Chapter 21

Juridical Investigations: Martin Wight as International Lawyer

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It may seem odd to include a political theorist – and one with no legal training – in a collection of works about significant British international lawyers of the twentieth century. It is, perhaps, even odder to include someone who published so little work and whose fame as a scholar of international relations (IR) was eclipsed by his pupil, Hedley Bull, as well as by a generation of influential American political realists (e.g. Morgenthau, Niebuhr and Hoffman).¹ Yet Wight’s sardonic style and lightly-worn, but deeply felt, historical learning speaks very directly to us as international lawyers reflecting back on a century of professional work in the UK. His preoccupations, such as empire, lawful diplomacy, enemies of mankind, theoretical tradition, Eurocentrism, intervention and ethics, are also ours. Wight’s political theory seems so much more congenial to international law than much of IR scholarship today (though there are important exceptions). One can imagine him as a grand old man delivering (to a mixed reception) a keynote address at a Third World Approaches to International Law conference in Cairo or engaging in spirited conversation with Philip Allott at the British Institute of International and Comparative Law (BIICL) or Chatham House.

In this era of the turn to history and the turn to theory, Wight would have flourished, too, as an honorary international lawyer. His historical range, coupled with a breadth of references drawn from diplomatic practice, would have left him well placed to enter into dialogue with those who are recasting the

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¹ Wight is not included among the key English School figures listed at the beginning of Tim Dunne’s essay on the English School: T Dunne, ‘The English School’ in C Reus-Smit and D Snidel (eds) The Oxford Handbook of International Relations (Oxford University Press 2008) 266. These are Manning, Bull, Vincent, Watson and Butterfield (though this is probably a subconscious omission; Dunne has after all written extensively and appreciatively about Wight, describing him as a ‘father’ (at 9) and then ‘godfather’ (at 47) of the English school: see T Dunne, Inventing International Society (St Martin’s Press 1998)). See, too, I Hall, The International Thought of Martin Wight (Palgrave 2006).
history of international law.\textsuperscript{2} As a theoriser of international relations he is a contradictory figure. Wight, in his famous opening chapter to \textit{Diplomatic Investigations} (the book he and Herbert Butterfield edited in 1966)\textsuperscript{3} denied that there was such a thing as international theory. Sometimes his work – crammed with anecdote, literary reference, sweeping generalisations (often followed by a denial that such generalisations were possible), distractingly entertaining digressions and deceptively on-point examples, and guilty of a certain looseness of categorisation combined with a magpie attitude to history and philosophy – reads as a refusal to theorise at all. But his tripartite system of international thought – each pole based around a key intellectual progenitor – has become a marker of the English School tradition and anticipated the endless inter-paradigm debates that, for a while, seemed to constitute the field itself.\textsuperscript{4} Of course, these ‘three traditions’, as he called them, can (with a loss of intellectual nuance) be compressed into a familiar duality between what have come to be known as idealism and realism, or between the risks of demanding and imagining a radically better world, and the compromises necessary to operate successfully in the present morally deficient one. This dilemma seems, at times, inescapable; its inescapability identified famously as the condition of possibility for the discipline itself. Wight would have understood the acuteness of this conflict. He developed as a scholar, after all, at a moment when these two world views appeared to be starkly opposed and in a period when one of the early masters of international relations, Edward Hallett Carr, was synthesising them as the theoretical grounds of his book, \textit{Twenty Years’ Crisis}.\textsuperscript{5} Carr fell on the anti-utopian side of this fence (even if his realism has been overstated subsequently) as a reaction to the perceived dangerous innocence of the inter-war peace-makers and their international law advisers.

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{3}M Wight, ‘Western Values in International Relations’ in H Butterfield and M Wight (eds), \textit{Diplomatic Investigations: Essays in the Theory of International Politics} (Allen & Unwin 1966) 91.
\bibitem{4}Wight himself grew tired of this system of thought. See I Hall, ‘Martin Wight, Western Values, and the Whig Tradition of International Thought’ (2014) 36 \textit{The International History Review} 961, 962.
\bibitem{5}E Carr, \textit{Twenty Years’ Crisis} (Harper Perennial 1981).
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