

## AN INNOCENT ABROAD

## THE LETTERS OF BASIL ISAACS, 1931-1932

by

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“‘I am not cultivated, I am not even educated; I know nothing about history, or art, or foreign tongues, or any other learned matters. But I am not a fool, either, and I shall undertake to know something about Europe by the time I have done with it.’” (Christopher Newman)

‘In the afternoon I went to see London Tower. I was very impressed with the age of everything. At first I was disappointed after seeing New York’s sky-scrapers. I had imagined it to be very high but when I heard William the Conqueror built it, and saw the place where Queen Anne was beheaded, I felt the charm and wonder of the place, and I think that is the first time history has meant anything to me.’ (Basil Isaacs)

## I

‘Adventure ... new countries ... youth ... strange customs ... all lie ahead of me. At the present moment I would not change places with anyone on earth.’ So wrote Basil Isaacs, a twenty-three year old Melbourne Jewish businessman, in January 1931. This was the start of a world trip that was to take him to New Zealand, Fiji, North America, the British Isles, the Continent, India, Singapore and Japan. Record of the year long journey has been preserved in a volume of his letters entitled *Letters During My World Travels, 1931-2* which was typed and bound some time after his return to Melbourne and handed down through the family.

There are thirty seven letters in all in a volume that runs to one hundred and twenty seven pages. They are of course of particular and poignant interest to the family, the more so because Basil Isaacs died tragically a mere three years after returning home. But the letters are of more general interest. They chart the experiences of a young Melbourne Jew abroad in the inter-war years as he learns first-hand about the rise of Nazism in Germany, about the politics of the period, the financial crash of 1931 and much else. And there are many fetching if less significant moments — sneaking a none too secret drink in prohibition Chicago, seeing television demonstrated in Germany, declining dubious overtures after a vaudeville show in Paris. Topical, touching, revealing: the letters are both a personal and public record.

None of this amounts to saying, however, that Isaacs was an extraordinary young man. On the contrary, it is his — in the best sense — ordinariness that often appeals and interests. His perceptions and failures of perception, his prejudices and predilections — all tell us not just about the man and the inter-war world he found, but also about his Melbourne Jewish background. The man who exhorted his family to ‘picture me, if you can, a poor, helpless, little Jewish boy alone in the heart of Europe’ (20



*Basil Isaacs 1908-1935*

September, 1931) knew that he was both an aspiring individual and a type, and where youth prompts a sense of self-importance the play of a laconic, deflating, Australian Jewish wit is always there to remind him of just how far he is a product and reflection of his beloved Melbourne.

Something of the range and charm of the letters is apparent in a larger excerpt from the one quoted above. That the writer was an eminently practical businessman is apparent from a postscript that heads the letter: 'I see mortgages are being cut by 22½%. This should be a big help to us.' What follows is this:

Dearest family:

I have just finished a most witty letter to Irene [Basil's mother's sister], witty perhaps but I am afraid very badly spelt.

Picture me, if you can, a poor, helpless, little Jewish boy alone in the heart of Europe, surrounded by hordes of anti-semites. Oh, why didn't I change my name to O'Brien, Casey, O'Flaherty or something to suit my appearance. With a face like mine I would have been an ideal Irving-Smith, or Hanover-Jones.

I left Berlin with a civic farewell, flags, processions etc. As a favour to the populace I sang that famous, little ditty, "The Red Flag". This nearly started civil war, and the nasty Nazis, under the baton of one Hitler, cried "Perish Jews", and sang the "Prisoner's Song", and as a finale, "Show me the way to go home".

I think my life might have been forfeited, only at that moment news came through that the English navy was in revolt as they had had their "screw" reduced. This, of course, called for community singing of the dear old war song, "Hymn of Hate", and after everybody had "straffed" England, I was waved from the platform in great, good humour.

I arrived in Dresden, a very famous, old German town, renowned for its art, the capital of Saxony, and one time the most powerful state of Central Europe. It was here that the Saxon kings controlled Poland, Czecho., Austria and Hungary. It is a beautiful city, population 700,000, and the sixth city in Germany. It is a famous tourist city, and outside many shops is to be seen the American flag with a notice, "English Spoken".

I met Mr. Henchel and wife, they are both very nice, educated, cultured people. I went with Henchel all over Dresden to the famous Green Vault and saw art treasures of the Saxon kings which could not be valued in money. They far surpassed any treasures I have seen in my so far extensive travels.

The humour is delightful, characteristic and has a surreal edge that often surfaces when he is disturbed or anxious. Here it is providing uneasy defence against the dawning dread of the Nazis to which he refers in earlier letters. The uncomplicated and essentially trusting assessment of the Henchels is also typical: with a few notable exceptions Isaacs was a great lover and pleaser of people. Indeed, for all the momentousness of his trip it is people, whether relatives, friends, or passing acquaintances, who loom largest in the letters and most engage him imaginatively. Certainly, the cultural treasures of the Old World assume a lower priority, and the assurance here that the Saxon treasures 'could not be valued in money' reflects a sensibility which, though occasionally attracted to high culture, was more at home in a world of measurable and immediate values.

The humour aside, the excerpt exemplifies what I take to be the two most historically significant aspects of the letters. The first concerns the writer's Judaism: the reaction of a young Melbourne liberal Jew to Europe in the early thirties. After hearing about persecution in Germany he writes with moving simplicity that 'I have, I think, realized that I am a Jew for the first time' (10 October, 1931), and the trip clearly forces him to confront the fact and the implications of his Judaism with an intensity that surprises and disconcerts him. Secondly, the letters are a modest record of the experiences of a 'colonial' abroad, especially a colonial in the Old World. This is a theme of perennial interest since it tells us so much about the 'colonial mentality' and the problems of cultural and national definition, and it is not surprising that two of our greatest novelists, Martin Boyd and Patrick White, have written about it.

The greatest writer about the colonial abroad, however, was not an Australian. It was the American novelist Henry James who, in a novelistic career spanning the period 1870-1915, popularized the so-called 'international theme' in fiction: the novel centering on value contrasts between the New and the Old Worlds and on the experience of the 'passionate pilgrims' (a favourite James phrase) who sought a future in the new and a past in the old. Many of James's protagonists are so-called 'innocents abroad', and some bear intriguing resemblances to Basil Isaacs. Hence, our title which, far from intending condescension, seeks to place his experiences abroad in a context of cultural and literary discussion.

That context springs from the predicaments of young nations like America and Australia, nations whose social, political and artistic life is relatively undeveloped, lacks a deep and defining past and goes on in the shadow of a mother culture. For nation and citizen alike the resultant problems of self-definition are very familiar,<sup>2</sup> and no writer has explored these problems more profoundly or comprehensively than Henry James.

Some of James's pilgrims are sophisticated, some are more credulous, and one of his favourite stereotypes is that of the self-made American businessman embarking on a voyage of cultural appropriation — personal and pecuniary — to Europe. It is with these characters that Basil Isaacs has most in common, and none more so than the pointedly named Christopher Newman, 'hero' of James's early novel *The American* (1877). Newman is a Westerner who has made a fortune after the Civil War and is proceeding with his business career when one day in New York he is seized with a sense of revulsion at the life he is leading. He determines to visit Europe for reasons that are both less than clearly formulated and apparently lacking in subtlety. He tells Tristram, an American he meets in Paris, that

I want the biggest kind of entertainment a man can get. People, places, art, nature, everything! I want to see the tallest mountains, and the bluest lakes, and the finest pictures, and the handsomest churches, and the most celebrated men, and the most beautiful women.<sup>3</sup>

If this sounds a little like Basil Isaacs wanting to value 'in money' Saxon treasures it also epitomizes the situation of the Jamesian pilgrim who pits an innocent conception of history, culture, freedom and manners against the antique subtleties of the Old World. Newman in fact encounters a perplexing and disturbing Europe, principally Paris, and is drawn into a melodramatic plot which sees him fail not only to gain the hand of his chosen bride, but to fathom the usages (social and artistic) and treacheries of Europe. Like Newman Isaacs is alert, eager and responsive but in matters social and artistic very much the innocent negotiating a more complex reality than he has known at home. Thus, if Newman's duplicitous Europe is the stuff of social melodrama, Isaacs's Europe is all too real in its menace and complexity — 'they hate all their surrounding countries, as is the general custom on the Continent' (20 September, 1931) — and it is striking to find so magnanimous a man in fact disliking and suspecting many of those he meets on the Continent. Their responses to art are also comparable. When we first meet Newman he is seated baffled and

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There are many such parallels in the perceptions and failures of perception of these businessmen abroad; and as James writes through Christopher Newman about American consciousness and its limitations, so a modest record of an Australian equivalent emerges from Basil Isaacs's letters. More of the letters themselves in the final section of this essay; let us for the moment turn back to Isaacs's Melbourne and see how it shaped experience of a man who at the age of twenty-four could write home and confess not only that 'I have, I think, realized that I am a Jew for the first time' (10 October, 1931), but — after visiting the Tower of London — that this 'was the first time history has meant anything to me.' (24 July, 1931).

## II

Both sides of the Isaacs family were well established in Australia. The paternal grandparents came out from England, the grandfather having been with the British Army; and Joe, Basil's father, was born in Melbourne. Edith, Basil's mother, was a Marks, and their Australian lineage went back still further: both her parents were born in Melbourne, the previous generation having also emigrated from England. Not much is known of the grandparents' vocations but the Isaacs had the comfort of sizeable inheritances. According to Mrs. Esther Isles, Basil's sister-in-law, Edith received an income of £60 per week during her married life.<sup>4</sup>

Joe Isaacs had a variety of occupations before he married, one of the more colourful being employment as a whisky salesman in Victoria. At the time he met Edith Marks he had a general store in the small New South Wales town of Candelero. The couple came to Melbourne and settled, probably in St. Kilda. Joe is remembered as a stern, forceful, presentable and particular man, but also as an honest and generous one. The family architect and close friend, Peter Mason, still speaks with amused awe about doing business with the patriarch. Arriving late for appointments, Mason recalls being first fixed with a reproving glare and then invited to console as Joe recounted the exasperating vagaries of family life.<sup>5</sup> Still, Joe was very much a family man and was both respected and liked by his sons. He was not a particularly cultured man, nor was he apparently very conscious of his Judaism.

His wife Edith was both more cultured and more intense in her Judaism. She had some interest in the arts, especially music, and had studied piano for a year in London in her teens; and she attended the St. Kilda synagogue regularly. It was probably her influence rather than Joe's that led to their being foundation members of the Alma Road Liberal Synagogue when it opened in 1930. Edith was remembered by Basil's late brother, Roy Isles, and still by Mrs. Isles,<sup>6</sup> as a warmer and more yielding personality than Joe, and her sons, especially Basil, seem to have been quite passionately attached to her.

The Isaacs settled in a large home in Tennyson Street, St. Kilda, an area in which, as the late Judge Rapke has it, 'Anglo-Jewry reigned supreme'<sup>7</sup> in the pre-war years. There were three sons. Walter, the eldest, was physically imposing, somewhat irresponsible yet much loved; Roy, the next in line, was a fine, quietly spoken, kindly and thoughtful man; and then there was Basil. The boys attended Wesley where, again according to Rapke, 'for these [pre-war] generations, anti-semitism was unknown.'<sup>8</sup>

The atmosphere of the household was extrovert but, with the partial exception of the mother, neither particularly cultured nor particularly Jewish. The boys grew up loving the Melbourne sporting and business ethos and its perennial pleasures: they liked a drink and weren't averse to a flutter on the horses (or anything else), especially Walter. Each had his Bar Mitzvah but none were more than occasional synagogue goers. Nevertheless, most of their friends were Jews and it was clear from conversation with Roy Isles, as it is from Basil's letters, that an abiding ethnic and community sense went with them. They probably thought little about Palestine, but to the extent that they did they were no doubt influenced by the anti-Zionist attitudes of the Anglo-Jewish Melbourne community of the time.<sup>9</sup>

Once established the family made its living from a clothing store in Melbourne that Joe started with his brother-in-law. It was probably called 'Isaacs Brothers' but not much is known about it. Joe's next business venture, however, is well remembered: it was a wholesale china importing business with palatial showrooms in Collins Street, just up from the Regent. This became very much a family affair with each of the boys joining Joe in it after leaving Wesley. Indeed, one purpose of Basil's trip was to buy for the firm.

Basil — to take the story back a little — was born on 26 May, 1908. He appears to have been adequate without being studious at school and to have joined the business in 1926. The letters and various recollections of him reveal a close bond with his mother and his brother Roy; they also reflect a charming, outgoing, sensitive man, unremarkable in any way, except perhaps for a great gift with people. His closest friend, the late Arthur Heymanson, remembered a thoroughly 'decent and kind bloke' who 'never bore anyone malice' and whose 'greatest ambition was to be a good salesman'.<sup>10</sup> Peter Mason speaks rather more colourfully of a young man whose charms did not go unnoticed by the opposite sex and whose exuberance in business worried his more conservative father: 'the glamour boy', 'a real charmer', 'girls laid on' — these are Peter Mason's recollections. Esther Isles's picture is also of a kind and personable man

who, she stresses, was very conscious of his Judaism ('ethnically Jewish') and who had numerous Jewish friends. She also recalls the sense of humour so evident in the letters and, speaking with rather more circumspection than Mr. Mason of Basil's private life, concedes that he was a 'normal, healthy, young man'. These general impressions are further corroborated by Mrs. Leo Spivakovsky, a relative and friend whom Basil visited in Berlin. She speaks of his warmth and friendliness and also of his intellectual curiosity: he was determined, apparently, to see more than just the tourist's Berlin.<sup>11</sup>

By the time Isaacs began preparing for his world trip the family business had diversified to include retailing and was doing well, though there were ominous signs. He had already been to New Zealand on a selling trip and was still living a fairly carefree unattached life in Melbourne, with a flat in a block of units built on the site of the old Tennyson Street home in 1925.

Such was the background, then: a moderate but sound basic education; a generally unintellectual though close and outgoing business household; an active social life; and a consciousness, as yet not well formulated, of being Jewish. Basil Isaacs often signed his letters 'Tons and tons of love, Basil' — another indication that if he was dying to see the world, the roots at home were deep, secure and basically happy.

### III

James's interest in the journey into the Old World gravitates towards a recurrent question: what use will the innocent abroad make of his or her imagination?

He charts, for example, the habit of comparative imaginative assimilation through which we all make sense of the unfamiliar. Newman finds in his intended Parisian bride's face 'a range of expression as delightfully vast as the wind-streaked, cloud-flecked distance on a Western Prairie.' (p.130). Images of home interpret experience abroad. Just so Basil Isaacs summons memories of Australian bushfire scenes to describe a walk in an autumnal forest in Germany: 'All the mountains are turning reddy-brown and the leaves are just beginning to fall; like a bushfire that has just scorched the trees but not burnt them.' (1 September, 1931).

In the sense that Isaacs experiences no Jamesian personal crises in Europe his accommodations are of course slighter than Newman's; nevertheless the exertion needed to extend the self and its sensitivities is infectiously evident in the letters. 'To enjoy London,' he tells the family one must have a good imagination, or have read a lot. For example: you walk down Pall Mall or Bond Street; nice shops, yes, but to get the thrill you must try to picture the dandies of bygone ages . . . Beau Brummell, Sir Roger de Coverly etc . . . who walked with their ladies with powdered wigs and crinolines. (13 August, 1931).

To this end you have to brush up on your Wesley history: 'I have found it necessary to buy a school history book and read up all about it. I find I have forgotten my badly-learnt history, but now can recite "William the Conqueror 1066," etc., almost as well as Mater.' (9 August, 1931). Basil's

descriptions seldom reach great heights but he was sensitive, responsive and quite a crisp stylist; and the occasional scene has obviously, in James's words, 'inflamed his imagination' (p.28). Here is his account of Armistice Day in London:

Then, finally, to-day was Armistice Day. I went down Whitehall, where the Cenotaph is. It was too wet and cold for the King, so E.P. layed the wreath. Whitehall was closed to traffic and was thronged with countless thousands of people, and, as the cannon boomed out announcing eleven o'clock, the silence was wonderful, not a sound to be heard in London, only one of the Life Guards' horses rattling a chain from afar, and the wings of an occasional pigeon overhead. The two minutes seemed like twenty, then the second cannon, the "Last Post," and all was over. The crowds filed past the Cenotaph all day long, tenderly laying wreaths upon it. (8 November, 1931).

A number of the letters are memorable for this note of moving and unaffected simplicity. A sense of the evils that lie behind such a scene awaits both innocents. The evil Newman encounters is a dark, largely unspecified and somewhat unconvincing thing that has its roots in the obliquities of antique culture and finds expression in destructive personal attitudes. Isaacs reports few damaging personal encounters ('I am just beginning to realize what a sap I am' he writes after being duped in Montreal (8 July, 1931)). However, in the rise of Nazism and Italian Fascism he witnesses iniquity on a scale that James always feared but never depicted in fiction. ('I have the imagination of disaster' the novelist once wrote to a friend.<sup>12</sup>) The more benign forms of Old World complexity that bemuse Newman also await his Australian counterpart. European customs and high culture intrigue and embarrass him and some of the funniest letters describe fumbling attempts to measure up in matters of taste and accomplishment. ('Everybody sounds so nice and cultured [in England], I wish I could be like them.' (24 July, 1931)). Unlike Newman, however, Isaacs comes with no expectation of conquest: the American determines to master Europe and cap his achievements with a Parisian bride; Isaacs by contrast is the charmed observer, content to look learn and enjoy it all. Does *he* return home a wiser man? An anxious disclaimer late in the trip tells the family that they must 'not expect any difference in me at all; I have not changed in speech, dress, customs or knowledge' (10 January, 1932), but there is much evidence to the contrary in the letters.

As these parallels suggest there are many themes and moments in the letters that are worthy of comment; but beyond the most general and inclusive of them — the encounter with a new and more complex reality — three stand out: Isaacs's reactions to high culture, and especially art; his sense of himself as an Australian; and his dawning awareness of the meaning of his Judaism. It is perhaps in these terms that the range and representativeness of one hundred and thirty pages of letters can best be indicated.

If Isaacs doesn't approach high culture with deadly earnestness he is certainly more responsive to it than Newman to whom 'an undue solicitude for "culture" seemed a sort of dawdling at the station' (p.62).

Nevertheless, his responses are uneven and seldom really incisive as he visits Europe's centres and monuments of culture. His astonished account of the Louvre has already been mentioned. Similarly unimpassioned is his report that 'I spent a lovely couple of days in Stratford-upon-Avon, and heard "King Lear" by a very fine company.' (19 August, 1931). Nothing is said of one of the greatest English masterpieces. Nor does a visit to the Imperial Palace provoke a particularly complex response, though it does give rise to a charming piece of provincialism:

In the afternoon went over the Imperial Palace, a famous museum. Saw countless pictures . . . the famous Raphael or Rubens "Madonna and Child," there are prints of it everywhere. Then saw famous statues, cathedrals etc., which I have down in my little diary which I have kept since leaving home.<sup>13</sup>

One thing particularly interested me. I saw the original lions with their paws on a ball, the copies of which are in front of Adamson Hall of Wesley College. (10 October, 1931).

Another description, this time of the Vatican, is also quaintly provincial — perhaps Jewish provincial — as it images the Pope amusing himself amidst his artistic treasures.

Went through the Vatican Museum, the place where the Pope amuses himself . . . Several hundred rooms, containing countless treasures, each room containing a mass of paintings on walls and ceilings, priceless books, masterpieces in sculpture etc. (10 October, 1931).

The Sistine Chapel also receives but a passing mention; however, St. Peter's clearly moves him:

One place, the Sistine Chapel, was decorated by Michelangelo in 1460, and took him three years to do the whole Bible in pictures on walls and ceilings. In the Vatican also was St. Peter's Church. This is by far the finest cathedral I have seen. I must admit I was disappointed with St. Paul's and Westminster, London; but this is like being in a different place to this earth. An immense place, with painted gold ceiling and the most perfect glass windows, at the end is to be seen angels carrying a chair in a cloud to heaven. The cloud is golden glass, and the effect of the sun shining through the glass takes one's breath away. The huge dome has all paintings and is so far away it can just be seen from the ground. There are no chairs to spoil the effect inside, the services are held inside chapels. There is a graven image of the Pope, and there is a constant queue of people, old and young, to kneel, cross themselves and kiss the foot. I watched this engrossing sight for a long time, and I only saw one person, a flapper, take out her handkerchief and give the foot a good rub. (10 October, 1931).

It is an indication of our voyager's true state of cultural sophistication, however, that his most rapturous letter home about such matters concerns neither Shakespeare nor the Louvre, nor even the Vatican treasures. The

greatest highlight is Noel Coward's play *Cavalcade* and these excerpts speak for themselves.

"North Stafford Hotel,  
Stoke-on-Trent.  
17 November, 1931.

I have seen *Cavalcade*!

It is so far the best show I have ever seen that I feel it beyond me to describe it. Written by Noel Coward, a man of 32 who has written many successful musical comedies, reviews, plays (music and all), this is his crowning success. I tried to book a ticket every day, but was told they were booked up a month in advance, and eventually managed a seat in the third row in the centre of the dress circle for 14/-.

The play starts in 1898 with a young couple, Lord Belridge and wife. It then goes right through the years to 1931, touching on the main incidents in England's history. There are twenty-two scenes, and over three hundred in the cast. No theatre but the Drury Lane could show it, as the stage has to be tremendous.

One sees the husband leaving for Africa, and the scene as the boat moves out, the soldiers singing "Should old acquaintance be forgot," and the people on shore cheering them and trying to be brave, is most touching."

At the side of the stage are lights showing the year each scene is depicting; and as 1914, '15, '16, '17, slip by you see the girls are whiter, thinner, and sing in a hysterical and frenzied manner, clearly showing war hysteria.

Then back in Lord Belridge's home again shows the two old people, who lost one son in the "Titanic" and the other at the War. It is New Year's Eve, 1930, and the Mother raises her glass and drinks the toast, "Here's to our England that we love so much. May she one day find prosperity, dignity, and peace!"

As she says that the room disappears, and a number of stages of different heights are seen. On each something different is happening. One man, with a red handkerchief round his neck, is on a soap-box, "This bloody country's rotten". Another is saying, "The only salvation is —". Then there is a terrific noise of huge machinery at work. On another level a jazz band is playing. Then you see a lot of people huddled together, with the small-ballroom craze, doing modern dancing. Horns bleat, lights flash, and the stages are all moving up and down. The effect is wonderful.

And right in front are the two dear old aristocrats trying to make it all out, gazing on in a dazed way at 1931.

One weeps on and off right through it. The way the thing is handled leaves no room for sloppy sentiment, and, I still feel, was really alone worth my coming over to see. I tingled and itched in my usual manner when excited, and knew an overwhelming desire for the stage, the memory of which I had forgotten I had ever had. At

the time it all came surging back. I know it must all sound rot to you, as I cannot possibly give you an idea of what it was like.

Great art, it seems, did not unduly trouble the Isaacs soul. He enjoyed it but with limited understanding and what he most enjoyed was generally less than great. In all this he reflects his Melbourne business ethos and no doubt, his youth. Such matters were essentially uncomplicated. Not so, however, matters of personal and national identity. Deeply Australian as Basil Isaacs clearly was, being Australian presented its problems. That all too familiar Australian inferiority complex followed him wherever he went: he refers repeatedly to his embarrassing 'lingo' and even shuns contact with those he takes to be more sophisticated than himself. A case in point is the fellow travellers on a boat to Bombay.

Most of the people are very nice, but I have felt so definitely out of it with my jargon that I have not mixed much. Honestly I do not over-exaggerate the position, but all the young fellows and girls talk in faultlessly good English, and I can see the result when I open my mouth. My voice, in my ears, now sounds hard, rough and coarse. Of course I am not trying to affect an English accent, although Vera [step-mother to his sister-in-law] almost begged me to do so before I left. (14 December, 1931).

This really is the colonial mentality *par excellence* and in this note of shamed apology sounds the true innocence of the Australian abroad.

Elsewhere though he strikes a more neutral tone as he makes those imaginative comparisons and accommodations that so intrigued James. The sheer scale of life abroad is a source of wonder: he is 'Astounded, frightened, and amazed with the immensity' of Chicago (26 June, 1931); so too are the social usages and gradations he finds in the Old World. This description of the social classes in England and Australia could have been written by many an Australian tourist:

The way one speaks to servants here is so totally different, I could never get used to it. It seems they think all the more of you if you tell them what you want them to do, and keep them in their place. Once you begin to treat them like ordinary humans you cannot do anything with them. Irene tells me her hairdresser likes to think she is doing a lady's hair better than herself. They have their pride of their own class. Whereas in Australia one goes out of one's way to let the hairdresser feel she is as good as oneself! It is all very strange. I have assimilated such a lot of new ideas. (8 November, 1931).

But one of the special moments in the letters is neither apologetic nor neutral about being Australian. He visits the graves of the Australian dead from the Great War and is moved both by the Australian tragedy and the larger human spectacle.

I then went to Ypres, and saw the Minin Gate. This is put up to "To All those British Soldiers who fell near Ypres in the Great War, Whom the Fortunes of War Denied a Known Grave." And then followed everlasting names of men. It was too heart shattering to describe, rows and rows of Australians. There were a lot of wreaths round the names with the most touching inscriptions, as though their

dear ones had just departed. It was shocking in its tragedy. The war-to-end-war — what has it done for us? Nothing!

I then went out to Hill 62, Sanctuary Wood Hill, and saw the first line of open trenches, with the barbed-wire, old guns and helmets etc. Then to the greatest tragedy of all, Tyne Cot Cemetery, Passchendaele, where lie 11,928 soldiers, many unknown — “A soldier of the Great War,” and underneath “Known unto God.” This is the spot that was taken and re-taken again and again. There is a monument to the Australians in the centre for taking this place finally. There are huge proportions of the graves with the Australian rising sun on them.

The cemeteries are beautifully looked after, and by ex-army men. And some of the inscriptions are unbelievably beautiful:

“‘Oh, Captain unforget,’ they cried,  
‘Come ye again, or come no more.  
‘Across the world we keep the pride,  
‘Across the world you mark the score.’”

(4 October, 1931).

His sense, not just of history, but of national identity is quickening. Significantly, he was at this stage travelling with a young German whom he unsurprisingly nicknames ‘Fritz’ (‘I called him Fritz and he called me Digger’), and an earlier letter records a ‘very happy night’ during which we both philosophised, and said how, if we had been ten years older, we might have killed each other at the bust-up. What a luck, Joe and Ede, that I am on this trip on pleasure, and not to serve God, King and country, or, to put it more truthfully, high finance. (9 September, 1931).

Not all his personal encounters, however, are so cordial, and something of his awkwardness at being Australian registers in a defensive distrust of ‘foreigners’. Some of these feelings have an historical rationale, but for the most part they are a kind of transplanted xenophobia, an inverted Australian snobbery.

Americans appear for the most part as figures of fun in the letters. They are ‘most systematic tourists, they carry huge guides and notebooks with them and jot down all the lies the guides tell them.’ (19 August, 1931). Not so, however, those he meets in New York: ‘I do not think I like New York. There is too much graft, tipping, do-your-next-door-neighbour spirit. Everybody tells you to look out for crooks, and then they promptly try to “do” you.’ (8 July, 1931). Both views are stereotyped and reflect a prevalent image of America in Australia in the twenties. To his credit though Isaacs revises his opinion somewhat:

One thing travelling has done for me so far. It has changed my idea of Yanks. Collectively, they may be arrogant etc.; but singularly they are hospitality itself, and this was the opinion of everybody on the boat, and of yours truly. (26 June, 1931).

Other races get off less lightly. They are, in tones of ironic hyperbole, ‘cursed foreigners’ (30 October, 1931). It is hardly surprising that he dislikes the Germans, but Belgians too are ‘a very poor lot, a very second-class race’ and the Italians. about whom he appears to have heard good

things from Italian Jews, fare even worse: 'These Dagos take watching. Unless you ask the price of even a cup of coffee they charge you double, and usually short-change you.' (9 September, 1931). Such attitudes are of course far from unknown in Australia today and it must be remembered that during the period of Isaacs's social awareness the principle of ethnic discrimination was institutionally enshrined in The White Australia Policy. Again, he is reflecting a climate; and the same can be said of his avowed allegiances: the 'cursed foreigners' remark is followed by this: 'Ten weeks of them is enough for any Britisher', and the one about Belgians with the damning observation that they have 'no love for the British at all.' Basil Isaacs was a true colonial — a 'Britisher' — and this is where he felt most at home. Of all the places he visits London is the 'pinnacle' for him (30 September, 1931); and the English countryside exceeds even his native landscape: 'the English country is beyond my ken altogether. To me it is much prettier than the Australian bush.' (24 July, 1931). Only industrial England gives the Anglo-Australian pause:

Well, here I am at Stoke-on-Trent, and thank the good Lord I am leaving tomorrow, or I would be carted away. Of all the cursed places on earth I think The-Five-Towns must be five of them!

Everything is thick with soot, houses, shops, everything. When it rains we get, not respectable Mallee dust, but charcoal. I have been here only two days, and have not seen a sign of the sun. One can only see a very limited distance at all. There are two hundred and fifty potteries here, each one with about fifty chimneys, so you can get some idea of what it is like.

The people are all sickly-looking weeds, with sunken cheeks, white, anaemic. The unemployment is terrible, and, strangely enough, there is very little crime. All the men wear caps and scarfs. They are very polite, and speak in a broad, Midland way, "Ay, I was at a do last night upp yonder." It is very quaint. (17 November, 1931).

Another place to evoke a response of this intensity is Shanghai. Generally, the East bemuses him but a familiar note of appalled compassion surfaces in this description:

I stood on a bridge for about an hour with a handkerchief over my face, watching the coolies in their sampans. These are tiny, little boats, about twenty feet long. The centre is filled with cargo, and they live at the ends, under the water level.

The stink of the canal is vile. All the refuse and sewerage are run into it. And the woman fills her billy from it, cooks her rice, and feeds herself and about five kids. They live and love and die in these beastly things. The woman does a lot of the hard work, often with a child on her back, Maori fashion. They get the boat along mostly by pushing against the banks and other boats with a huge bamboo pole. (10 January, 1932).

Shanghai came late in a trip that had confirmed a love for the motherland. Isaacs departed Australia a relatively unselfconscious Anglo-Jew; he returned home far more aware of both aspects of his personal heritage.

His reactions to Jews and Judaism abroad again reveal a pattern of

uneven sympathies; but the depth of his Jewishness is everywhere apparent: in his constant habit of self-portraiture and parody in Jewish terms; in references to other Jews he meets and to the Jewish community at home; and in what we have called his dawning awareness of the historical plight of the Jews. Esther Isles is surely correct to describe him as 'ethnically Jewish' and as a man to whom the thought of being Jewish was 'second-nature'.

That second nature bubbles up in many of the jokes, asides and jaunty declarations he sends home. For instance:

My latest and maturest reflection for what it is worth: I have tasted caviar. I have tasted grouse, goose, and Wiener Schnitzel but give me a piece of honest-to-goodness underdone roast beef, or flounder, a la Jewish style . . . and I'm more than satisfied. (1 September, 1931).

Again, keeping the Italians honest has 'developed all my latent Jewish instinct' (9 September, 1931). He attends Temple in Rome and reports that 'it gave me quite a thrill to hear the Rabbi singing in Hebrew'; however, he is surprised to find that 'a man went round with a collection box, and there were also boxes at each entrance.' Wryly, he tells the family that 'I leave it to your imagination to picture an Italian Jew.' (10 October, 1931). His description of the Jews in Petticoat Lane, however, is more vivid and is delightfully frank in its self-consciousness:

Went to Petticoat Lane in the morning . . . the home of my fathers, and I loved it. I could spend weeks there, bartering, arguing, haggling. It thrilled me to see a Jew holding and swaying a lot of open-mouthed gentiles, who gaped and took in everything he said. There is no doubt about me being a reversion to type. (13 August, 1931).

In a more sober key he reports visiting synagogues in Rome, Prague and London and reading 'a delightful Jewish book, well worth reading, called "Singerman"'. (8 July, 1931). And, early on in the trip, he starts to feel uneasy about attitudes to Jews abroad. In New York

I could have gone on a big 50,000 ton boat for about £15 extra, and then everybody is a multi-millionaire and things are pretty stiff for non-gentiles. Talking of Jews, in Canada there is a bathing place with a notice "Only Gentiles Admitted". (8 July, 1931).

The extent of his sympathies for particular national Jewish communities is difficult to determine, and on the evidence of the letters Mr. Heymanson's belief that overseas Jewry had not been a great concern in the circles in which Isaacs moved would seem to be correct. At this distance the lacuna is a little puzzling: the large numbers of Russian Jewish immigrants in the period 1871-1911 had an impact not only on styles of Australian Judaism but on Australian attitudes to Jews more generally,<sup>14</sup> and Isaacs must have been to some extent aware of the wave of local anti-semitism that marked the decades immediately prior to his birth. Likewise, the post-World War I influx of Polish Jews must have made some impression; yet, it seems to have taken the trip abroad to trigger any serious reflection on these matters.

One such is, in fact, not about Eastern European Jewry, but about their American counterparts; and here again, the more complex, troubled and apologetic side of the man is evident. Early in the trip he writes that

All the low types of Jews I saw in the States have given me an acute Jewish inferiority complex. I guess I can understand why the Jews are not popular in the States . . . yes sir-ee. I have felt all this time that people have not wanted to talk to me because of being a Jew. (8 July, 1931).

But it is not until later that things really begin to crystallise. In Leipzig he meets 'a young Jewish undergraduate' who speaks volumes of communism but also tells him of 'the strong movement to persecute the Jews' in Germany (4 September, 1932); eleven days later he writes home about 'awful anti-semitic scenes in Berlin' on Jewish New Year's Day 'in which many Jews were injured'. And then the fateful sentence: 'There is a powerful organized party known as the Nazis, anti-semitic and anti-communistic.' (15 September, 1931). Before writing the next letter he discusses the persecution in Germany with an Italian Jew, and it is after this, eight months into his tour, that he tells the family that 'I have, I think, realized that I am a Jew for the first time.' (10 October, 1931).

It would be a significant moment of recognition in anyone's life, yet one can only guess at the intensity of his feelings during this period. Though Basil was an emotional man it was not the Isaacs habit to discourse at length about one's inner conflicts. References to his Jewishness and to Judaism increase, as do his defensive jokes and parodies. No doubt, an element of guilt was involved, for in the same letter, he admits that before these revelations 'the thought of other Jews being persecuted did not worry me'.

That remark must be taken in the context of Isaacs's youth, his natural candour and an understandably approximate mode of expression when writing to the family. There is no doubt an element of overstatement in it. Nevertheless, it does reflect both the remoteness and the degree of assimilation of the Melbourne Anglo-Jewish circle in which he moved. Like Newman, he sheds much of his native innocence and one can only assume that he returned home a wiser man.

#### IV

One of the few consolations that might be offered about the remainder of Basil Isaacs's life is that having witnessed the rise of Nazism he did not live to see its full consequences. His parents drove to Sydney to meet him on his return and for three and a half years he settled back into his Melbourne life and the family business. Regrettably, there are few clear recollections of him during this period.

In about October 1935 he was driving through the city with his brother Roy when he was seized with an agonizing pain. An immediate visit to the family doctor aroused serious fears. He was admitted to the Alfred, then to Windemere Hospital and underwent surgery for cancer. He ailed rapidly and died in Windemere Hospital on 17 November, 1935. The effect on the family was such that Roy Isles, who with Basil had taken over the management of the business, closed the Collins Street showroom and sold up at the first opportunity. It would be hard to imagine a more pathetic and sudden end to a happy and honourable life.

In retrospect, perhaps the most poignant moment in the letters comes in a routine and characteristically self-mocking instruction to the family from America: 'Keep this if you can, as in years to come I might like to bore my kids with . . . How their father went out into the hard world alone without a penny.' (26 June, 1931). Having heard so much of Basil it has been a matter of great pleasure to present generations of the family that Basil's parents took him at his word and preserved the letters. Indeed, the volume was only discovered in a cupboard in 1978.

One of James's nicest and wisest Americans abroad, Ralph Touchett in *The Portrait of a Lady*, voices a conviction that is perhaps pertinent to the author of these letters. Asked by his father what he means by "rich" he replies: "'I call people rich when they're able to meet the requirements of their imagination.'" (p.160). Basil Isaacs died too early to make his fortune or to fulfil any remaining ambitions he may have had. It is therefore with great satisfaction that one reads that during his year abroad he was at least 'rich' in the ways of the imagination.

*Basil Isaacs 1908-1935*

### NOTES

1. The Basil Isaacs Letters, hereafter given as the 'letters'. Not all the letters are dated. Where they are I shall give the date in parentheses in the text; where none is given I shall approximate. The letters contain countless errors, many of them presumably Basil's, though his anonymous and unprofessional typist may have contributed also. I have corrected a few glaring ones but have not felt disposed to do more than this. In any case, his level of education is itself a point of interest.
2. A famous designation for these problems in Australia was coined by the Australian critic A. A. Phillips when he wrote of our 'cultural cringe' (Meanjin No. 4, 1950; rpt. *The Australian Tradition* (Melbourne: Cheshire, 1958)).
3. James revised *The American* comprehensively and, many feel, unsuccessfully for the New York edition of his fiction (New York: Charles Scribener and Sons, 24 vols, 1907-1909). Like them I prefer the first edition. Certainly it is more interesting for present purposes and quotations here are from a modern reprint of the 1877 text edited by Roy Harvey Pearce and Matthew J. Bruccoli (Boston: Houghton Mufflin, 1962). The first citation is from p. 24 of that edition; subsequent ones will be parenthesized in the text.
4. I am indebted to Mrs. Isles for many detailed recollections of the Isaacs family. Some of these have been passed on in conversation, others are on record in a taped interview done in February, 1979.
5. These and other details are recorded in a long taped interview Mr. Mason kindly gave in September, 1978.

- 6 My recollection from conversations with my late grandfather, Roy Lionel Isles.
7. Judge Trevor Rapke, "The Pre-War Jewish Community of Melbourne", *Australian Jewish Historical Society Journal*, Vol. III, Part 3, 1972, p. 291. Subsequent citations of this journal will be given as A.J.H.S.J.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 293.
9. I am indebted to my father, Mr. Paul Freadman, for a great deal of background information about the Melbourne community and for his help generally on this project. For discussions of Melbourne attitudes to Zionism see, in addition to Rapke's article, Raymond Apple, "The Victorian Jewish Community, 1900-1910", A.J.H.S.J., Vol. IV, pp. 53-77, and Alan Crown's highly informative *Initiatives and Influences in the Development of Australian Zionism, 1850-1948*", A.J.H.S.J., Vol. VIII, pp. 313-36.
10. In a recorded interview of January 1979.
11. In conversation, 1982.
12. *Henry James: Letters to A. C. Benson and Auguste Monod*, ed. E. F. Benson (London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1930), p. 35.
13. Unfortunately the diary has been lost or destroyed.
14. See Crown, pps. 315-16.