminating and intimate book explores the pressures and rewards of daily life in the 'goldfish bowl' of No 10 and Chequers, and offers fascinating insights into the 'political marriage' and the changing role of the leader's spouse.'



• **Professor Ben Pimlott**, one of the foremost political biographers of his generation, died in April, aged 58. His lives

of *Harold Wilson* (1992) and *The Queen* (1996) were bestsellers. But his biographical career began while a research associate at LSE. *The Times* noted in his obituary: 'In 1979 he was awarded a large grant to take up a post as a research officer for two years at LSE to work on [Hugh] Dalton's papers. This was a bold decision on his part, for it would mean effectively giving up his tenured post at Newcastle. The work led to an invitation to write a biography, and

his *Hugh Dalton* received great acclaim on its publication in 1985 and was awarded the Whitbread Biography Prize in the same year. The work established Pimlott as an authority both on the Labour Party in the interwar years and as a biographer. Roy Jenkins likened the book to an X-ray inspection of Dalton, and praised it as "the most relentlessly penetrating biography" he had read.'

Professor Pimlott went on to complete two volumes of Dalton's diaries, *The Second World War Diary 1940-45* (1985) and *The Political Diary 1918-40, 1945-60* (1986). When he had finished them, he commented: 'It is an odd expertise, to know more than anybody about a person with whom you have no connection, and to have the career details of his vast acquaintanceship buzzing round your head.' Professor Pimlott, who also chaired the Fabian Society from 1993-94, became warden of Goldsmiths College, London, in 1998 – a post he held until his death from leukaemia this year.



overdue, for it was first begun in the 1870s under the aegis of James Thorold Rogers, Drummond Professor of Political Economy at Oxford, a pioneer of economic history and MP for Southwark. Rogers did not make much progress before the project was turned over to Henry Richard, another Liberal MP (Merthyr Tydfil) but more importantly the secretary of the Peace Society in whose activities Cobden himself had been closely involved. In the mid-1870s it was decided to abandon this collection – partly because Cobden's widow was less keen on it than his fellow Radicals. Even so, another of Cobden's close friends Mrs Salis Schwabe did publish (in Paris in 1879) a collection of her letters from Cobden, sales of which went to support infant education in Naples.

Why set out to complete a project begun more than 130 years before? Largely the answer lies in concerns beyond the biographical. This edition of Cobden's letters will contribute to a more detailed understanding of the nature and complexity of Radical attitudes towards free trade, the role of the state, and foreign affairs in early Victorian Britain. In addition, Cobden, the 'Marx of the bourgeoisie', put forward a distinctive view of history and progress through international economic integration which identifies him as a prophet of globalisation. Most lives and letters in the Victorian period have tended to be those of party politicians from aristocratic circles, but Cobden is distinctive as a businessman in politics. Cobden also became an important writer and orator, producing a string of political pamphlets and major speeches from the 1830s onwards, works which contributed greatly to his influence in his lifetime and became a central part of the Radical canon thereafter. Cobden was also unusual as one of Victorian Britain's most well-travelled citizens, who knew at first hand, Europe (including Russia), the Near East and the United States, which he visited twice. His travels gave Cobden a worldwide range of correspondents and gave rise in his letters to a series of cultural and economic observations

which throw light not only on the nations he visited but also on his understanding of British national identity. His letters therefore tell us much about the 'public mind' of Victorian Britain, and in this sense he was a leading 'public intellectual' or 'political moralist'.

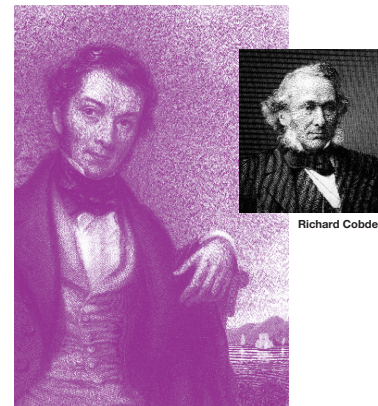
Two other reasons made this edition attractive. Cobden was, as Thorold Rogers noted, among the best of 19th century letter writers – writing 'with great fluency, clearness and vivacity. A letter of his gave one all the impressions of an animated conversation.' Since Cobden was never an executive politician, the letters are uncluttered by the minutiae of daily official business, and remain free-flowing, readable, and informative.

Finally, Cobden has interesting connections with LSE. His home was Dunford House, near Midhurst, Sussex. He was able to repurchase it with funds given to him by his admirers after the repeal of the Corn Laws in 1846, and the house was then given to the School by his daughter Jane Cobden Unwin in 1919. Jane had been one of the first women elected to the London County Council in 1889 although unable legally to take her seat. Dunford was for a few years a valued weekend retreat for members of the School until Jane decided she wanted the house back. She purchased it from the School in 1923, the funds going towards a 'Cobden Library'. ■



Anthony Howe

is now Professor of Modern British History at the University of East Anglia, having taught for 20 years in LSE's Department of International History. He is an honorary research associate of the *Oxford DNB* to which he has contributed 40 entries, including those on Jane Cobden Unwin and on another of Cobden's daughters, Annie Cobden Sanderson, a militant suffragette. © Anthony Howe



Richard Cobden

The Letters of Richard Cobden Project is funded by a major grant from the Arts and Humanities Research Board.

With Dr Simon Morgan, the Cobden Project's research officer, Professor Howe is organising an international Cobden Bicentenary conference in July 2004 to be held at Dunford House, in association with the YMCA, who now run the house as a conference centre. For further information, please see www.uea.ac.uk/his/research/projects/cobden. If any reader knows of the whereabouts of any of Cobden's letters in private hands, the Project would be very keen to hear from them. Please contact Anthony Howe at the School of History, UEA, Norwich, NR4 7TJ; email: a.c.howe@uea.ac.uk