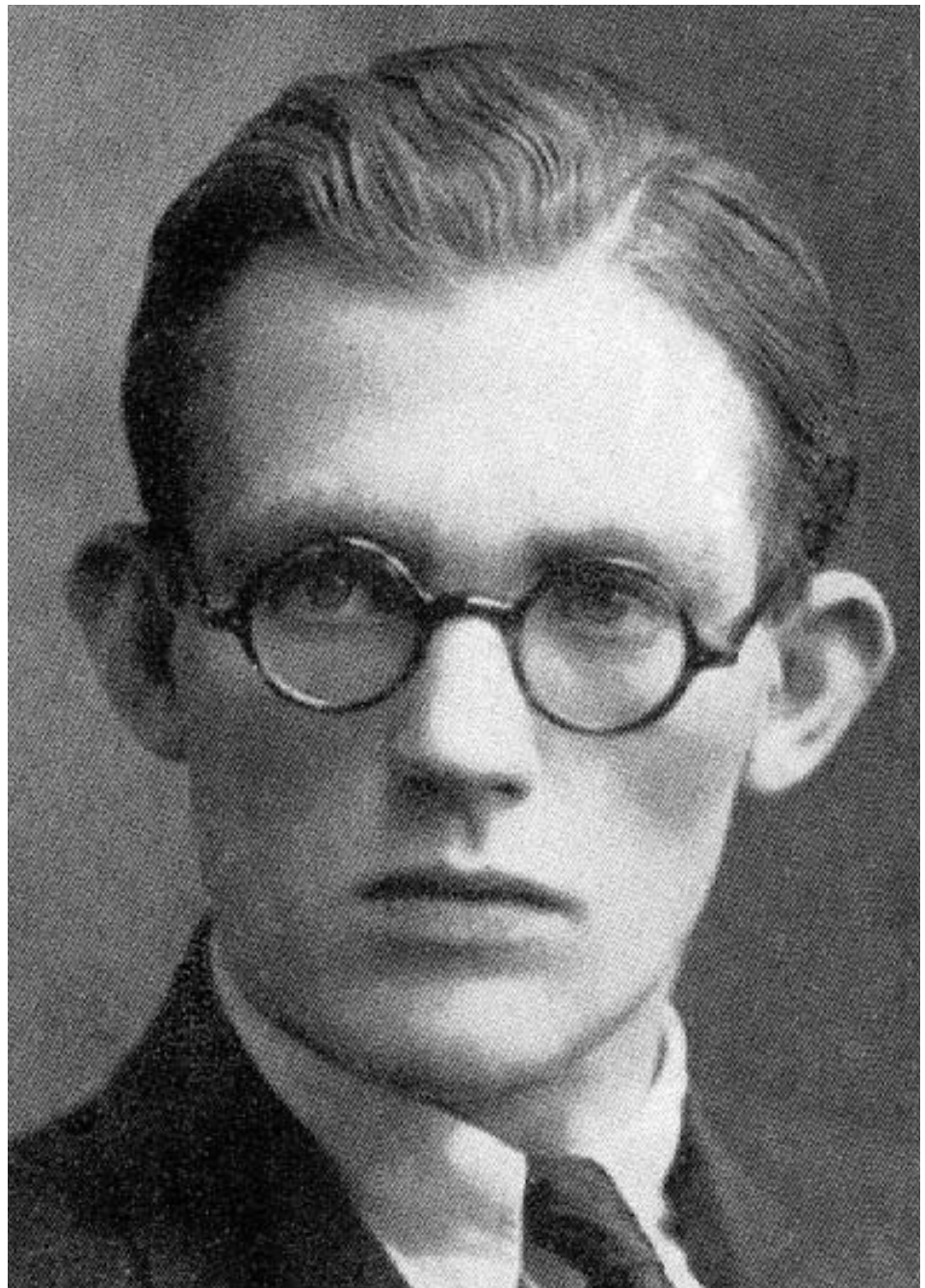


'WHY I AM THE DYNASTIC LIBERALISM OF

'I am Liberal first of all because of the unfaltering resistance which liberalism is pledged to offer to those twin dangers of fascism and war.' The author then added some general reflections on British history. Liberalism, he wrote, was largely responsible for 'the social and democratic institutions which this country already enjoys'.¹ This ardent young Liberal was a twenty-year-old undergraduate at Wadham College, Oxford, called Michael Foot. **Kenneth O. Morgan** examines the dynastic Liberalism of Michael and all the Foots.



A LIBERAL'

MICHAEL AND ALL THE FOOTS

HE WAS writing in the *News Chronicle*, in an article commissioned by that Liberal newspaper's editor, Aylmer Vallance, and published in April 1934. His party credentials as a young Liberal were impeccable. He breathed the very air of traditional Liberal principles – free trade, free speech, the importance of Nonconformity, international peace. His bookish teenage years were profoundly influenced by reading classic Liberal historians like Macaulay, George Otto Trevelyan and J. L. Hammond, by individualist religious dissenters like William Tyndale or John Bunyan, and the grand old cause of constitutional liberty successfully preserved (he believed) in the face of royal tyranny by Cromwell, Milton and their brethren.

Foot was the product of a political dynasty centred on Plymouth whose influence extended throughout Devon and Cornwall. He was the son and younger brother of Liberal MPs; he had stood successfully as a Liberal as a fifteen year-old in a mock election in Leighton Park, the Quaker school, in May 1929. In Oxford he had been a charismatic president of the University Liberal Club. His political idol was the still towering personality of David

Lloyd George, for whom he had campaigned in the 1929 general election. Breakfast with L.G. at the Randolph Hotel in Oxford in 1932 had been a highlight of his undergraduate years: 'it was superb'.² As a star speaker in the Oxford Union, elected president in June 1933, Foot took a strongly partisan Liberal line in debates. In January 1933, on a motion that 'This House believes that British Liberalism has before it a great future', he chose to thank God that, under the National Government, there was still a party he could support.³ The previous October he had launched a fierce rhetorical onslaught on the Tariff Boards created by the government, and the regime of protectionism and imperial preference established at the conference at Ottawa, which overturned almost a century of free trade since the repeal of the Corn Laws. He ridiculed protected 'Peter Pan industries which never grew up'. The *Oxford Magazine* reviewer wryly observed that 'this is the first speech in which Mr. Foot has not mentioned the name of Mr. Lloyd George'.⁴

As his *News Chronicle* article indicated, Foot linked his Liberalism strongly with the peace movement so active amongst Oxford undergraduates at that time, and in which he had himself been a prominent figure. In

a book *Young Oxford and War*, published later in 1934, to which he had been asked to contribute by an influential Indian active in Labour politics in London, Krishna Menon, Foot's near-pacifist argument identified Liberalism strongly with the movement for disarmament and a spirit of true internationalism. Indeed only through liberalism, broadly defined, could a peaceful world order and an end to international anarchy (a favourite term of Foot's, drawn from G. Lowes Dickinson's book of that title) be achieved. By contrast, Communists wanted to overthrow capitalism by violence and bloodshed. Conservatives enshrined the military virtues and blind obedience to the state. Socialists (not dealt with so fiercely, perhaps) tended to look inwards and to undermining the capitalist system at home rather than working for a truly international order.⁵

Foot had viewed with anxiety his father Isaac's taking office in MacDonald's National Government in October 1931 as Minister for Mines. He chided Isaac amiably in early 1932:

Well, I hope you are feeling thoroughly uncomfortable in your present position. I hope that the responsibility for a niggardly disarmament policy and blustering [?] dealing with

Left: Michael Foot in 1935

'WHY I AM A LIBERAL'

Ireland rests on your shoulders. I hope that you squirm in your pronouncement of each tariff order. I hope you will vote with patriotic resignation for the further cuts and a raising of the school leaving age.⁶

He was enthusiastic when Isaac, along with other mainstream Liberals under the leadership of Sir Herbert Samuel, resigned from the government following the Ottawa conference and the imposing of imperial preference and tariffs. He continued his enthusiastic evangelism for the Liberal cause after graduating from Oxford in the summer of 1934. On a debating tour of American universities in November and December, undertaken with his close friend, John Cripps, Michael Foot struck an ardently Liberal note time and again, notably in attacking US isolationism in its foreign policy and extreme protectionism in its trade policy.⁷ When he returned to Britain and contemplated a future career, one of the projects that appealed to him was writing the life of Charles James Fox, the hallowed Whig champion of the democratic ideals of the French Revolution. It was a cherished ambition which, like his proposed life of William Hazlitt, was endlessly deferred over the decades, though perhaps Foot's presence, in his ninety-fourth year, at a ceremony to unveil a statue of Fox in Bloomsbury Square in early 2007 represented a final genuflection to his lifetime hero.⁸

And yet, a few months later, the young Liberal Foot defected for ever.⁹ No doubt his friendship with young socialists like John Cripps, and meeting (and shortly working on a book with) his father Sir Stafford, was one major factor. Another was a trip to Palestine to visit his brother, Hugh, where he met a number of persuasive Jewish socialists. A more direct one was his first experience of poverty and despair in an industrial

city when he briefly worked in Liverpool for a few months in 1935 (and was particularly alienated by the right-wing views of his employer, the former Liberal MP, Richard Holt). Another, typically, appears to have been the influence of left-wing novelists, notably H. G. Wells and Arnold Bennett, whose works he read on Liverpool trams as they took him in leisurely fashion to his office on the waterfront. At any rate, he joined first the Labour Party, then the Socialist League (where he met the vivacious Barbara Betts, later Castle), and actually stood as Labour candidate for Monmouth at the general election in 1935. Thereafter he would be frequently attacked for jettisoning his ancestral Liberalism in favour of extremes of state control and centralisation which made a mockery of his early enthusiasm for individuality, freedom and libertarianism. Barbara Castle noted in her memoirs that 'the best way to infuriate Michael' later on was to refer to his youthful article 'Why I am a Liberal'.¹⁰ Nevertheless, the Liberalism of Michael Foot never disappeared. It is significant that his closest friend when he started up as a journalist was the former Liberal MP for Hereford, his buccaneering colleague in editing the *Evening Standard*, Frank Owen.¹¹ He shared to the full Foot's enthusiasm for David Lloyd George; he had been one of the six Lloyd George Liberal candidates in the 1931 general election and later wrote a (sadly inadequate) life of the great man, *Tempestuous Journey* (1954). Liberal instincts continued to influence key aspects of Foot's approach and style as editor of *Tribune*, as a left-wing Labour dissenter, and even as a government minister. It remained, and remains, as a significant thread in the warp and woof of the British progressive left at the dawn of a new millennium, and is well worth re-examination here.

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The Liberalism of Michael Foot was ancestral and dynastic. The historian John Vincent has seen it as patrician and elitist, derived from a 'West Country Hatfield'.¹² The Foot family, based previously in St Cleers, overlooking the Cornish moors, and then from 1927 in Isaac's spacious, book-lined country house in Pencrebar close to the Devon-Cornwall border, was powerful throughout the West Country. Their seat of political power was Plymouth, where Isaac (and later two of his sons) was senior partner in an important solicitor's firm, Foot and Bowden. David Owen, another Plymouth-bred politician, told the present author how aware he was of growing up within the towering Liberal shadow of the Foots of Plymouth.¹³ Michael Foot's grandfather, the elder Isaac (1843–1927), was a notable self-made man, a carpenter and part-time undertaker by trade, an influential Methodist and teetotaler, who built a Mission Hall and a hall for the Salvation Army in Plymouth city centre.

But the Foot legend was really the work of his son, Michael's astonishing father, Isaac Foot (1880–1960).¹⁴ Based in his native Plymouth, he soon became a Liberal patriarch and patron of immense and pugna-cious impact. Briefly attracted to socialism as a young man, he was passionately excited by the Liberal landslide election of January 1906 (in which both Plymouth seats went Liberal) and by the socially radical campaigns of Lloyd George, of whom Isaac was at first an intense disciple. He twice stood unsuccessfully for parliament in the 1910 elections, in January for Totnes, in December for Bodmin, where he was only narrowly defeated. He was elected to the Plymouth borough council in 1907 and by 1920 had become deputy mayor, in good time to celebrate the tercentenary of the sailing of the good ship *Mayflower* from Plymouth Hoe. He was to become

mayor at the end of the Second World War. His Liberalism, like that of his Cornish wife, was a product of sense and sensibility. It was rooted in West Country Methodism (in later life Isaac became president of the Methodist conference), in strict teetotalism, and in what Isaac saw as the radical, anti-royalist traditions of the West Country in general and Plymouth in particular. He cherished Freedom Fields in the middle of the city, which commemorated the triumph of Plymouth's parliamentarians in withstanding a lengthy royalist siege during the Civil War, and was to become a passionate champion of Cromwell, and effectively the founder of the Cromwell Association in the late 1930s. One of Isaac's more famous pronouncements was that the way to judge a man was to know on which side he would have fought at the battle of Marston Moor in 1644.¹⁵ An opponent of capital punishment, he seems to have viewed the execution of Charles I without regret. His son Michael inherited this conviction.

During the First World War, Isaac Foot was alienated by his hero Lloyd George's advocacy of military conscription and alliance with the Tories. He stood as an Asquithian Liberal for Bodmin in December 1918, and then in a by-election in Plymouth in 1919 where the victor, Lady Astor, a fellow teetotaller with whom he became extremely friendly, was the first woman to take her seat in parliament. Isaac then stood for Bodmin again in a by-election in 1922, successfully this time, making fierce criticisms of the Lloyd George government's policies in Ireland and in foreign policy. He held the seat in the general elections of 1922 and 1923, lost in 1924, but succeeded again (this time as an admirer of Lloyd George once more) in 1929 and 1931. After this, as mentioned above, he served in the National Government briefly, as Minister for

Mines. He played a particularly notable part in debates on India, and was influential in rebutting the imperialist extremism of Churchill in debates on the 1935 Government of India Act. He met with further electoral disappointments, losing his Bodmin seat in 1935, losing again at St Ives in a by-election in 1937 and yet again at Tavistock in 1945. But his Liberalism remained unflinching.

Nothing was a more powerful testimony to this than Isaac's famous library, of perhaps 70,000 volumes, crammed somehow into every available cranny of Pencrebar.¹⁶ It reflected the capacious mind of an Edwardian man of broad but unquenchably Liberal culture, with thousands of volumes commemorating, or celebrating, early Protestantism, the work of John Milton, the debates of the Civil War, the French Revolution and the American Civil War. His holdings of religious and patristic literature included no less than 240 early bibles, notably the 1536 New Testament of William Tyndale, 'apostle of England', a Protestant martyr for the faith during the reign of Henry VIII, and innumerable works by Luther, Calvin, Melancthon, Richard Baxter, and the early Quakers (over 200 volumes) amongst a cast of tens of thousands. While Isaac's bibliomania extended generously to medieval Catholic incunabula, to Shakespeare, Swift, Wordsworth, Hardy and even (remarkably) to Oscar Wilde and the sonnets of his homosexual lover, Lord Alfred Douglas, Pencrebar was above all a shrine to Liberal Protestantism, and the ideals of a free democratic republic.

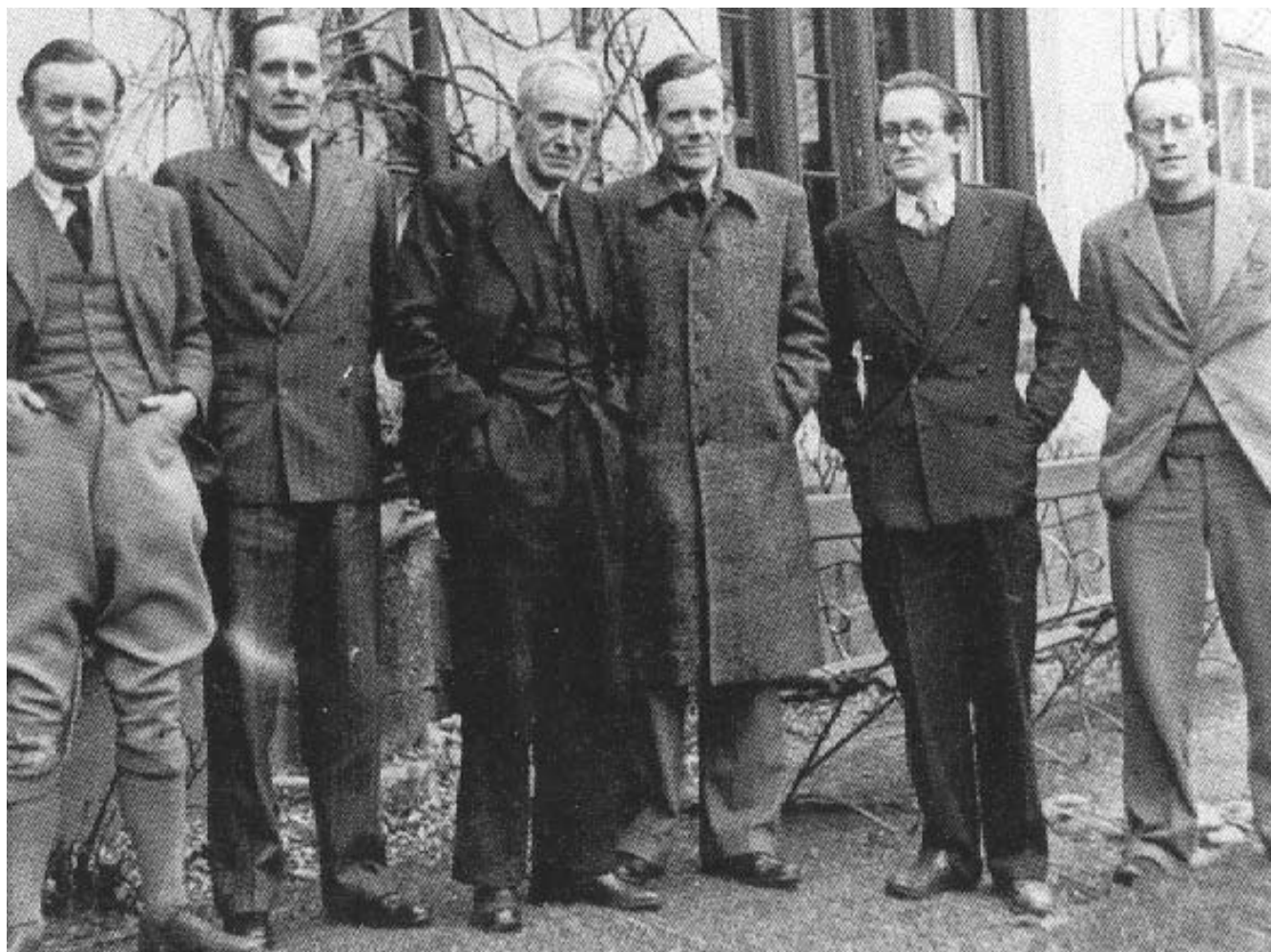
Michael's defection from the family faith to join the Labour Party in 1935 was a shock to Isaac, and perhaps even more to his resolutely orthodox wife Eva. A Cornish pasty sent by Eva to Michael on the eve of the poll in 1945 was a delayed signal of forgiveness, an edible olive

branch, as it were.¹⁷ Yet in many ways it was Michael who seemed to be the most natural of Isaac's heirs, the most dedicated in his love of books and learning, the most outspoken and pugnacious champion of free speech and liberal dissent. Nothing gave Isaac more pleasure in his later life than the appearance in 1957 of Michael's book *The Pen and the Sword*, a vivid account of Dean Swift's journalistic triumph in laying low the mighty Marlborough during the reign of Queen Anne. The two did not agree on everything. Isaac never really shared Michael's passion for Byron (as opposed to Wordsworth or Shelley). Michael never felt his father's enthusiasm for the United States in general and Abraham Lincoln in particular. Nevertheless, in key respects, the most important quality of Michael Foot, socialist pamphleteer, editor and parliamentarian extraordinary, was that he was Isaac's son.

Michael was born in 1913, the fifth oldest child, the fourth of five brothers, with two sisters, and enjoyed warm relations with all of them. Membership of the family was no doubt a taxing experience – keeping up with the gifted disputatious Foots was no mean task, and indeed an impossible one for the females of the family. Still, it was a remarkably close unit, with all of them enjoying private jokes in family gatherings and codes of behaviour including an enduring passion for Cromwell and for Plymouth Argyle football club. Correspondence between them would feature the family phrase, 'pit and rock', a reference to the famous passage in Isaiah about never forgetting 'the rock whence you are hewn and the pit whence you are digged'. Three of Michael's brothers, Dingle, Hugh and John, were active apostles of the family Liberalism.

Dingle, the eldest, born in 1905, seemed from the very start destined to follow in Isaac's

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Liberal footsteps.¹⁸ He went to Bembridge School on the Isle of Wight, where he was taught by J. H. Whitehouse, a former pacifist Liberal MP who had opposed the First World War. In Oxford he became president of the Liberal Club, and later president of the Union. He put in a strong performance in standing for Tiverton in the 1929 general election, where he gained over 42 per cent of the vote, and in 1931 was elected for Dundee, taking one of its two seats in harness with the Conservative, Florence Horsburgh. By now he had entered chambers and was to build up a considerable international reputation, with a prominent legal practice in Commonwealth countries in Africa and south-east Asia. He remained member for Dundee until the 1945 election, where he lost to Labour. Michael tended to gloss over the fact that Dingle stood for Dundee

From left: Dingle, Hugh, Isaac, John, Michael and Christopher Foot at Pencrebar in the late 1940s

without Conservative opposition in what was effectively an anti-Labour front. But of his firm, even radical, Liberalism there was no doubt, and he was fierce in his condemnation of Simon's followers, whom he later called 'the Vichy Liberals'. In the early months of the war in late 1939, he was prominent, along with the Conservatives Leo Amery and Robert Boothby, David Grenfell from Labour, the past and future Liberal Clement Davies, the actual Liberal Graham White, and the Independent Eleanor Rathbone, its convener, in the all-party 'Parliamentary Action' group popularly known as 'the Vigilantes'. Indirectly, it played a key *sub rosa* role in undermining Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister in May 1940,¹⁹ and Dingle served as junior minister under Hugh Dalton at the Ministry of Economic Warfare in Churchill's government. Dalton

seems to have had a high regard for one he called 'my Foot'.²⁰

After the calamitous Liberal performance in the 1945 election, Dingle Foot spent much of his considerable energy on his legal career, mainly in the Commonwealth, where he often acted with much courage. He was expelled from Nigeria in 1962 after challenging the Emergency Powers Act there. In domestic politics, he had had links with the movement Radical Action (originally formed during the war in 1941 and including Sir William Beveridge, Tom Horabin and Vernon Bartlett, among others) to keep his party as a force on the progressive left. After 1945 he was vocal and active in resisting Clement Davies's alarming drift to the right. Dingle's close ally in all this was Megan Lloyd George, of whom he was certainly an intimate friend and (some suspected) lover. At any

rate, he treated Megan with far more sensitivity and loyalty than did her long-term lover, Philip Noel-Baker, who grievously let Megan down when she might have reasonably hoped to marry him; Dingle, unlike Noel-Baker, did attend Megan's funeral.²¹

Dingle found other allies among the Liberal MPs, including such pro-Labour figures as Edgar Granville, Wilfrid Roberts and Emrys Roberts.²² The first two of these eventually joined the Labour Party, as did Megan Lloyd George at the time of the 1955 election. So, too, did Dingle, and he entered the House as Labour member for Ipswich after a by-election in 1957. When Harold Wilson became Prime Minister in 1964, he appointed Dingle Foot his Solicitor-General, and he was then heavily involved in policy towards Africa, especially in legal moves designed to counter the unilateral declaration of independence in Southern Rhodesia led by Ian Smith after the break-up of the old Central African Federation. However, Dingle Foot never seemed wholly attuned to membership of the Labour Party, and his ancestral Liberalism always exerted a powerful contrary pull. He resigned from the government over its handling of the illegal Rhodesian regime in 1967 and was thereafter a critic, including over policy towards Biafra and also Commonwealth immigration. Dingle was defeated in Ipswich in 1970 and his remaining years until his death in 1978 were not happy, with a gloomy lapse into near-alcoholism. He was now largely occupied with legal and constitutional work in the Commonwealth and also Northern Ireland. Certainly, especially in his legal career and as a courageous practitioner of the common law, his Liberal heritage was an inescapable part of him down to the end.

Hugh Foot, the second brother, born in 1907, was less party political than Dingle. He

too found the family Liberalism a compelling influence, with all the books and the innumerable household portraits and busts of Oliver Cromwell. He was to name his two sons appropriately – Paul, after the favourite family saint, Oliver, after the ancestral hero. Hugh attended the Quaker Leighton Park School, as Michael was to do, and became president of the Liberal Club at Cambridge, before the almost predictable presidency of the Cambridge Union and a far less predictable enthusiasm for rowing (football and cricket were the Foot games). Michael somewhat unfairly wrote of Hugh as 'never the brightest of the brood' and something of a 'hearty', but he seems to have taken this in good part, and indeed in 1939 was briefly Michael's landlord in London where he took a relaxed and genial view of the tenant's payment of rent.²³

Hugh went into the Colonial Service, starting in Palestine in 1929 (where, as has been seen, Michael visited him in 1934), then moving on to Transjordan, Nigeria, Jamaica (where he was Governor) and finally in 1957–60 in Cyprus as Governor during a dangerous state of emergency. Here, he played a distinguished part in reducing tension in that violent island, re-establishing diplomatic and personal relations with Archbishop Makarios and finally achieving an end to violence with the granting of independence to the island – something which a recent Conservative Minister of State for the Colonies, Henry Hopkinson, had declared would 'never' happen. Hugh Foot then served on the UN Trusteeship Council but clashed with the Conservatives over Rhodesia. Harold Wilson brought him in as Ambassador to the United Nations in 1964 and he remained there for nearly six years. There were some who felt that at first Hugh was somewhat too passive as a former Colonial Office man; Dingle Foot told Barbara Castle that 'Hugh can't

remember he's no longer a civil servant' in early discussions over the Rhodesian UDI in 1965.²⁴ But he soon struck a firm and commanding note, especially in dealings over the Palestine question. Foot was the major author of resolution 242, that unavailing monument to international pressure on Israel after the illegal occupation of the West Bank, and became a strong champion of the Palestinian cause. After he died, perhaps on the orders of his son Paul, Palestinian flags were draped on his coffin at the funeral service.²⁵

There is no doubt that the career of Hugh, too, was a monument to Liberalism. He noted with pride that every colony in which he served was soon to gain its independence. His fundamental ideals of international reconciliation and self-determination were a product of the culture of Pencrebar. His memoirs spoke of the impact upon him of his father, and he fondly recalled Isaac giving him a volume of Edmund Burke's speeches on American independence, with their precepts on 'magnanimity in politics' and 'participation in freedom'.

Hugh's two sons, in their contrasting ways, also testified to this vivid Liberal heritage.²⁶ Paul, the elder, became a famous crusading left-wing journalist. His long-term membership of the Socialist Workers' Party, with its singularly illiberal creed, led nowhere and may be seen as yet another instance of the Foot family eccentricity. However, as an exponent of the politics of exposure of corruption and dishonesty in high places, of police inadequacies or blunders in the James Hanratty, Helen Smith, Carl Bridgwater and Colin Wallace cases, or the racist rhetoric of Enoch Powell, even in his reporting for *Private Eye*, Paul Foot was a noble specimen of the dissidence of dissent. His later monograph, *The Vote*, is a passionate and moving plea for popular democracy, from the

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Levellers at Putney to the suffragettes and beyond. It is also the continuation of long family arguments, with Uncle Michael about parliament, with Aunt Jill over the Pankhurst daughters, and, most startling perhaps, with grandpa Isaac over the anti-democratic politics of the great Oliver Cromwell.²⁷ It is a very Foot book.

Oliver, Paul's younger brother, found another outlet for Foot Liberalism with his work for the arts and for the Christian charity Orbis International; his death in early 2008 was greatly mourned.²⁸ Another admirably dissident Foot descendant is Paul's son, Matthew, a criminal lawyer and vigorous campaigner for civil liberties, especially active as a critic of ASBOs.

The third brother, John, Baron Foot, born in 1909, was the one who remained impeccably Liberal throughout.²⁹ He went to Bembridge School, like Dingle, and he too became president of the Oxford Liberal Club, and then of the Oxford Union as well. He was always a sparkling and witty orator, the best of them all in Michael's view, and embodied all the Foot enthusiasms, for Cromwell especially. He stood for parliament as Liberal candidate for Basingstoke in 1934 (in a by-election) and 1935, and then for Bodmin in 1945 and 1950. In the 1945 election he joined in the family campaign against Leslie Hore-Belisha, Michael's opponent in Devonport, and a former Liberal who was felt to have behaved dishonourably in traducing his former ally Isaac at a by-election in St Ives in 1937 (when Walter Runciman, another National Liberal defector, stood down). After his defeat by just 210 votes, Isaac had bitterly quoted from Lord Alfred Douglas's poem of betrayal, 'The Broken Covenant', against the traitorous Simonite Liberals, Hore-Belisha and Runciman: 'I shall know his soul shall lie in the bosom of Iscariot'. The National Liberals

– the 'Vichy Liberals' as Dingle called them – were always a special Foot family target; during his campaign in Bodmin in 1945, John voiced his profound hope that Hore-Belisha and other Simonite renegades would be annihilated, as by and large they were.

Thereafter John focused on his career as a solicitor in Plymouth, but he remained politically active as a supporter of CND as zealous as Michael (according to his brother),³⁰ in work for the Immigrant Advisory Service, as a close friend of Jeremy Thorpe in West-Country Liberalism, and finally as a Liberal peer, Baron Foot of Buckland Monachorum. Lord Tordoff recalled John Foot, when president of the Liberal Party, presenting all his successors with the Foot family volume of Milton's *Areopagitica*, with a slip inside for all of them to sign.³¹ Of all the Foot brothers, it was John with whom Michael seems to have had the closest rapport, starting with a cheerful fraternal trip to Paris in search of French culture and French girls back in 1934.

Sadly, Michael's younger brother, Christopher, had a somewhat unhappy life as a solicitor managing the family firm, while the two daughters, Jennifer and Sally, were not encouraged to develop their abilities, a major reproach to the progressive instincts of the family.

This, then, was Michael Foot's powerful Liberal heritage. From the time of his joining the Labour Party in 1935 it was a tradition held at arms' length. Thereafter, his career followed its own individual, even eccentric, course – elected Labour MP for Plymouth, Devonport, in 1945, backbench critic and permanent dissenter and 'Bevanite' down to his electoral defeat in 1955, editor of the left-wing *Tribune* and radical pamphleteer *par excellence*, heir to Nye Bevan as MP for Ebbw Vale from 1960, leader of CND and impresario

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at a host of left-wing marches, 'demos' and protests, close ally of Jack Jones and the unions, cabinet minister during the era of the 'social contract' in the 1970s and finally, in an ultimate disastrous period, Leader of the Labour Party in 1980–83. His abiding mentor now was no traditional Liberal, but Nye Bevan, the class warrior who fought the capitalist enemy, viewed the old Liberals with something near contempt, and saw socialism in terms of centralisation, nationalisation and the celebration of the collectivist cause to promote national minimum standards from Tonypandy to Tunbridge Wells. Michael Foot, his disciple and ardent biographer, echoed his master at every stage.

Of course, Michael Foot remained for the rest of his career remote from the Liberal Party and its creed which provided him with his early inspiration. He was above all else the Labour propagandist and partisan. And yet, it is important to the understanding both of his career and of the history of the twentieth-century Labour Party more widely to see that Liberalism remained of importance for him, as perhaps less obviously it did for another son of Edwardian Liberalism, Tony Benn. Foot shared this quality with many of those who made the transition from Liberalism to Labour, from Christopher Addison in the early 1920s onwards.³² As a backbencher in 1945–55, and again in 1960–70, he was especially active in pursuit of the rights of minorities, freedom of speech, liberty of conscience, and the reform of parliament. His booklet, *Parliament in Danger* (1959), was a passionate plea for the freedom of backbenchers and a relaxation of the stifling control of the party whips. He cited the powerful authority of Edmund Burke in his support.³³ Unlike others on the left, Michael Foot was always manifestly a parliamentarian, however at home he might be on the march or on the platform.

His journalism of exposure, certainly *Guilty Men*, written with Frank Owen and the more conservative Peter Howard, at the time of Dunkirk, is the work of a radical rather than a socialist. His political hero in many ways remained Lloyd George (who, indeed, gets off very lightly in *Guilty Men*) while such economics as he could command took their stand on the writings of Keynes he had encountered in tutorials in Wadham from Russell Bretherton.³⁴

His Liberalism was especially to the fore in his pursuit of freedom of the press. He insisted that this was one of his dominant goals in his trade union legislation of 1975, including the promotion of the closed shop for journalists. He pointed to his sympathy for conscientious dissenters who should not be compelled to join a union, although critics complained that his Liberal sympathies disappeared when he insisted on closed shops for all writers in newspapers and periodicals, whether journalists by trade or not. It was a debatable argument either way. Foot undoubtedly felt that the National Union of Journalists (of which he was an active member) was a legitimate agent for a free press and liberty of expression, well in the tradition of Milton's *Areopagitica*, of which he had been taught by his father, Isaac.³⁵ He had pursued much the same line, as a left socialist, in defending the rights of free expression of Djilas and other dissidents in eastern Europe. Others, including many Labour journalists, wondered whether enforced membership of a union was really any kind of guarantee of freedom of expression. One of those who took this view, apparently, was his brother Dingle, who had fought for freedom of the press in African and Asian countries. Michael Foot was on firmer ground in meeting the miscellaneous arguments of right-wing newspaper publishers, some of whose commitment

to free speech and free thought had been less conspicuous than his own.

Nevertheless, a judge as liberal in spirit as Lord Scarman could see in Foot's trade union legislation of 1974–76 a valuable updating of Campbell-Bannerman's Liberal trade union legislation back in 1906.³⁶ It could well be argued that the unions had been a major gap in the Liberal Party's policies ever since the working-class 'Lib-Labs' left them after 1918. The Labour government had made the 1906 'Magna Carta' that much more protective of workers' rights, and, for the moment, moderate Conservatives like Prior and Pym went along with it. Otherwise, colleagues of his in Cabinet in 1974–79 recalled Foot as being on the libertarian side of ministerial arguments. One instance was the introduction of seat-belts in cars, which Foot (who had ceased to be a driver long since) viewed as an unacceptable intrusion into personal liberty.³⁷ Barbara Castle was struck by how rational and conciliatory Foot would be in discussing the conducting of a referendum on membership of Europe in May 1975:

As I listen to Mike these days the more conscious I am that, as they grow older, these Foot brothers all merge into one collective Foot type: rational, radical and eminently reasonable. They even speak in the same voice and the same terms: they are natural Liberals.

She added, 'No wonder Paul Foot has rebelled against his elders!'³⁸

Shirley Williams told the present writer that she saw in Michael a ministerial colleague, with whom she worked closely in 1975–76, as a man who was not a natural champion of an over-mighty central state apparatus at all, but rather a natural champion of decentralism and devolution. He was essentially 'a

free spirit', although one whose personality was constrained by office.³⁹ It was entirely appropriate that, rejecting his old Bevanite legacy, he should take up the cause of devolution for Scotland and Wales. (It should be added that Jim Callaghan, himself no devolutionist, took a somewhat more sceptical view of Foot's views here.⁴⁰) Michael Foot was also a major champion of the Lib-Lab Pact of March 1977, for which he was sharply criticised by Tony Benn. The pact, of course, was essentially a tactical device to keep the minority Labour government in office. But clearly Foot, unlike Benn and perhaps Denis Healey, felt quite at ease in allowing scope for consensual discussion with David Steel and the Liberals on such matters as Europe and constitutional reform, and regretted the Liberals' later decision to end the pact. He was a driving force throughout in keeping it alive.⁴¹

Foot's Liberalism, equated with a defence of a free parliament, also came out strongly when he became Labour leader. He increasingly saw the approach of the Bennites and hard left as at basic variance with the pluralism which should govern the internal processes of the Labour Party. To Foot, the Labour Party should aim at being a progressive broad church in the way that the Liberal Party of yore had been; it should straddle a rich variety of viewpoints, from Shirley Williams to CND. Militant Tendency offended his deepest instincts because it was anti-parliamentary and illiberal. The Bevanites, he believed, had always worked within the bounds of legitimate constitutional dissent; they were a 'legitimate left'.

The anti-parliamentarism of Militant which so disturbed him emerged again, in what he believed to be the threat from the European Common Market. He campaigned against Britain's remaining in the EEC in 1975 not as a socialist but as

'As they grow older, these Foot brothers all merge into one collective Foot type: rational, radical and eminently reasonable. They even speak in the same voice and the same terms: they are natural Liberals.'

a democrat. Sovereign parliamentary authority, painfully acquired since the time of Cromwell, was being fundamentally challenged by an unelected bureaucracy located overseas, with scant parliamentary redress. As it happened, Foot was to change his view about Europe over time, largely because of the encouragement from centre-left social democrats in continental countries, like Gonzales, Soares and Papandreou. His links with Francois Mitterrand, another intellectual socialist, may also have been a factor.⁴² After all, an author who wrote so sympathetically on international free spirits like Montaigne, Hazlitt, Byron, Heine, Stendhal and Silone, was not obviously one of nature's Eurosceptics or xenophobes. Throughout his retirement he wrote on irrepressible liberal figures like these. His historical reading focussed on Michelet, Macaulay and Trevelyan, as it had done in his youth, not to mention that epitome of transnational enlightenment and reason, Edward Gibbon.

In his final years as an active politician, in the mid-1990s, he took up another grand old Liberal cause, that of defending the national freedoms of Croatia in the face of Serb aggression. There were those, including Paul Foot, who chided his uncle with ignoring the distinctly illiberal and racist elements of Croatia in its neo-fascist Ustasha past under Pavelich and its present reality under President Franjo Tudjman.⁴³ But for Michael Foot it was a case of clear aggression upon a smallish nation 'rightly struggling to be free' as the old Yugoslavia crumbled. He and his wife Jill, both in their eighties, travelled to their beloved Dubrovnik, almost helpless before Serb and Montenegrin shellfire and rockets, to tell the world of the atrocities that were being committed, while British Tory foreign secretaries like Hurd and Rifkind stood aside as their predecessors had done

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in Spain during the time of the Popular Front. *Two Hours from London*, Jill's film, which shows Michael Foot appealing to the world conscience from the battlements of old Dubrovnik above the harbour, is deeply moving, despite efforts by the BBC to curtail or even ignore it.⁴⁴ It calls to mind another brave octogenarian's crusade against savage aggression – the endeavours of Gladstone in his eighty-sixth year in 1896 to rouse the conscience of the civilised world over Turkish atrocities in Armenia. Michael Foot's Liberal inheritance was never more thoroughly vindicated.

The audacious Liberalism of Michael Foot – embracing the party Liberalism of his heritage and his family – is at least as important as the socialism of Nye Bevan in making him what he was. Foot was an emotional, instinctive and principled politician. He believed that the essence of politics emerged in the market of free ideas. One of his particular heroes was John Stuart Mill – not the intellectually tortured Mill who feared 'the tyranny of the majority', but the champion of a kind of feminism who wrote the somewhat bloodless *Subjection of Women*.⁴⁵ Michael Foot's most characteristic and revealing book is not his two-decker biography of Bevan, stirring though it is, but his volume *Debts of Honour*, published around the time he became Leader of the Labour Party in late 1980. It is a volume of essays, each of them a study of personalities, and an eclectic and even eccentric collection it is, too. It includes mavericks like Beaverbrook, whose friendship Foot cherished. But above all it is a catalogue of predominantly liberal (or Liberal) dissenters, 'trouble-makers' in Alan Taylor's inspired phrase – Hazlitt, Disraeli (a real radical to Michael), Russell, Paine, Defoe, Swift and, above all, father Isaac, a portrait drawn with deep insight as well as affection. Only three of Foot's

pantheon could be classified as socialists: the cartoonist Vicky and the authors H. N. Brailsford and Ignazio Silone. Even here, in the case of Brailsford, the emphasis is placed on his writings on the seventeenth-century Levellers, on Shelley and Godwin during the French Revolutionary wars, and Brailsford's work in the women's movement. Journalists were derisive when reading that Tony Blair had seen in Foot's book in 1982 a more attractive route to ethical socialism. But this was unfair. It is not at all surprising that a young man like Blair, with an idealistic heart but no aptitude for political theory, should find appealing a tradition that was non-Marxist and non-coercive but altruistic, warm and humane.⁴⁶

Apart from his book on Bevan – admittedly, a very considerable exception – Foot did not write on the history of the labour movement. He encouraged the writing of works on Hardie, Lansbury or Maxton by others, but he focussed himself on pre-industrial radicalism. This is not to say that socialism was not important to him, but it was a socialism that was always libertarian and literary-romantic, drawn from an instinct for humanity rather than an analysis of class. Perhaps that adds to his stature. Michael Foot was one of the great prophets and communicators of the British left. He was influential throughout the world in proclaiming what it meant to be a socialist as he understood it. Always underpinning it was an instinctive Liberal imperative. Michael has quoted his father, Isaac, contemplating his world in simple moral terms after a bitter by-election defeat at St Ives in 1937:

The purpose of liberalism is to defeat fear and bring hope. Wordsworth once gave the definition of a liberal. He spoke of 'a man of hope and forward-looking mind'. That is a definition of a liberal and the triumph

of liberalism means the conquest of fear.⁴⁷

It is not the most inappropriate of epitaphs for the son of Isaac. Perhaps the last evidence may be taken from two of Michael Foot's closest comrades from the epicentre of Welsh valleys socialism. There was Aneurin Bevan during the CND controversies in 1959 telling a friend privately, 'deep down, Michael is still a Liberal'.⁴⁸ And, nearly half a century later, there was Neil Kinnock's considered view – 'Michael belongs to the Liberal-Republican pantheon, not the Socialist one'.⁴⁹

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1 *News Chronicle*, 4 April 1934.
 2 Michael Foot to Isaac Foot, 'Friday' 1932 (Isaac Foot papers, private possession); D. F. Karaka, *The Pulse of Oxford* (London, 1933). Foot was to write a passionate tribute to Lloyd George on news of his death, *Daily Herald*, 5 April 1945
 3 *Oxford Magazine*, 26 January 1933.
 4 *Ibid.*, 26 October 1932.
 5 Michael Foot's chapter in V. Krishna Menon (ed.), *Young Oxford and War* (London, 1934), pp. 39ff. and 59ff.
 6 Michael Foot to Isaac Foot, 'Friday' 1932 (Isaac Foot papers, private possession).
 7 Report of debates at Yale, 19 November and La Rochelle, New York, 26 November 1934 (Michael Foot papers, private possession).

8 Interviews with Michael Foot, 2002–06. At the launch party for my book on 21 March 2007, there was a fascinating discussion on Fox between Michael Foot and William Hague, author of a recent biographer of the Younger Pitt.
 9 For a fuller discussion, see Kenneth O. Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life* (London, paperback edn., 2008), pp. 40–43.
 10 Barbara Castle, *Fighting all the Way* (London, 1993), p. 77.
 11 Michael Foot wrote a highly sympathetic account of Frank Owen in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. There is a brief but lively account of Owen's life in Gron Williams, *Firebrand: the Frank Owen Story* (Square One Publications, Worcester, 1993). I am much indebted to the author for drawing my attention to this work.
 12 Morgan, *Michael Foot: A Life*, p. 13.
 13 Interview with Lord Owen, 25 March 2004.
 14 See the fascinating volume, Michael Foot and Alison Highet, *Isaac Foot: A West-country Boy – Apostle of England* (London, 2006).
 15 Isaac Foot's name is inscribed on the monument put up in 1939 at the site of the battle of Marston Moor, between Leeds and York.
 16 Theodore G. Grieder, 'The Isaac Foot Library: a Report to the University', 1964: Online Archive of California (<http://www.oae.cdlib.org.findaid.ark>). Isaac Foot's library was sold after his death to the University of California, Santa Barbara, for the remarkably small sum of £50,000.
 17 Interviews with Michael Foot, 2002–06.
 18 Dingle Foot's rather sparse papers are in Churchill College, Cambridge.
 19 Alun Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies, Liberal Leader* (London, 2003), pp. 91ff.; Susan Pedersen, *Eleanor Rathbone and the Politics of Conscience* (New Haven, Connecticut, 2004), pp.

307–09.
 20 Ben Pimlott, *Hugh Dalton* (London, 1985), p. 284.
 21 Mervyn Jones, *A Radical Life* (London, 1991), p. 185. The biography of Noel-Baker (David J. Whitaker, *Fighter for Peace: Philip Noel-Baker 1889–1982* (York, 1989)) makes no reference at all to this relationship.
 22 Clement Davies to Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, 15 November 1950 (Clement Davies papers, National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth, J/3/45); Wyburn-Powell, *Clement Davies*, pp. 171 ff.
 23 Hugh Foot, *A Start in Freedom* (London, 1964), pp. 22–23, 61. Michael's comments on his brother appeared in the *Evening Standard* in 1961.
 24 Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries 1964–70* (London, 1984), pp. 22–23, entry of 23 March 1965.
 25 I owe this information to Professor Wm. Roger Louis, of the University of Texas at Austin.
 26 Hugh Foot, *A Start in Freedom*, p. 34.
 27 Paul Foot, *The Vote* (London, 2005), esp. pp. 25 ff.
 28 Obituary of Oliver Foot, *The Guardian*, 12 February 2008.
 29 Obituary of Lord Foot, *The Independent*, 12 October 1999. I am indebted to reminiscences of him from Lord Tordoff and Lord Livsey.
 30 Information from Michael Foot.
 31 Information from Lord Tordoff.
 32 See Kenneth and Jane Morgan, *Portrait of a Progressive: The Political Career of Christopher, Viscount Addison* (Oxford, 1980). There is an absorbing discussion of some of the underlying issues in Michael Freedon, *Liberalism Divided* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 294ff.
 33 This pamphlet was published by Pall Mall Press. Foot was much influenced at this time by his leading role in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which attracted the support of many Liberals, including his brother John.

34 Morgan, *Michael Foot*, pp. 26–27.
 35 *Ibid.*, pp. 307–12; Foot's memorandum, 'Freedom of the Press', 3 December 1974 (CAB 129/180/3); Cabinet conclusions, 6 November 1975 (CAB 128/57), National Archives, Kew.
 36 See Lord Wedderburn, *The Worker and the Law* (3rd edn, London, 1986), pp. 586ff. Also see Paul Davis and Mark Freedland, *Legislation and Public Policy: A Contemporary History* (Oxford, 1993), and Brian Brivati, *Lord Goodman* (London, 1999), pp. 229 ff.
 37 Information from Lord Rodgers, 14 November 1995.
 38 Barbara Castle, *The Castle Diaries, 1974–76* (London, 1980), p. 347, entry of 20 March 1975.
 39 Interview with Baroness Williams, 1 November 2004.
 40 Conversations with the late Lord Callaghan.
 41 Tony Benn, *Conflicts of Interest, Diaries 1977–80* (London, 1990), pp. 85 ff., entries of 23–27 March 1977; I am much indebted for interviews with Lord Steel of Aikwood, 20 July 2004, and Lord McNally, 17 January 2006 and for their observations at the Liberal Democrat History Group meeting on the Lib-Lab Pact, 14 July 2008 (see report in this *Journal*).
 42 Interviews with Michael Foot, 2002–06.
 43 Paul Foot to Michael Foot (Michael Foot, private papers); conversations with Ms Vesna Gamulin in Dubrovnik.
 44 For a fuller account, see Morgan, *Michael Foot*, pp. 455ff.
 45 Conversations with Michael Foot.
 46 Tony Blair to Michael Foot, 28 July 1982, and undated (? 1996) (Foot private papers).
 47 Isaac Foot, quoted in M. Foot and A. Highet, *Isaac Foot*, p. 212.
 48 Interview with Geoffrey Goodman, 23 March 2004.
 49 Interview with Lord Kinnock, 30 January 2005.