

MICHAEL HOWARD

Michael Eliot Howard

29 November 1922 – 30 November 2019

elected Fellow of the British Academy 1970

by

HEW STRACHAN

Fellow of the Academy

Michael Howard was a military historian who established war studies as a fit subject for university study. He founded the Department of War Studies at King's College, London in 1962. In 1968 he returned to Oxford, where had read history, to take up a Fellowship at All Souls. He was appointed Chichele Professor of the History of War in 1977 and Regius Professor of Modern History three years later. On his retirement from Oxford in 1989 he became the first Robert A. Lovett Professor of Military and Naval History, finally retiring in 1993.



✓ Michael Howard

On Michael Howard's 70th birthday, 29 November 1992, his successor as Chichele Professor of the History of War, Robert O'Neill, organised a large dinner in the hall of All Souls College, Oxford. As Howard rose at the end of the meal to respond to O'Neill's birthday greetings, he looked round the room at the assembled company. It included colleagues and admirers, but his speech specifically named those who could be called his disciples and the institutions to which they now belonged. They had taken war studies to some new seat of learning and then propagated them. Michael Howard's somewhat grand manner makes it tempting to use the vocabulary of imperialism but, given that he had no progeny of his own, that of family might be more appropriate. They were his offspring, and he derived both pleasure and self-satisfaction from their success.

Almost single-handedly Michael Howard had put the study of war in the United Kingdom on a new footing after 1945. This made him an innovator, leaving a legacy perpetuated not only by his pupils – and by many others whom he influenced and supported – but also by the institutions he created or helped to create. At the same time, however, as the All Souls dinner suggested, he embodied a set of older traditions, which he embraced and which in part also explained his ability to effect change without disruption. That continuity was evident in three ways.

First, he believed that war was best understood through the perspective of military history. After the use of nuclear weapons in 1945, some thinkers were persuaded that history could no longer provide precedents for understanding what was likely to follow. In the 1950s other disciplines, pre-eminently political science and international relations, secured a foothold in what began to be called strategic studies and which went on to develop a literature of its own which challenged the historical approach to comprehending war that had ruled the roost since Clausewitz. Howard saw strategy not as a subject in its own right but as an amalgam of other disciplines. Today, the range and depth of the literature in both military history and strategic studies has become too vast for one person to embrace them 'in width, in depth and in context', to use Howard's words.¹ He was therefore the last of the old. His more traditional route into strategic studies gave a breadth and humanity to his work which few who followed him could emulate. In this respect, his own success in establishing strategy as a proper subject of enquiry effectively ensured that he was *sui generis* – an impossible act to follow.

Secondly, his roots in history, when combined with a broad education across the humanities, made him a fluent and accessible communicator. A fondness for drama at school and at university gave him the ability to enthral an audience. He valued clear prose just as he eschewed jargon. He knew the value of wit, especially irony, and he was a master of the dismissive one-liner. He could sometimes seem too Olympian to those

¹'The use and abuse of military history', a lecture delivered to the Royal United Services Institution in 1961 and reprinted in Michael Howard, *The causes of wars* (London, 1983), p. 197

who toiled in the foothills of more detailed research. However, the results had a clarity which commanded attention which extended far beyond academe. As his standing grew, so did the respect accorded his judgements. He was a public intellectual in ways more characteristic of historians of the first half of the 20th century than of those at the close of the millennium.

Thirdly, he was among the last of the major students of war who had himself served in uniform. Spenser Wilkinson, appointed the first professor of military history at Oxford in 1909, had been a military correspondent for national newspapers, but all Wilkinson's successors until 2001 were soldiers at some stage in their lives, so perpetuating a belief that only those who had seen war could also comprehend it. Michael Howard had served with 3rd Battalion, the Coldstream Guards in the Second World War, and won an immediate Military Cross for his courage and leadership in taking 'the pimple', a hill north of Salerno, in 1943. In the words of the citation in the *London Gazette*, he 'charged the Spandau positions, killing and wounding some of their crews and putting others to flight'.² The experience shaped not only his own understanding of war and of armies but also his appreciation of others who wrote about combat with the empathy of experience. Before Howard, Britain had produced outstanding naval and military historians who were not sailors or soldiers, most obviously gentlemen scholars like Julian Corbett and John Fortescue, but they were exceptions. Most who wrote about war had also seen it or had at least served in the armed forces. Since Howard, professional academics have dominated the subject despite never having fought or even served.

Michael Eliot Howard was born in London on 29 November 1922, the third son of Geoffrey Eliot and Edith Julia Emma Howard (*née* Edinger). His father's family were Quakers and manufacturers of pharmaceutical and industrial chemicals; his mother's were originally German Jews, who had settled in London before the First World War. His father had turned to high church Anglicanism and his mother's family had converted to Protestantism. Howard embraced his father's faith, but these diverse religious inheritances made for a fruitful and principled mix when his son faced the ethical conundrums of conflict. Richard Crossman, the Labour politician, was a cousin on his father's side, and Geoffrey Elton, born Gottfried Ehrenberg and to become Regius Professor of History at Cambridge when Howard held the equivalent chair at Oxford, on his mother's. The Howards lived in some style in Ennismore Gardens, were conveniently close to the museums of South Kensington, and had a house in Ashmore in north Dorset. Michael's catholic tastes in music (Mozart especially) and art (he possessed a fine Ivon Hitchens) came from his mother.

² Quoted by Michael Brock, 'Michael Howard's contribution to historical studies', in Lawrence Freedman, Paul Hayes & Robert O'Neill (eds), *War, Strategy and International Politics: Essays in Honour of Sir Michael Howard* (Oxford, 1997), p. 295.

He was lucky to escape the worst brutalities of inter-war English preparatory schools, as he readily acknowledged in *Captain Professor* (2006), his memoir which is particularly engaging in its account of his early life and wartime experience. He went to board at Abinger Hill at the age of nine. The school taught its pupils through projects rather than formal classes. Each boy could set his own timetable; discipline was relaxed but maintained, and Howard thrived, reading voraciously and beyond his years. He went on to Wellington College in Berkshire, historically the most military of the English public schools. Howard was more an aesthete than an athlete (although he could run fast): his parents chose it for the usual reasons – because other members of the family had been there and because his father thought, or so his son concluded, that it would knock some sense into him. It did. There were enough inspirational teachers for Howard to be introduced to choral music and opera, to art and design, and to an outstanding history master, Max Reese, to whom in 1961 Howard dedicated his first significant book. By the time he left Wellington Howard had decided he wanted to be a history don and Reese's instruction in the Tudors and Stuarts, the staple of so many school history syllabuses until the 1980s, got him onto the first rung of the ladder with an open scholarship to Christ Church, Oxford. There he was taught by, among others, Keith Feiling, J.M. Thompson and A.J.P. Taylor.

Howard's university career, like that of many of his contemporaries, was derailed by the Second World War. The First that he had gained in 1941 before he went off to fight was followed on his return by a poor Second, acquired in 1945 after a further four terms, too much acting and other understandable postwar diversions. He failed the All Souls prize examination and was turned down for the Studentship (i.e. Fellowship) which had been dangled before him at Christ Church.

Like others, he found that, although the war had effectively closed one route, it had opened another. Howard was not an obvious soldier: 'too precious' in his own later self-description. However, service in the Officers Training Corps at Wellington and Oxford acquired purpose, when set against the background of Munich and then war itself; it was even moderately up to date. When he was at Christ Church, it was effectively compulsory for those deferring their call-up. Both the adjutant and sergeant major of the Oxford OTC were in the Coldstream Guards, and the former suggested that Howard might find the regiment congenial. He did: he was attracted to its uniform and its regimental slow march was composed by Mozart. When he was commissioned in the Coldstream in December 1942, he found himself in a mess of kindred, if patrician, spirits. For the best part of two years, between July 1943 and May 1945, he fought his way up the west side of Italy, beginning at Salerno, south of Naples, passing through Florence, and then swinging via Bologna to the Adriatic coast to finish at Trieste. On the way, he experienced fear and discomfort, he was twice wounded, he succumbed to malaria and jaundice, and he suffered personal loss as others were killed. He also found

another side of himself. He showed considerable personal courage and learned to lead. Although he had no intention of staying in the army, he was pleased at the war's end to be Captain M.E. Howard, MC. 'Those of us who served in the armed forces and enjoyed at least the advantages of youth, health and comradeship', he was to write in 1992, 'were in many ways the lucky ones, although it did not always seem so at the time.'³

He remained loyal to his regiment for the rest of his life. The Coldstream reciprocated by asking him to assist John Sparrow, the future Warden of All Souls, who was writing the regiment's Second World War history. Howard accepted and finished what Sparrow had barely started. The book was published in 1951. Disappointment at Oxford, recurring if diminishing bouts of malaria, postwar austerity lived out in the parental home, and struggles with his own sexuality dented Howard's self-confidence. He was ambitious and competitive but uncertain whether he would fulfil the hopes he had invested in himself. In 1947 he secured an assistant lectureship in history at King's College London and was required to teach modern European history, so putting to one side his ambition to work on the Tudors and Stuarts. It was not Oxford, and the young former Guards officer did not get on with his head of department, C.H. Williams. In 1953 King's threw him a lifeline. Persuaded by Sir Charles Webster and Lionel Robbins, it decided to revive the teaching of military studies, which had been entrusted to Major-General Sir Frederick Maurice in 1927 but had lapsed. Howard was the internal candidate for a lectureship in 'military studies' and got it on the strength of the Coldstream history. He then asked for a year's sabbatical in order to learn about the study of war, spending it in Vienna. He returned with a renewed sense of purpose.

What became the Department of War Studies at King's did not exist in 1953, not least in the eyes of Williams. He continued to regard Howard as a member of the History Department and increasingly despaired of his pursuit of what he saw as journalism at the expense of scholarship. Howard did not agree and threatened to resign in 1959, when Williams refused him permission to accept J.R.M. Butler's invitation to write the fourth volume in the *Grand Strategy* series of the official histories of the Second World War. The Principal of King's supported Howard and he got a readership in 1961, his own department in 1962, and a chair in 1963. Even then the department was a pale shadow of what it was to become. When he left in 1968 he had only two academic colleagues – another military historian (Brian Bond) and a Quaker specialist in contemporary strategy (Wolf Mendl). It was, however, the only university department for the subject in the country, and the principal centre for military history outside the Department of War Studies at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst. Not least because the department's resources were so exiguous, but also because Howard believed that those who studied war first required a firm grounding in a traditional undergraduate academic discipline, it

³Michael Howard, 'Obscurity without illusions', *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 April 1992.

focused its attentions on postgraduate teaching, both for research degrees and for the pioneering taught MA in War Studies. In his promotion of the subject, Howard had to proceed warily, all too conscious of the academic hostility it could provoke.

Howard was clearer about what ‘war studies’ were not than what they were. They were not operational military history and they were not designed for the education of the armed forces (although that had been Maurice’s brief in 1927). War studies at universities should be eclectic. They included military sociology, the laws and ethics of war, and war’s place in international relations. They were underpinned by what came to be known as the ‘new’ military history, which treated war as part of ‘total history’ and placed it in its political and social context. Howard’s vision may have lacked a tight definition but it was broad and above all open. This was not a closed subject designed only for those in uniform.

As Howard made clear in a report on professional military education which he and Cyril English wrote in 1966 for the Defence Secretary, Denis Healey, he was all in favour of officers being sent to universities but so that they could develop a different and broader understanding of war than they would acquire in military academies; the latter taught potential officers ‘to operate under stress, to obey, and to know the right answers – and to assume that there is a right answer’.⁴ The Howard-English report recommended that officer cadets from all three services should have one year of professional training at single-service colleges, and then go to a joint Royal Defence College for a further year of academic education. Howard was reported to be the likely head of such a ‘national defence university’, which would have been located at the Royal Naval College Greenwich, but the report was shelved. Not until 2001, when it created the Joint Services Command and Staff College, did the Ministry of Defence accept the principle of ‘jointness’ and elevate education alongside training.

In other words, war for Howard was too important to be left to the generals. The latent threat of a nuclear exchange presented by the Cold War made it an appropriate subject of study for every responsible citizen. His London base in the Strand, in the heart of the metropolis and within walking distance of Westminster, Whitehall, the BBC and Fleet Street (still then home to the national newspapers), gave him physical access to the levers of power and influence. Here his focus was not on the past but on the present and whether there would be a future. In 1957 he acted as rapporteur for a group of defence experts, who believed that the division of Germany and the Soviet domination of eastern Europe were unsustainable. They met at Chatham House to consider how to reduce the military tensions in Europe. The establishment of NATO in 1949, Howard wrote in the resulting Penguin Special, *Disengagement in Europe*, ‘was as salutary for Europe as

⁴Michael Howard, ‘The officer class’, *Times Literary Supplement*, 9 May 1975.

a plaster cast for a broken limb'.⁵ Western Europe had now recovered from the fractures of the Second World War, but there seemed to be few paths towards its demilitarisation which would not be productive of instability. The conclusion to the book, published in 1958, stated the problems but had no clear recommendations.

Howard was not alone in his sense that current defence dilemmas, precisely because they were so intractable, required sustained attention. Although still comparatively junior, he was simultaneously involved in another, larger and somewhat grander discussion group addressing the limitation of war in the nuclear age. It asked him to chair a committee to look at what should follow the publication of its report. The answer was an independent body to address military issues in the same way that Chatham House addressed foreign affairs. Called the Institute (later International Institute) for Strategic Studies, it was established in 1958 thanks to a grant from the Ford Foundation, secured by Denis Healey, then shadow minister of defence. Howard took at least some credit for the appointment of its first director, Alastair Buchan, also an Oxford historian and the defence correspondent of the *Observer*. Buchan became a close friend, staying with Howard in London during the week, and in 1960 secured a grant to enable Howard to go on an eye-opening six-week tour in which he met all the major figures in US strategic studies and sang for his supper with a talk on British defence policy.

Howard had achieved a great deal by force of personality and by cultivating connections outside the confines of the academic profession, but he also needed a big book to cement his standing as a scholar in the academic world and to convince his peers that military history mattered to history more broadly defined. When the Royal United Services Institution weeded its library of its historic collections, Howard offered to buy a tranche of its 19th-century volumes on military history and theory, many in French and German, as the nucleus of the King's library in war studies. He then concluded that, as a result, he should write a book on the Franco-Prussian War. Much studied between 1871 and 1914, it had been neglected since, and there was no up-to-date one volume treatment. Apart from the French military archives at Vincennes, Howard confined himself to published sources: the Prussian military archives were largely destroyed in 1945 and those that had survived were effectively inaccessible in Potsdam. In 1961 *The Franco-Prussian War* was produced to a high standard by Rupert Hart-Davis, not only the book's publisher but also its principal editor. It remains in print, and – although it has never been translated into French or German – its status is undiminished. It addresses the theory and practice of war, but it does so through glancing reflections and not in a full-frontal assault. As a result, it never loses its narrative flow, sustained in lucid prose. It spoke to a general audience but also won over his professional colleagues. It appealed at three academic levels: for historians of France, here was the foundation of the Third Republic;

⁵Michael Howard, *Disengagement in Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1958), p. 89.

for historians of Germany, it embraced not just the country's unification but the first step in the story of German militarism; and for military historians the book gave the subject a good name with those who were not. The reviews were enthusiastic and it won the Duff Cooper prize for non-fiction.

Before *The Franco-Prussian War* was finished Howard had accepted Butler's invitation to write the fourth volume of the *Grand Strategy* series, covering the year from August 1942 to September 1943. The book had already had two false starts and, when Howard undertook the project, he laboured under two misapprehensions. The first was that, according to the terms of the 50-year rule, the archives which he was consulting would remain closed until 1992. The 1966 Public Records Act reduced the period of closure to 30 years and those for 1942 were opened in 1972, the year in which his volume was published. Secondly, unbeknownst to him, the papers which he consulted had been weeded of any reference to signals intelligence. Two years after Howard's *Grand Strategy* appeared F.W. Winterbotham published *The Ultra Secret*, which revealed that Britain had been reading German signals and that the flow of information had become particularly significant from 1943. Much of Ultra's value was more tactical and operational than strategic, and it could be argued that knowledge of Ultra might have clarified more than it would have altered what Howard wrote.

The book addressed the run-up to the Anglo-American conference at Casablanca and its conclusions for British strategy in the Mediterranean. In particular, it established how preposterous were suggestions that D Day might have been launched in 1943. It had two important intellectual consequences for Howard himself. First, it made sense of a war which he had experienced as a subaltern: he now saw it from top down, as well as bottom up. To those who questioned the necessity of the Italian campaign, he responded that 'the Germans had to be fought somewhere in 1943, and the fall of Mussolini made it inevitable that it should be Italy'.⁶ Secondly, he had had to engage with grand strategy in practice. His subject was a coalition war waged in several theatres. On the opening page he defined grand strategy as 'the mobilization and development of national resources of wealth, manpower and industrial capacity, together with the enlistment of those of allied and, when feasible, of neutral powers, for the purpose of achieving the goals of national policy in wartime'. The book won him the Wolfson Prize in 1972, and in the same year he wrote and presented a television series for the BBC on grand strategy in the Second World War. Bow-tied and Tayloresque, he lectured his audience, aided by an electronic map which could be as erratic in its portrayal of military manoeuvres as one chalked onto a blackboard.

By then Howard had left King's for Oxford. *The Franco-Prussian War* established his own reputation as a military historian and that standing in turn gave gravitas to the

⁶Michael Howard, 'Blunders at Anzio', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 1991.

nascent war studies department: it had become hard to imagine one without the other. But the load which Howard had created for himself as an official historian and public intellectual, as a departmental head and (from 1964) Dean of the Arts Faculty, was heavy. He was the governor of three public schools and a trustee of the Imperial War Museum. To Alastair Buchan, he seemed ‘a tired and overburdened man, a consequence of his high sense of public duty’.⁷ Howard’s very success meant that the literature in military history and strategic studies, boosted in 1966 by what amounted to the simultaneous opening of the British public records for both world wars, was expanding exponentially in ways that meant he needed time to read and to think. The opportunity came in the form of another of Denis Healey’s initiatives. In 1966 the Ministry of Defence established five-year lectureships in defence studies in the expectation that those universities which hosted them would take on their funding thereafter. Howard gave evidence to the committee which proposed the scheme, which was of a piece both with what he had achieved at King’s and with the thrust of the Howard-English report. Oxford was offered a Fellowship in Higher Defence Studies to be held at All Souls College.

In November 1966 Howard applied for the post, prompted by Healey, Max Beloff and probably by John Sparrow, now the Warden of All Souls. His familiarity with British defence, and the individuals who drove it, stood in his favour, but he lacked the expertise in American politics and in the technologies of nuclear weaponry possessed by Laurence Martin, who two years earlier had returned – after nearly a decade in the United States – to the professorship of international politics at Aberystwyth. Moreover, as All Souls was already host to the Chichele Professorship in the History of War, it had no need for a second military historian. Howard was due to depart for a term’s leave at Stanford and Harvard in early December 1966, and chafed at the college’s inability to make up its mind before he left. It asked the two candidates (each of whom seems to have been aware of the other’s application) to explain how they would contribute to the PPE syllabus and to outline their current research projects. Howard became petulant: he was not sufficiently familiar with the PPE syllabus to know what approach to defence studies would best work and he had ‘no specific “research project” to submit’. Privately he protested to Sparrow that both he and Martin were ‘established scholars whose achievements are on the record’ and he failed to see what could be achieved by ‘this rather humiliating performance’, which ‘is disagreeably reminiscent of the first scene in *Leaar*’.⁸ He sailed for America in December with the situation still unresolved.

All Souls appointed a committee which took advice from Buchan and concluded that, while Howard was ‘of greater intellectual distinction’, that point was ‘outweighed

⁷Alastair Buchan to the Warden of All Souls, 1 December 1966, in Michael Howard file, All Souls. All the following references are to papers in the same file.

⁸Howard to the Warden of All Souls, 30 November 1966; Howard to John Sparrow, 1 December 1966.

by the fact that Prof. Martin represented an approach to Defence Studies which was as yet unrepresented in Oxford, and indeed was under-represented in this country by comparison with the United States'.⁹ The College accepted the committee's recommendation in favour of Martin in January 1967. Although Howard seems to have anticipated the possible outcome, he was still deeply disappointed – 'not', he wrote to Sparrow, 'because of the comforts or pleasant surroundings, for I know how many serpents inhabit that Eden, but because I had hopes of setting up a serious school there'.¹⁰ He was keen to quit King's and talked of seeking employment in the United States. But then 'the unexpected happened'.¹¹ Martin turned down the job. It was not tenured, and neither the Ministry of Defence nor the college could guarantee its extension; nor was there provision for any salary increments, a significant consideration for a family man. With Martin out of the equation, All Souls formally offered the post to Howard in March. He accepted but on condition that he be free to honour his obligations to King's by taking it up in October 1968, not 1967.

Howard found the episode bruising at least in part because he had forewarned both his superiors and (it would seem) his colleagues that he might be leaving King's for Oxford before he sailed for America – and so before All Souls had reached a formal decision. Moreover, he had already suggested a game of musical chairs, in which Martin would succeed him in the Department of War Studies.¹² In practice, this is what happened but in reverse order. Howard's departure created the vacancy at King's, which Martin filled because Martin had turned down Oxford. Howard returned to Oxford, and finally arrived at All Souls, so opening what proved to be a particularly productive phase of his career.

His reputation as a lecturer meant that he had been asked to give the Lees Knowles Lectures at Cambridge in 1966. He devoted them to a consideration of the Mediterranean strategy in the Second World War, so developing some of the themes which he addressed in the *Grand Strategy* volume. They were published in 1968. In spring 1971 he gave the Ford Lectures in British History at Oxford and they too resulted in a book, *The Continental Commitment: the dilemmas of British defence policy in the era of two world wars*, published in 1972 and as a slim Pelican paperback in 1974. Pithy and succinct, it described a British defence establishment caught between the global responsibilities of imperial defence and the security needs of an archipelago off the coast of north-west Europe. In

⁹Report of Research Fellowships Committee, All Souls, 21 January 1967.

¹⁰Howard to John Sparrow, 27 January 1967.

¹¹Sparrow to Howard, 14 February 1967.

¹²Howard to Norman Gibbs, 22 November 1966; for Howard's own account of what happened, see Michael Howard, *Captain Professor: a life in war and peace* (London, 2006), pp. 195-6; Brian Bond, *Military Historian: my part in the birth and development of war studies 1966-2016* (Solihull, 2018), p. 34, recalls the confusion at King's.

1914 and in 1939 it could not maintain one without addressing the other. It recognised that its empire and maritime strategy, given that its principal sea lines of communication passed through the Channel to the rest of the world, depended on the balance of power in Europe. Twice in the first half of the 20th century, Britain had had to put a major army on the continent – and after the Second World War it had stayed there. *The Continental Commitment* remains, fifty years on, the best introduction to its subject.

Formally speaking the book's coverage ended in 1942 but its context was also topical. 'It is now only rarely that we catch a faint, Curzonian echo', Howard wrote in his concluding paragraph, 'that our true frontier lies on the Himalayas'.¹³ Even an echo was enough to affront him. He had been appalled by British policy in the 1956 Suez crisis and, in an article for *International Affairs* in 1966, he said that Britain would have to withdraw militarily from east of Suez. Denis Healey came to the same conclusion in the following year and in January 1968 the prime minister announced that Britain would be out of Singapore, Malaysia and the Persian Gulf by 1971. The age of empire was over, and in *The Continental Commitment* Howard described the decision to maintain British armed forces in Europe as 'final' and 'binding'.

Howard's continentalism became an article of faith. It reflected not only the views of the Labour government but also the Europeanism of its Conservative successor in 1970 – and the strategic assumptions of the British Army of the Rhine. In 1974 Howard delivered the Neale Lecture in English History at the invitation of University College, London. Its title, 'The British way in warfare; a reappraisal', took direct aim at Basil Liddell Hart, who had popularised the phrase in 1931-32. Liddell Hart asserted that British strategic practice, developed and tested over three centuries, had rested on maritime power and that the army's role was to conduct amphibious operations to support Britain's European allies at peripheral points distant from the main theatre of war. Scarred by the experience of the First World War, Liddell Hart opposed the formation of a mass army, the use of conscription and the thinking of the army's general staff. In the 1930s he called for a 'limited liability' in Europe and so linked himself with appeasement – and during the Second World War, despite his own liberalism, he had called for a compromise peace with Hitler.

Howard's lecture denounced Liddell Hart's *British way in warfare* as 'a piece of brilliant political pamphleteering, sharply argued, selectively illustrated, and concerned rather to influence British public policy than to illuminate the complexities of the past in any serious or scholarly way'.¹⁴ The criticism was warranted but that did not soften the impact of an attack on somebody whom Howard later described as 'one of the kindest

¹³Michael Howard, *The Continental Commitment: the Dilemma of British Defence Policy in the Era of Two World Wars* (Harmondsworth, 1974), p. 149.

¹⁴Howard, *The causes of wars*, p. 172.

people I have ever met'.¹⁵ Although Liddell Hart had never held a full-time academic job, by the time he died in 1970 he was regarded as Britain's leading military historian and strategic thinker. He had supported Howard early in his career, inviting him to stay, giving him the run of his library, and introducing him to the Military Commentators' Circle, a dining club over which he presided. Liddell Hart agreed to Howard's suggestion that in due course his books and papers should be transferred to King's College London to found the Liddell Hart Centre for Military Archives. In 1965, Howard had edited a *Festschrift* in his honour called *The Theory and Practice of War*, and after Liddell Hart's death in 1970 he orchestrated the appointment of his official biographer. But there was more to Howard's attack than apparent *lèse majesté*; it also revealed his reluctance to engage with the role of sea power in national policy, which had not disappeared and regained vitality as British defence looked beyond Europe after the end of the Cold War. Howard recognised that Liddell Hart had plagiarised the British way in warfare from Julian Corbett's *Some Principles of Maritime Strategy* (1911), but the point remains that maritime strategy and naval history remained blind spots for Howard – or almost so.

The exception was another work of synthesis, one which found its roots in the Radcliffe Lectures given at Warwick University in 1975. *War in European History* (1976) included naval warfare, although it had more to say about warfare on land. It is a forcefully written summary of accumulated reading with a chronological sweep to match, beginning with the 'wars of the knights' and ending with 'the nuclear age', and all encompassed within 165 pages. It quickly found its way on to undergraduate reading lists.

In the same year, a much-longer running project came to fruition, the publication of a new translation and edition of Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*. The idea had been put to Howard by one of his doctoral pupils at King's, Peter Paret, from whom he said that he had learnt so much that it would have been 'impertinent' to call himself his supervisor. Paret was almost coeval with Howard and, like him, had served in the Second World War. In 1962 Paret persuaded Princeton University Press to commission a full English-language edition of all Clausewitz's works in six volumes. Given that there is no modern scholarly German edition, that smacked of hubris and so it proved. But Howard and Paret persevered and in 1974 Princeton issued a fresh contract for a translation of *On War* in isolation.

Howard had first read Clausewitz during his sabbatical in Vienna in 1953 and he claimed to re-read it every year. There were then two English-language editions, both based on the second, corrected German edition of 1853, and after 1908 the better-known of the two, by J.J. Graham, was issued, like the original German edition of 1832–34, in three volumes. In the English-speaking world Clausewitz had acquired a reputation for

¹⁵Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 154.

being both obscure and militarist, and had only begun to be elevated to his current standing as the most important writer on war in the aftermath of the Second World War. In 1943, Edward Mead Earle's *The Makers of Modern Strategy* contained an outstanding chapter on Clausewitz by Hans Rothfels and the whole book was studded with references to *On War*. Significantly, when Princeton University Press decided to commission a new edition of what had become a canonical text, it asked Paret to edit it. Howard had a strong influence on Paret's selection of topics and authors, and Howard himself contributed a chapter on the doctrine of the offensive before 1914.¹⁶

Howard responded to Clausewitz as one soldier to another, a point he made explicit in his brief essay on Clausewitz, published in Oxford's *Past Masters* series in 1983. He therefore hoped that soldiers would read him, an objective which the more convoluted of Clausewitz's sentences could thwart. Howard and Paret's *On War* is much more fluent than either of the two previous translations or the original German. It removes ambiguity by turning passive constructions into active and by breaking long sentences into short. The apparent bulk was reduced by its publication in one volume, not the original three. It uses modern military vocabulary, such as 'total war' and 'operations' (to denote the level of war between tactics and today's understanding of strategy), which were not familiar to Clausewitz. Howard aligned tactics, operations, strategy and policy in a clear hierarchy which suited the use of war in western democracies. He equated Clausewitz's concept of 'absolute war', a Kantian ideal in book I of *On War* but a reality manifested by the French Revolution in book 8, with the threat of all-out nuclear exchange. Above all, he stressed the relationship between war and policy, inserting the adjective 'political' at points where it is not present in the text to suggest that it is the book's dominant theme. From that he was able to stress Clausewitz's openness to limited war, given that it is policy which determines the scale of the objectives which war is required to pursue. Howard's concentration on the present in his version of *On War* could take it in directions which reflected Clausewitz's ambition to write something of universal validity but which could arrive also at destinations far removed from his immediate preoccupations – his nationalism, his hatred of France and his readiness to see war as an existential act which could usurp policy. Howard had fashioned a Clausewitz for the Cold War, adapted to liberalism and to containment.

It worked and the timing was impeccable. The US army was digesting its defeat in Vietnam. In 1982 Colonel Harry G. Summers used *On War* as a tool to critique American conduct of the war. The Clausewitzian framework of Summers's *On Strategy* set a precedent in strategic studies that others have subsequently followed, and in departments

¹⁶Howard's role in Paret's edition of *The making of modern strategy from Machiavelli to the nuclear age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986) is covered by Michael Finch, *Making makers* (Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

of international relations as much as in military academies. *On War* became a text that transcended time and place, rather than a reflection of the Napoleonic Wars which had so dominated Clausewitz's career. Its sales surprised Princeton University Press and delighted Howard. Between 1976 and 1981 it was adopted by all three US War Colleges. Today, when English-speakers reference Clausewitz, they are more often citing Howard and Paret's *On War* than Clausewitz's *Vom Kriege*.

Michael Howard regarded the close examination of a complex text which *On War* required as the most pleasurable and rewarding exercise of his career. It was also his last big book. He was only 54 when it appeared and he hoped to write a study of Lord Esher, the *deus ex machina* of pre-1914 defence, but it never appeared. Henceforth his output centred on essays, derived very often from lectures, where the spoken word transferred easily to the printed page. Their range, chronologically and conceptually, remained formidable, but there was no major project to match the scale of the Franco-Prussian War, the *Grand Strategy* volume or the translation of Clausewitz.

If there had been, it would have been his involvement in the official history series on intelligence, which was commissioned in the wake of Winterbotham's *The Ultra Secret*. Howard was asked to address not signals intelligence – a bigger task and one given to F.H. Hinsley, who had been in naval intelligence – but deception. Although deception exploited signals traffic, it also used spies and double agents, which added to the attractions of the work. Thanks to Howard's former Christ Church tutor, J.C. Masterman, who in 1972 had published *The Double-Cross System*, more of this story was already in the public domain. Howard completed his book, commissioned in 1972, in 1979, but the Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, withheld its publication. The immediate reason was the exposure as a former Soviet agent of Anthony Blunt, the Keeper of the Queen's Pictures and a wartime British intelligence officer. However, another seems to have been a lingering prejudice against homosexuals and a fear that they were vulnerable to blackmail: Blunt was gay and Howard was open about his own sexuality when he was vetted before undertaking the task. A decade elapsed before *Strategic Deception in the Second World War* was published in 1990, and by then too much of what it had to say was either familiar or had been covered by others who had had access to the same sources for its reception to be anything other than muted.

The foibles of official history were not the major block to effective publication over the decade after 1976; more serious were the teaching and administrative demands of Oxford University. In 1977 Norman Gibbs, also an official historian, retired from the Chichele Professorship of the History of War. He had been in post for 24 years and in Howard's judgement had 'sat on his chair'.¹⁷ The potential subject matter had developed

¹⁷A.L. Rowse, *Historians I have known* (London, 1995), p. 185; for the context, see Hew Strachan, 'The study of war at Oxford 1909-2009', in Christopher Hood, Desmond King & Gillian Peele (eds),

exponentially since the Chichele chair's establishment in 1909. The two world wars had added to the content of military history and the Cold War had multiplied the disciplinary inputs to the study of war. Gibbs had grown the subject in terms of doctoral pupils, but not by co-operating with those who taught international relations nor by recognising the opportunities inherent in strategic studies. The electors faced a choice between Howard and Piers Mackesy, a Fellow of Pembroke and author of three studies of British strategy in the reign of George III, as well as a mainstay of undergraduate teaching in military history. They plumped for Howard.

Because the chair carried a Fellowship at All Souls, the appointment allowed him to stay put, to engage as much or as little with undergraduate teaching as he wanted (in fact he wanted to more than he needed to), and to use the opportunities the college provided for public engagement with government and international security. In 1969 he had set up a student-led society, the Oxford University Strategic Studies Group, for which he acted as senior member (to satisfy proctorial requirements) and principal mentor. His influence enabled the group to attract distinguished speakers on a weekly basis to address current issues in international relations. He became a member of the Common Room at St Antony's, home to 'area studies' in Oxford, and he introduced strategic studies to undergraduate and postgraduate studies in PPE and to the Masters' degree in international relations established by his old associate, Alastair Buchan, now the Montague Burton Professor of International Relations. Buchan died suddenly in 1976, only five years into his tenure, but he was succeeded by another kindred spirit, Hedley Bull. Together Bull and Howard worked to secure funding for a readership in international relations in Buchan's memory, filled by Adam Roberts in 1981.

By then Howard was no longer Professor of the History of War. His period as Chichele professor, despite the post's embodiment of everything in which he was interested, was the shortest of all its incumbents in the 100-plus years of its existence. But his impact outlived his tenure. He already had twelve doctoral pupils by the time he was appointed in 1977. Many of those he taught as graduate students went on to careers not as academics but as practitioners, including several Defence Fellows (another Healey innovation) who would reach four-star rank in the armed forces. He had taken the history of war firmly into the field of contemporary affairs, a point reflected in the draft advertisement for his successor. Although the Chichele Professor of the History of War was appointed to the Faculty of Modern History (as it was then), his teaching obligations lay more in politics and international relations.

In 1980 Howard was elevated to the Regius Professorship of Modern History, with a Fellowship at Oriel. Thanks not least to his predecessor, Hugh Trevor-Roper, this was a

Forging a discipline: a critical assessment of Oxford's development of the study of politics and international relations in critical perspective (Oxford, 2014), pp. 204–21.

post with a public profile commensurate with Howard's reputation and it was in the gift of a prime minister, who – despite the rebuff over the history of deception – still consulted him. He knew that he was not the obvious choice of the faculty and so had to earn credibility with his colleagues. Since the Regius Professor served on almost every faculty committee and was expected to take more than his fair share of administration, he did not have to strive to prove himself a good citizen, but he did feel that he should show his commitment to a broader understanding of history than he had done of late. He used lectures to make evident his appreciation of the past as much as his understanding of its relationship to the present. Although he was not expected to teach undergraduates, he was now in an undergraduate college, 'a good county regiment in the front line' as he put it, and he enjoyed the stimulus of direct engagement with them which All Souls had not provided.¹⁸ The problem was that he could not also slough off his pre-existing commitments.

His move to the Chichele chair in 1977 had – fortuitously for Howard – coincided with the ending of the Ministry of Defence's funding for the All Souls Fellowship in Higher Defence Studies. Whereas other universities honoured their obligation to the Ministry of Defence, Oxford did not. So it was down one post in the field. A second, the Chichele chair itself, was then frozen for financial reasons. Everything that Howard and others had built up was threatened by these two vacancies. Rather than permit that to happen, Howard continued to teach international relations. It was an outrageous load and an indication of Oxford's capacity to behave in dysfunctional ways. As chairman of the Faculty of Modern History, he requested that the Chichele chair be filled, but his rational explanations of the need went unanswered until 1987, when Robert O'Neill, the Director of the International Institute for Strategic Studies, was appointed.

Howard was now 65, the standard age for retirement, and given the punishing burden loaded on him by Oxford that is what he might have done. He did not. Paul Kennedy wrote to him from Yale, saying that the university was aiming to fill a new post, the Robert A. Lovett Chair of Military and Naval History, and wondered if Michael Howard could suggest whom the university might encourage to apply. Howard replied that he rather fancied the job for himself, and so in 1989 he took up residence in New Haven for four years. This was a period of rapid change, not continuity, with the end of the Cold War, the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the potential dismantlement of the security architecture with which Howard had become familiar, and which to some extent he had help shape. Howard regarded those who tried to make sense of what was now going on, in order to shape the future or even to grasp the present, as 'shooting at a moving target'.¹⁹ He kept abreast by returning to regular book reviewing. In 1991 he damned Martin van

¹⁸ Howard, *Captain Professor*, p. 208.

¹⁹ Michael Howard, 'Shooting at a moving target', *Times Literary Supplement*, 14 March 1992.

Creveld's fashionably iconoclastic *On Future War* not just for its misreading of Clausewitz but also for falling into the trap of seizing 'upon an ephemeral trend' and projecting 'it into the future'.²⁰ Howard's interests may have moved away from deepening military history to widening the understanding of war, but his apparent conservatism still took refuge in his core discipline. 'It is the task of historians', because they have neither access nor knowledge as to how events will turn out, 'to explain, not to predict', he wrote in January 1993. 'They are like interpreters of a very long sentence in German, only at the very end of which will they know what the verb is going to be.'²¹

Away from the university, New Haven is not the most pleasant part of Connecticut but Howard found the experience liberating, and not just because he had put university administration behind him. He was now determined to integrate his life more fully than before. He and his partner, Mark James, a teacher, had lived separate lives during Oxford terms, with Howard residing in college and James at their joint home in the Old Farm in Eastbury, close to Hungerford. Despite the transformation in public attitudes, Howard was of a generation that had learnt to be wary of others' responses to gay relationships. However, Michael insisted that Mark accompany him to the United States, and the openness which the move enabled was a source of relief and strength to Howard. In 2006 they entered into a civil partnership.

Back in Eastbury, Howard remained engaged with the study of war, the state of the world and news of who was doing what almost to the end of his life. Supported and energised by his near-neighbour, Max Hastings, and by a stream of visitors from the worlds of military history and strategic studies, he continued to keep up to date, to read *Foreign Affairs* and to be ready to comment – until increasing deafness made it hard for him to keep track of conversation. He built a library, a portrait of Clausewitz hanging on its wall, adjacent to the two cottages that made up his and Mark's home.

In 1977 he had been invited to give the Trevelyan Lectures at Cambridge and he chose to devote them to *War and the Liberal Conscience*, the title of the book which followed in 1978. Howard later said that the lectures were the first time in which he had engaged with the Enlightenment and its legacy for the ethical and legal justifications for war. This was self-deprecating nonsense. He had never forgotten his Quaker forebears, and his induction into war studies as the Cold War intensified created an urgency to his thinking around the problems of war and peace. In 1958 that imperative spawned an offshoot of the Institute for Strategic Studies specifically designed to address the morality of nuclear weapons, the Council on Christian Approaches to Defence and Disarmament (CCADD). With nuclear deterrence a dominant factor in international relations, Howard also joined a group headed by Herbert Butterfield, the historian and Master of Peterhouse,

²⁰ Michael Howard. 'Famous last screams', *London Review of Books*, 5 December 1991.

²¹ Michael Howard, 'Winning the peace', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 January 1993.

which included Martin Wight, the Christian pacifist credited with founding the 'English school' of international theory. When Howard addressed his Cambridge audience in 1977, he was already poised to succeed Alastair Buchan as Vice-President of the CCADD, and in January he delivered the lecture it had organised to honour Wight's memory. Wight had realised that the challenge for Christians 'in a world of evil' was, Howard pointed out, to 'face the fact of evil'. His central premise was that 'the appropriate response of the political moralist to the world of power must therefore be not to condemn but to enlighten'.

His reading of Hobbes, Grotius, Vattel, Rousseau and Kant left Howard seized of two ideas. First, while he respected pacifism in its various manifestations, he rejected its idealism. As a historian as well as a veteran, he knew that war was a reality of international affairs and that those who went off to fight were not necessarily dupes but could be intelligent young men who thought the cause was right – as he reminded congregations on successive Remembrance Sunday sermons in the 1980s. He saw his own service in the Second World War as part of 'the last and greatest service that the British Empire was able to render to mankind'.²² That did not mean that humanity was relieved of the moral responsibilities imposed by nuclear weapons or by war. So, secondly, there was a need to find ways to contain and limit war. For him the best instruments for achieving this were the state, which, by establishing the monopoly of force, had the potential to use it wisely, and the armed forces, whose professional training should teach them to employ violence with discipline and restraint. Nuclear weapons had not abolished war, for all Brodie's hopes after 1945, but they behoved states to learn how to use it in limited ways. In 1959 Howard had questioned the British decision to acquire an independent nuclear deterrent and instead favoured strong conventional forces for limited war below the nuclear threshold. In 1980 the radical historian, E.P. Thompson, devoted much of a pamphlet opposing Cruise missiles to a personal attack on Howard for allegedly trying to make nuclear war thinkable. Provoked to respond in tones which were both authoritative and condescending, Howard pointed out that nuclear weapons were not an end in themselves, but a means to defend the political freedoms from which Thompson himself benefited.²³ In 1984 he wondered whether nuclear war 'would produce the total holocaust so often predicted', reminding the CCADD of 'the horrors through which mankind had already passed'.²⁴ It was here, as a writer in the liberal tradition on war, that Howard best emulated Liddell Hart.²⁵

²² Michael Howard, 'Kingdom of the dead', *Times Literary Supplement*, 8 March 1996.

²³ E.P. Thompson. *Protest and survive* (Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, 1980); Michael Howard, 'Protest and survival', *Encounter* 55:5 (November 1980), 9-14.

²⁴ 'Reflections at the CCADD Conference at Maryknoll Seminary, N.Y.', 3 September 1984.

²⁵ See Basil Liddell Hart, *The Revolution in Warfare* (London, 1946).

War and the Liberal Conscience was followed by two edited books. The first, *Restraints on War: studies in the limitation of armed conflict* (1979), was derived from lectures delivered in Oxford in the same term as the Trevelyan Lectures. Howard's own opening chapter attacked the 1977 Additional Protocols to the Geneva Convention for giving belligerent status to insurgent forces in civil war. 'The principle that only "legitimate authorities", states and their agents, have the right to make war and to claim protection in war, has been the basis of the whole system of rational, controllable, inter-state conflict', he declared. Although he acknowledged that the system favoured the *status quo*, it had helped to build 'a just, peaceable and orderly society'.

The second edited book, *The Laws of War: constraint on warfare in the western world* (1994), developed this idea of state self-control through the prism of law. It was a product of Howard's time at Yale. As the United States enjoyed its 'unipolar moment', he shared in the sense of optimism. But he cautioned against taking such benefits for granted. He carried into the post-1989 world thoughts that had crystallised in 1984, reflected in the Alfred Deakin Lecture of that year and in addresses to the CCADD.

The principal quality required of statesmen as they considered the problems of international security was prudence. As a layman of faith, Howard urged Christians to respect 'the prudential calculations' on which statesmen based political decisions. Their object was not peace itself but the creation of an international order from which peace, fragile and inherently vulnerable, might emerge. To be effective, that order had to be based on existing circumstances, not on a utopian vision. Peace, he warned, 'is not to be brought about by the creation of any "new order"; if only because, in our infinitely diverse world, there is no consensus on what the new order should be'. Rather, peace 'can only come about as the result of a just ordering of relationship[s] between nations ... and that ordering can be maintained only by a process of constant adjustment to take account of the myriad developments and changes, each replete with opportunities for friction and conflict, which occur every day all over the world'.

Howard, who listed weeding among his recreations in *Who's Who*, likened the maintenance of peace to 'the same kind of constant hard work as the maintenance of a well-tended garden'. By 2001, such gardeners were in short supply. In 1984 the threat of nuclear weapons had contributed to stability, but now their role was less clear. Howard's worries about peace multiplied, Cassandra-like, in proportion with those inclined to take *Pax Americana* for granted. The European ideal was vested not in its geography but in its peoples, their diversity and the institutions which they planted. The latter, he told the alumni of the Woodrow Wilson Center in 1996, needed 'manuring, training, and sometimes drastically pruning of dead or diseased wood'.

Horticulture was only an analogy. As Edward Luttwak observed in 2000, 'It is always as a historian that Howard writes, not as a philosopher or social scientist, for his own way of understanding war and peace owes little to phenomenological speculations and

much to sequential constructions'.²⁶ Luttwak was reviewing *The Invention of Peace*. Another essay derived from a lecture, it took a broad sweep of history to argue that peace was not a normal condition simply 'to be preserved', but – partly because war was of greater antiquity – it had to 'be attained'. The historical illiteracy of America's response to the 9/11 attacks in the very next year appalled Howard but did not surprise him. He had already warned in 1998 of the myth-making which exaggerated the threat a renaissance Islam posed to the west.²⁷ In 2001, by treating terrorists as belligerents, the United States implicitly gave them legal rights, when it should have treated them as criminals. 'The global war on terror' was a logical absurdity. Its interventions overthrew the international laws that the United States had helped to put in place, and instead opened a field of conflict which had no logical end. Howard took no pleasure in being right (although he did allow himself some sense of *Schadenfreude*), but in 2002 he added an epilogue to what he had written and called it *The Reinvention of War*.

At that 70th birthday dinner in All Souls, Michael Howard had been presented with a *Festschrift* with a suitably capacious title, *War, Strategy and International Relations*, edited by Lawrence Freedman (one of his most distinguished pupils), Paul Hayes and Robert O'Neill. He was already laden with honours, and more would follow. All three of his Oxford colleges elected him to honorary fellowships. The Royal United Services Institute awarded him its Chesney Gold Medal in 1973. He was made a Fellow of King's College London in 1996, and in 2014 King's established the Sir Michael Howard Centre for the History of War, which sponsors an annual lecture in his name. He was given honorary doctorates by Leeds and London. He was appointed CBE in 1977, knighted in 1986, made a Companion of Honour in 2002, and added the Order of Merit in 2005 (the first person to be both OM and CH since Churchill, he would proudly say). He died on 30 November 2019, the day after his 97th birthday.

Acknowledgements

Michael Howard left a full account of his life, *Captain Professor: a life in war and peace* (2006), and a shorter one called 'A Professional Biography', written in 1991, of which copies are held by the British Academy and All Souls College, Oxford (Mil.Hist.KK.16). I am grateful to the Warden and Fellows of All Souls for permission to study the Michael Howard papers in the College's possession and to Gaye Morgan for her guidance and help. David Skaggs wrote 'Michael Howard: military historian and strategic analyst' as a dissertation for the US Army War College in 1983 and summarised his findings in *Military Affairs* 49 (1983), pp. 179-83. Three of Howard's students, Professor Sir Lawrence Freedman, Professor John Gooch and the Earl of Wemyss and March, have

²⁶Edward N. Luttwak, 'Peace in and of our time', *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 October 2000.

²⁷Michael Howard, 'The past's threat to the future', *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 August 1998.

given me the benefit of their memories and impressions, for which I am very grateful. Professor Brian Holden Reid is writing an authorised biography and until it is complete Michael Howard's papers, held by King's College London, are closed. However, Brian Holden Reid published a preliminary assessment in the *Journal of Military History*, 73 (2009), 869-904, and he has made several suggestions for improving this text. The late Professor Geoffrey Best helped more than he realised when he gave me a sheaf of Michael Howard's reviews and lectures. For fuller accounts of specific aspects of Howard's writings, see Hew Strachan, 'Michael Howard and the dimensions of military history', *War in History*, 27 (2020), 536-51, and 'Michael Howard and Clausewitz', *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 45 (2022).

Note on the author: Sir Hew Strachan is Wardlaw Professor of International Relations at the University of St Andrews. He was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 2017.

Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy (ISSN 2753-6777) are published by
The British Academy, 10-11 Carlton House Terrace, London, SW1Y 5AH
www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk