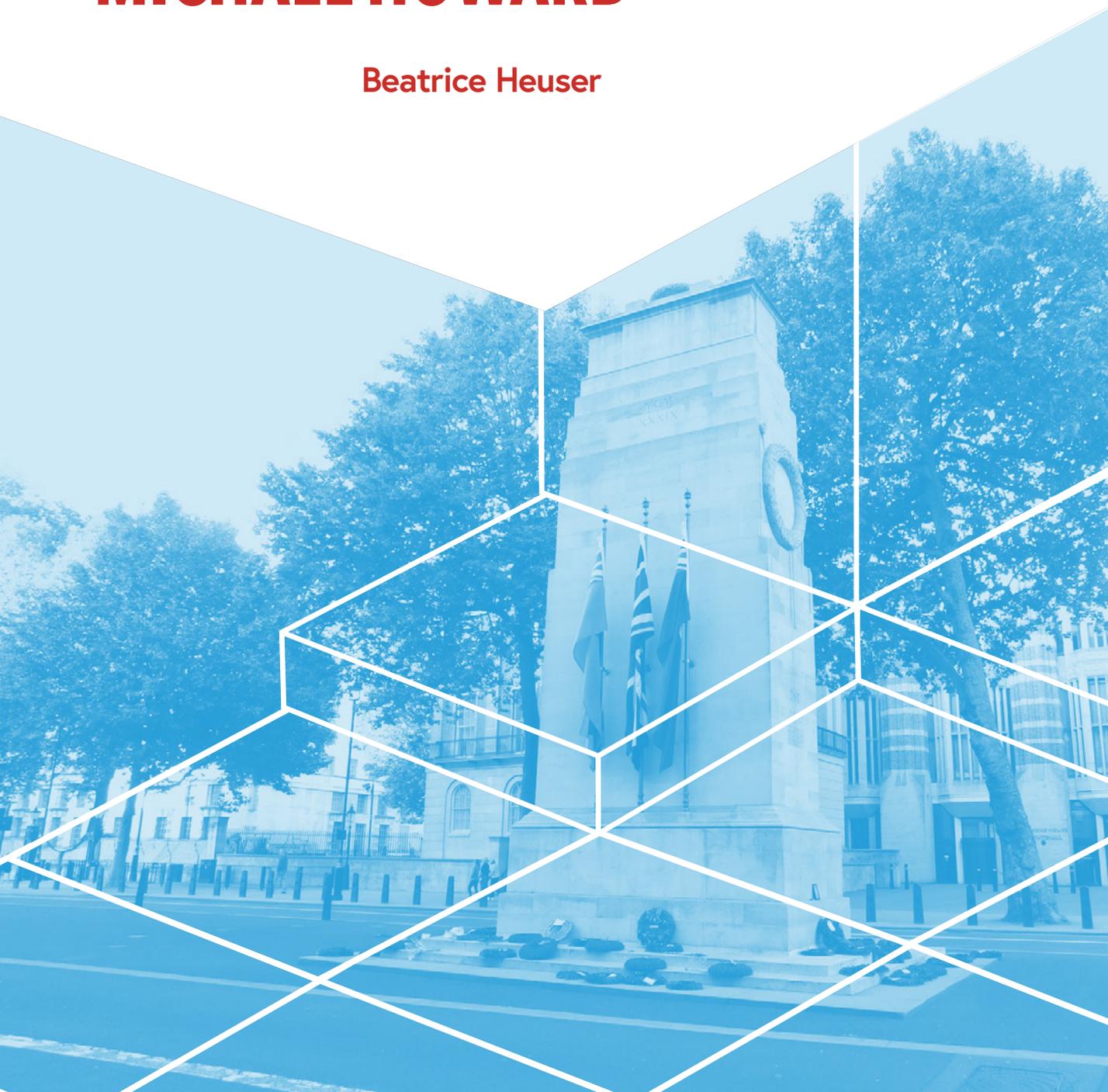




CAPTAIN PROFESSOR SIR: SOME LESSONS FROM MICHAEL HOWARD

Beatrice Heuser



In this featured roundtable essay for Vol. 3, Iss. 2, Beatrice Heuser writes about the life and work of the late Sir Michael Howard.

In 1967, the professor of war studies of King's College London, then still an integral part of the University of London, was invited to give the ninth Harmon Memorial Lecture in Military History at the U.S. Air Force Academy. Ostensibly speaking about "Strategy and Policy in 20th-Century Warfare," the speaker, Michael Howard, used this occasion to make a plug for widening military history to become more of a historiography of war. He argued it should explain the traditional campaign history in the larger context of the history of war, which, in turn, is an intrinsic part of the history of society. Combat activities should be seen as "methods of implementing national policy, to be assessed in the light of political purposes which they are intended to serve." Influenced by Edward Mead Earle's famous *Makers of Strategy*, he identified this linkage between "national policy" and the use of force as "strategy." Almost 40 years later, this is how he put it in his autobiography:

The history of war, I came to realize, was more than the operational history of armed forces. It was the study of entire societies. Only by studying their cultures could one come to understand what it was that they fought about and why they fought in the way that they did. Further, the fact that they did so fight had a reciprocal impact on their social structure. I had to learn not only to think about war in a different way, but also to think about history itself in a different way. I would certainly not claim to have invented the concept of 'War and Society', but I think I did something to popularize it.²

I first encountered Michael Howard when his star was at its zenith and he was invited to give another celebrated lecture to another set of students, this time civilians. In 1981, as the incumbent of Britain's most prestigious chair in modern history — the Regius Chair, which is appointed by the monarch on the prime minister's advice — he gave the annual

Creighton Lecture at the University of London. It was the last peak of the Cold War, and the lecture, entitled "The Causes of War,"³ was given in the university's Senate House, Britain's most glorious fascistoid piece of architecture. Into this lecture I drifted, then myself a confused history student at the London School of Economics and a member of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, to find that it was the most inspiring thing I had heard on the subject of war. Sitting in the cold marble Art Deco lecture room, I realized that I had discovered my academic model: a scholar who started a lecture with Thucydides' explanation of the origins of the Peloponnesian War and ended it with a pointer to the horrendous dangers inherent in balance-of-power thinking. He conjured up the nightmare that a nuclear power might be tempted to go to war to prevent an adversarial nuclear power from growing to the point that it would become unbeatable. Not only did he articulate the fears of Campaigners for Nuclear Disarmament, but he also intuitively caught the essence of how Soviet military leaders felt in the face of NATO's deployment of the Euromissiles or Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces.⁴

Moreover, here was a historian who did not hesitate to sketch the big picture. I had had my fill of lecturers who, when asked about parallels across time and space, claimed not to be able to comment because that was "not their period." I had also had my fill of lecturers who thought the study of history was worth pursuing because it was intriguing, entertaining, and fascinating, but who proclaimed that history should be studied exclusively for its own sake — that it holds no wisdom for the present. I realized that I had found the approach to history that I have since made my own, not *l'art pour l'art* or history as entertainment, but a database for the study of human behavior, our only guide to understanding *rerum causas* — the origins of things, of configurations of the present and the future.

Howard was well aware of the potential for the abuse of history.⁵ History, he said, does not teach lessons; historians do, some wisely, some less so.

1 Michael Howard, *Strategy and Policy in 20th-Century Warfare*, 9th Harmon Memorial Lecture in Military History (Colorado: United States Air Force Academy, 1967), 2.

2 Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: The Memoirs of Sir Michael Howard* (London: Continuum, 2006), 145.

3 This is printed as the first chapter in Howard, *The Causes of Wars* (London: Maurice Temple Smith, 1983, reprinted by Unwin paperbacks).

4 The Soviet hawks, we recall, were afraid of a NATO surprise attack with these weapons which could pass under the radar (cruise missiles) or take so little time to reach the Soviet Union that Moscow might not have time to react. See, Beatrice Heuser: "The Soviet Response to the Euromissile Crisis, 1982-83," in *The Crisis of Détente in Europe: From Helsinki to Gorbachev, 1975-1985*, ed. Leopoldo Nuti (London: Routledge, 2008), 137-49.

5 See, Howard, "The Use and Abuse of Military History," in *The Causes of Wars*, 208-17; and Howard, *The Lessons of History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), containing lectures he gave when at Oxford.

New evidence constantly emerges, requiring a constant re-evaluation of our understanding of past times, just when we thought we understood this causality or that period reasonably well.⁶ Historians can make few predictions of the future, but as historians perceived with glee, particularly in the late 1980s, the many theories of international relations could not do more. History furnishes us with *patterns* — not identical patterns as found in wallpaper, which would allow us to formulate a verifiable, hard-and-fast theory that whenever there is a grey circle, then a brown square follows. But we do find an erratic, unreliable, but nevertheless discernible repetition of basic configurations — structure and process, in the words of Howard⁷ — of human interactions, such as jealousy and competitive behavior between rivals and colleagues; the dynamics of group decision-making in a cabinet of ministers or the NATO Council; inter-service rivalry; conspiracy theories; bureaucratic politics; the individual's temptation to defect from the group and follow his or her own shortsighted, narrow interests; and the distrust of any rising power, however peaceful and democratic it is, and the dangerous window-of-opportunity thinking that might bring on avoidable conflicts. History also provides examples of moral dilemmas that resurface time and again: what balance to strike between the liberty of the individual and the sacrifice made for the collectivity or how to identify the lesser evil, given that the choice in politics and international relations is generally between several bad options, rarely between good and bad.

The Lessons He Taught

Two years after hearing him speak, when I applied to do a DPhil at Oxford, I was assigned Howard as my supervisor. I sent him a gushing note to express my excitement about this. He wrote back, kindly: "It is nice to be appreciated." He must have wondered how to respond to this effervescence of enthusiasm, and clearly, his British reserve kicked in. When, in the second year of my DPhil, he absconded to Princeton for a sabbatical, however, he wrote glowing reports home in private letters about the enthusiasm of American students (letters now in the Liddell Hart Archive at King's College London). So he too could gush, but only in private!

I worked with him for long enough then, and later, to take on board some of the major lessons he passed on beyond that of marrying history and the present. One was that of his engagement as a

government adviser: I have never seen the point of studying international relations if one does not want to engage with practitioners. Knighted in 1986 and honored with further distinctions, Sir Michael Howard has been greatly honored by the British establishment, even though it was not always plain sailing, as his opposition to a number of government decisions illustrates. He clearly did wield influence in Whitehall through his articulate and lucid statements at conferences and the wisdom of his insights, presented in a sincere yet tactful way. His was always the approach of avoiding outrightly offending an adversary, rather seeking to persuade and to stimulate thinking. (Occasionally he gave in to the temptation of gentle mockery, but he would equally turn this on himself.)

Persuasion, rather than hostile confrontation, was to him a cardinal goal. I once was examiner to a PhD student who, to terminate NATO's intervention in Afghanistan, advocated bombing in winter the villages of tribes known to back the mujahideen. The student's argument was that it would kill enemy supporters, and those who were out during the day — gathering firewood perhaps — would die of exposure. The candidate added that "unfortunately" the "Obama circles" in Washington refused to contemplate this measure. Having read much the same about Wehrmacht tactics in occupied Russia in World War II, I was horrified, and I turned to Howard for moral guidance. His answer: make the candidate write as many pages on why it is that the "Obama circles" refuse to contemplate this measure. That would force him to take an even-handed approach to the subject.

In the same vein, Howard opposed the outlawing of "Holocaust denial" in the United Kingdom: He did not think it a parliament's business to legislate on the truth. By contrast, he thought one should not cease to engage with those denying that genocide had taken place — under German occupation, or under the Young Turks, or under Pol Pot or Mao — and to confront them with evidence. Dialogue to him was key. In the heated debates about war and peace and nuclear deterrence, he realized a long time before many of us that Whitehall and the military had the same goal as the antinuclear campaigners: to avoid World War III. The disagreement was about how to do so, not about the goal itself. The disarmers merely showed more concern about the ever-present danger of war, including nuclear escalation, by accident or miscalculation, while the deterrers — who included Howard — argued and continue to

6 Howard, *The Lessons of History*, 11.

7 Howard, *The Lessons of History*, 188–200.



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argue that nuclear weapons make major war an impossible rational choice. As he put it in 1981,

Society may have accepted killing as a legitimate instrument of state policy, but not, as yet, suicide. For that reason, I find it hard to believe that the abolition of nuclear weapons, even if it were feasible, would be an un-mixed blessing. Nothing that makes it easier for statesmen to regard war as a feasible instrument of state policy, one from which they stand to gain rather than lose, is likely to contribute to lasting peace.⁸

In the furtherance of dialogue, one of his great achievements was his leading role in setting up the Institute for Strategic Studies (later the International Institute for Strategic Studies) in London. Yet, in his memoirs, he was skeptical about the true enthusiasm with which this was greeted among government officials (the institute scrupulously refused any government financial support). He recalled: “Seldom can bureaucrats have listened so courteously to academics, and academics have basked so gladly under the happy illusion that their

ideas were being taken seriously in the corridors of power.”⁹ There is no doubt, however, that this institute has provided an exceptional forum for international debate about war and peace, and for the exchange of knowledge between the government and scholars.

It was also Howard who founded the world-leading interdisciplinary Department of War Studies at King’s College London, which, under the leadership of his disciple, Sir Lawrence Freedman, bloomed into the world’s largest research and teaching institution on war-related subjects. Its students are not merely normal civilian undergraduates and graduates (as in London) — its Shrivenham branch is now mainly responsible for the academic part in the education of most British higher officers.

Occasionally, this growth in war studies, pursued with great enthusiasm by lecturers and students alike, could lead to misunderstandings. When Howard was invited back to King’s College from Oxford for, as usual, a very stimulating guest lecture, an undergraduate asked him, “Sir, what is your favorite war?” He took a deep breath and, realizing that just such a misunderstanding had occurred, replied with a voice like thunder: “My favorite war?

8 Howard, *The Causes of Wars* (Unwin Paperback reprint, 1985), 22.

9 Howard, *Captain Professor*, 163.

Why, I hate them all!" Indeed, his memoirs of his own experience in World War II are full of regrets. These include the likely unavoidable inaction of the British contingent in Gorizia while Yugoslavs wrought their revenge on Italians for what Italian occupation forces had done to Yugoslavs shortly before.¹⁰ Years later, Howard was invited to lecture in an Italian town, and found that not everybody gave him a warm welcome: It turned out that the British contingent that had liberated it had been unaware that in a town nearby, a bloody reckoning was taking place between two different factions of Italians. He wrote in his memoirs that he was still wondering what else he could have done.¹¹ He, for one, was never so naïf as to think there was a good answer to every such question.

Howard had a particular gift of finding the right words in his writing: He could summarize complex issues most beautifully and succinctly. Sitting in an antique armchair in his exquisitely decorated office at Oriel College (I have a vague memory of pastel colors including light green, grey, and pink, which he also sported in his ties), an ornate 18th-century golden clock ticking away above the fireplace, he shared with his student a cup of tea or a crystal glass of sherry as well as his recipe on how to write a good lecture or chapter. It was derived from the old Oxbridge essay style: Do all your reading, then retire for the evening with a good glass of red wine. *In nocte consilium*: Rise early, write the whole thing in one go, and then go back to your notes to insert the footnotes. If you look closely, the chapters

of his great think-piece books, such as *War and the Liberal Conscience* or *The Invention of Peace*, are all roughly the length of a good 50-minute lecture.

Howard also knew what scholars can and cannot contribute. His wisdom was to contribute a wid-

He saw that, as a historian, the best contribution he could make was to put any issue in a wider context, to highlight the bigger picture, the recurrent patterns and questions, and the ethical dimensions beyond the specific technicalities of any ongoing negotiations, while insisting on precision in language and argument.

In dialogue with government officials as well as civilian students and military officers, Howard followed a number of rules typical of the English School of Strategic Studies, of which another captain (one world war earlier), Sir Basil Liddell Hart, was the father. It is not by accident that Liddell Hart would also become Howard's chief mentor. True to the tradition of another "captain who taught generals" (as was said of Liddell Hart), Howard passed on the following advice to his own disciples: Do not shroud your writing in jargon. Write clearly so that any halfway educated person can understand what you are saying, and cite solid historical evidence to make your point, rather than indulging in a game of theories. Find quotations from the original sources to illustrate your point; do not quote or clutter your text with the names of other academics unless you intend to disagree with them. Write and speak succinctly. Your main argument is what matters. Don't go off on tangents with details that thrill you but that distract your audience and readers from the main argument.

er perspective, whether in a debate behind closed doors or in public, about any live issue, with an understanding of history that shed light on a topic from a different angle. Few scholars have real-time insights into diplomatic and policymaking activities or could ever have the detailed knowledge of the issues facing government officials and military officers directly involved in negotiations within governments, alliances, or other international organizations or arms control fora. Technical details of weapons systems, for example, are usually the last to be declassified. And Howard, for one, was acutely aware that changes in technology could significantly change arguments about strategy.¹² Yet, sometimes choices emerge that are clear enough even to outsiders without knowing all the technical details involved. It is especially here that scholars can weigh in and comment in ways that can enrich and enlighten the debate, as Howard did in the debate about the United Kingdom's acquisition of Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces and of Trident in

10 Howard, *Captain Professor*, 108, 114–16.

11 Howard, *Captain Professor*, 109.

12 See, for example, Howard, "Surviving a Protest," first published in *Encounter* (1980), reprinted in *The Causes of Wars*, 116f.

the early 1980s — he was against both and thought the American commitment to Europe's defense in NATO sufficient¹³ — or the debate on the U.S. “War on Terror” following the 9/11 attacks. (In the latter context he rightly pointed out that it is nonsense to speak about waging war on an abstract noun, while promoting a conflict with terrorists to the status of war would only give them combatant protection.¹⁴) He saw that, as a historian, the best contribution he could make was to put any issue in a wider context, to highlight the bigger picture, the recurrent patterns and questions, and the ethical dimensions beyond the specific technicalities of any ongoing negotiations, while insisting on precision in language and argument. This is an important lesson that academics can learn from the career of Michael Howard: It is in such contexts that they can make themselves most useful.

Translating Clausewitz

It is often said that Howard owed his reputation above all to his book on the Franco-Prussian War.¹⁵ But his real rise to fame came when, jointly with Peter Paret, he edited a new translation of Clausewitz's *On War*, just as, in the wake of the Vietnam debacle, the idea that America had betrayed its Napoleonic-Clausewitzian “way of war” in Vietnam and should return to a true “American Way of War” was seizing hold of the American military. Clausewitz became the flavor of the age, and Howard and Paret, together with their late colleague Angus Malcolm of the British Foreign Office, turned obsolescent German into pithy, up-to-date English prose. Clausewitz, of course, has more to offer than merely comments on high-intensive conflict or how to organize large-scale resistance (“people's war”) against an occupation regime (an aspect of *On War* that impressed Mao Tse-tung).

Clausewitz was to give Howard much of the intellectual ammunition that he was still groping for when he gave his lecture at the U.S. Air Force Academy in 1967: As director of Prussia's General War School, Clausewitz was at odds with his staff over their excessively positivist determination to teach warfare through formulae — what would later be called the principles of warfare — and make it cal-

culable and predictable. Clausewitz thought that “[a]ll these attempts to base the conduct of war upon arithmetic and geometrical principles are to be discarded, as the application of the rule exclude the genius [probably better translated as ‘judgment’] and limit the activity of intelligence.”¹⁶ In his “Abstract Principles of Strategy” of 1808/1809, Clausewitz wrote:

The more I think about this part of the Art of War [i.e. what we now call Strategy], the more I become convinced that its theory can posit few or even no abstract principles [Sätze]; but not, as is commonly thought, because the matter is too difficult, but because one would go under in stating the all-too-obvious [Trivialitäten].

On the one hand, he argued,

In war, there are so many petty variables [Umstände] which contribute to affect action that if one wanted to include them appropriately in his abstract rules, one would appear as the biggest pedant.

On the other hand, to ignore the many variables would be unrealistic.¹⁷ Nor did Clausewitz think it appropriate for the teacher to prescribe the military commander's every actions in all contexts: Howard liked to quote the passage from *On War* in which Clausewitz defined the role of the teacher as to “educate the mind of the future military leader or rather give him guidance in his self-education, but not accompany him onto the battlefield, just as a teacher guides and facilitates the spiritual development of a youth, without, however, keeping him strapped in leading strings all his life.”¹⁸

Published in 1976, this new translation of *On War*, with its lengthy introductory chapters, gave Howard the material for many wise spin-off articles and lectures. The very next year, Howard left London for Oxford there to take up the Chichele Chair of the History of War — a chair created in 1910 as the Chair of Military History and renamed in 1946 to cover “war” more generally — which perfectly suited Howard's agenda of moving research from traditional military history to the history of war and of strategy.

13 Howard: “Surviving a Protest,” 116–33, 116f; “On Fighting a Nuclear War,” in *The Causes of Wars*, 133–50; and “Deterrence, Consensus and Reassurance in the Defence of Europe,” *Adelphi Paper*, no. 184 (London: IISS, 1983).

14 Michael Howard: “Mistake to Declare This a ‘War,’” *RUSI Journal* 146, no. 6 (2001), 1–4, <https://doi.org/10.1080/03071840108446710>.

15 Michael Howard: *The Franco-Prussian War: The German Invasion of France, 1870-1871* (London: Hart-Davis, 1961).

16 Quoted in Rühle's review of *On War* in the *Allgemeine Militär Zeitung* 8, no. 3 (1833) col. 22–24. And Clausewitz: *On War*, II.2.

17 “Strategie aus dem Jahre 1809,” in *Carl von Clausewitz: Verstreute kleine Schriften*, ed. Werner Hahlweg (Osnabrück: Biblio Verlag, 1979), 46f.

18 Carl von Clausewitz: *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976), book II.2, 141.

But besides being the acknowledged lead historian of war in the United Kingdom, the incumbent was the obvious person to invite to conferences — public and private — on all matters military, and to bring over to Whitehall whenever one needed a more academic (and historical) perspective on matters related to defense. Here, Howard's forte would continue to be to provide the larger picture, and this he did outstandingly. This larger picture, and the memory of similar questions that had been on the table a decade or several decades before, is what government institutions notoriously lack, and do not have the time or manpower to research with the patience and thoroughness of a scholar.

His Legacy

What of his heritage, half a century later? The International Institute for Strategic Studies and King's College London are flourishing and have both expanded to a size even their founder would not have dreamt of in the 1950s and 1960s. Military history has truly changed into the history of war, wherever it is tolerated. Unfortunately, that is not in many universities, as many scholars are still suspicious of anybody studying war. The “war and society” approach has grown greatly, but with a massive emphasis on social history, so that, outside the Department of War Studies at King's College London, and a small handful of chairs at universities and the military academies, academics studying war are more likely to study soldiers' wives or patterns of desertion than strategy. Graduate degrees including the term “strategy” or “strategic” are most likely to deal with business or climate change, or include a token session on Clausewitz, taught by somebody with at best a passing acquaintance with the Paret and Howard translation, rarely the ability to read his works in the original. The English School of Strategic Studies, of which Howard's obituaries proclaim him to be a scion if not the founder, is now threatened by extinction. It just about flourishes still in the Department of War Studies at King's College London, but that is not immune from the steady spread of jargon, reductionism — “one independent variable, one dependent variable” — and confirmation bias — “this essay will argue” or “this article will show that.”

Also waning are sensitivities for cultural diversity and the acquisition of “the language of the past” — and of other languages *tout court*. They have been drowned in “monoglot illiteracy” (to quote Lord Dacre)¹⁹ and the ever-increasing fashion of quanti-

tative and theoretical analysis that has flooded Europe coming from — sorry, folks — American academe. Historical evidence — particularly anything that happened more than about 30 years ago — is disregarded or brushed aside, myths are created and happily passed on if they fit theories, and the names of obscure scholars and the jargon-heavy, and worse still monocausal, theories they have produced reign supreme. Encrypted language prevails in this discourse addressed exclusively at the initiates, which is also true for most internal government documents, although the acronyms and the jargon differ from those of the social scientists. This makes dialogue between academics and practitioners a dialogue of the deaf. It should thus perhaps not surprise us that an increasing number of international relations scholars see no way to — and have no ambition to — make themselves useful to government: Speaking different languages, they would not be able to communicate anyway. Others, with their three-case-studies approach, will claim to have created, proved, or disproved theories that, in reality, have no predictive quality for the next case. But it would be dangerous in the extreme to expose civil servants or military officers with an engineering background to such theories, which might fit even complex machines, but not the much greater complexity of multiple human interactions.

Meanwhile, the split in academia between history and international relations seems complete in all but a handful of universities, with a few aging academics still keeping a foot in both camps. Gone from international relations is an understanding that human societies are constantly evolving and are not an unalterable clockwork, the mechanism of which can be understood by any one theory. International relations, as taught today, seems to have begun in 1991, or at best, in 1945 (with a brief back-hand to a supposed Westphalian system that never existed and a Soviet-American division of the world at Yalta, which never happened), and furnishes an eclectic database — usually centering on U.S. foreign policy — for largely abstract theoretical cloud-cuckoo lands. Howard's eminent successors as Chichele Professors of the History of War were progressively barred from supervising doctoral students who were not working on a purely historical subject with a narrowly historiographic methodology. Brilliant students, often military officers, from the world over had come specifically to study with Howard, and after him, Robert O'Neill (one of his own disciples, and one-time director of the International Institute of Strategic Studies) and Hew Strachan (who had previously

19 Howard, *The Lessons of History*, 13, 18.

founded the Scottish Centre for War Studies at the University of Glasgow). For the last decade or so, they found themselves turned away from working with the Chichele Professor if their subjects had a strong contemporary angle. Instead, those students were kept firmly in the social sciences faculty, as though examining what happened after 1945 had to differ in methodology from examining what happened before, and as though one period concerned only the arts and humanities, the other the social sciences. Their work was shoehorned into international relations methodologies, with modelling, quantitative approaches, and, above all, monocausal theories — “show me *one* ‘independent variable’ in war” as Michael Howard used to say — and they were made to write in jargon-laden, impenetrable prose.

Perhaps we will find, looking back in some years, that Sir Michael Howard’s death marks the passing of the understanding that we are part of eternal change not of unchanging mechanisms. And it may mark the passing of the use of lucid, jargon-free, universally intelligible prose in strategic studies that practitioners can immediately understand without themselves having to read about arcane international relations theories. ●

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Photo: Paul the Archivist