



'Full of Ghosts': H.A.L. Fisher, England and European identity

T.G. Otte

To cite this article: T.G. Otte (10 Jul 2026): 'Full of Ghosts': H.A.L. Fisher, England and European identity, History of European Ideas, DOI: [10.1080/01916599.2026.2697375](https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2026.2697375)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2026.2697375>



© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



[View supplementary material](#)



Published online: 10 Jul 2026.



[Submit your article to this journal](#)



Article views: 145



[View related articles](#)



[View Crossmark data](#)

‘Full of Ghosts’: H.A.L. Fisher, England and European identity

T.G. Otte

School of History, University of East Anglia, Norwich, United Kingdom

ABSTRACT

H.A.L. Fisher occupied a prominent position in British public life as a scholar and public intellectual but also as a political figure. His *History of Europe* was his *magnum opus*, in many ways the summation of a life spent grappling with Europe’s conflicted past. The work can also serve as a useful prism through which to study broader attitudes towards the idea of Europe in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. This article examines the liberal internationalist tradition in British public life through Fisher’s *oeuvre* and his correspondence. Ultimately, even to some as sensitive to the ‘haunting dream’ of European unity as Fisher was, Britain – or rather to him England – was not wholly of Europe. To him England’s character and identity were separate from the rest of continental Europe. To that extent Fisher gave expression to beliefs and ideas about Britain and Europe, and the relations between them, that were widely held in his lifetime, and that still resonate today.

KEYWORDS

H.A.L. Fisher; liberalism;
liberal Internationalism;
England; European Identity;
intelligentsia

‘History is very commonly written by parrots.’

H.A.L. Fisher¹

To include Herbert Fisher in a collection of essays examining concepts of Europe may strike the casual reader as quixotic. Neither was Fisher a political thinker, nor does political thought in Britain tend towards the abstract or conceptual. And yet, it is no mere whim to include him. Fisher was an acknowledged authority on continental history in general and the French revolutionary and Napoleonic periods in particular. He had very decided views on what bound the peoples of Europe together, but also on what divided them.

Fisher commanded considerable attention as a scholar and public intellectual but also as a political figure. His *History of Europe* was his *magnum opus*, the summation of a life spent grappling with Europe’s conflicted past, but it can also serve as a useful prism through which to study broader attitudes towards the idea of Europe in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. First published in 1935, and never out of print since, it was also translated into numerous foreign languages.² At the root of its enduring popularity lies a powerful combination of form and content. Its spare prose style gave it an

CONTACT T.G. Otte  t.otte@uea.ac.uk

 Supplemental data for this article can be accessed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/01916599.2026.2697375>.

© 2026 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

elegant literary polish, always an important ingredient of success in Britain. No less important was the fact that Fisher articulated ideas about Europe and Britain's place in it that were powerful in his lifetime and that continue to resonate to the present day.

* * *

Herbert Albert Laurens Fisher (1865-1940) was born into clerical and intellectual purple. His observation on the great Whig historian Thomas Babington Macaulay might equally have applied to himself: '[He] grew up to the sound of earnest men debating large issues of public policy.'³

Fisher belonged to that comfortable, tightly knit and well networked upper middle-class 'intellectual aristocracy' that was such an important feature of Victorian life.⁴ His father was private secretary to the Prince of Wales and held a Royal sinecure as Vice-Warden of the Stannaries. Leslie Stephen, the founder-editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, was an uncle, which made Julia Cameron, the pioneer of portrait photography, his great aunt and Virginia Woolf his cousin. Sir Henry Halford Vaughan, the Regius Professor of History at Oxford, was another uncle. Frederick William Maitland, the great Cambridge legal historian, was his brother-in-law,⁵ and so was the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams. Fisher also married into the same circle. His wife Lettice, herself an economist and historian, was the daughter of Sir Courtney Ilbert, the distinguished lawyer and Clerk to the House of Commons. Fisher fagged for Edward Grey, the future foreign secretary, at Winchester,⁶ and since university days Gilbert Murray was his closest friend. At Winchester he won a prize medal for an essay on 'The insular position of Great Britain'; at New College, Oxford, he took a Double First and then became a Fellow there in 1888.

Twenty-four years later, in 1912, Fisher exchanged the cloisters of Oxford for the bracing challenge of the vice-chancellorship of the new University of Sheffield.⁷ In that role he attracted the attention of David Lloyd George, who made him President of the Board of Education on becoming Prime Minister in 1916.⁸ The association of Fisher, the very embodiment of dry scholarly rectitude, with the mercurial Welshman was an unusual one. As a later twentieth-century public figure noted, Fisher struck him as 'a good man who had unwittingly entered a brothel – and rather enjoyed it.'⁹ If not an obvious ally, Fisher was nevertheless an uncomplaining member of Lloyd George's 'stage army', the Coalition Liberals. Although an outsider, he 'took naturally to practical politics' and was that rarest of animals, 'the academic with political antennae.'¹⁰ In fact, he 'exercise[d] a good deal more influence than one would expect', much to the astonishment of the then Cabinet Secretary.¹¹ Always a 'fervent Liberal',¹² he acted as the keeper of Lloyd George's Liberal conscience, a somewhat ephemeral entity at any time. Fisher's 1918 Education Act was perhaps the most substantive legislative achievement of the coalition government, albeit not one to escape the Geddes Axe in 1921.¹³ But his influence spread beyond his departmental remit, and he 'sprayed his leader with uncompromising Liberal views.'¹⁴ Especially on European affairs, the prime minister sought his advice; and in 1920-22 he was one of Britain's three principal delegates at the Assembly of the League of Nations, in which role he earned the plaudits of British and foreign diplomats alike.¹⁵

Fisher remained a staunch, but not uncritical, defender of the League of Nations as 'an aspiration for a better and more civilized international order.'¹⁶ Such was his reputation

that he was touted as possible candidate for the Washington embassy. Nothing came of it (- Fisher would have preferred the vice-chancellorship at Birmingham at any rate).¹⁷ After the fall of the coalition in October 1922, he slowly returned to the groves of academia, to New College whose Warden he became in 1925, a position he occupied until his death in April 1940, 'a political idealist, an educational administrator of wide vision, and a distinguished historian who wrote for the scholar and for the general public.'¹⁸

* * *

Fisher was strongly European in his culture, personal outlook and contacts. Time spent at the *École des Chartres* at the Sorbonne left him "in the swim" of precise scholarship.¹⁹ A term at Göttingen sharpened his appreciation of the many facets of continental history, already stimulated by his brother-in-law Maitland, who was very much indebted to German methods, just as Fisher himself valued the superior 'critical treatment of authorities inaugurated in Germany.'²⁰

Like Maitland, Fisher thought that the historian's focus should not only rest on rulers, the wars they fought and the treaties they made, but should encompass the origins of their nation, its institutions, culture and language.²¹ Though he eschewed any all-embracing theory, Fisher admitted that he had 'an irresistible tendency to run off into reflections and disquisitions to extract significance rather than to relate *das geschehene*.'²²

Fisher's approach tended to focus on constitutional arrangements and the law, staple items of Whig historiography.²³ There was also a discernible, if subtle, influence of Idealist, vaguely Hegelian, philosophy, as filtered through liberal British academe, with its underlying assumption of vast currents and an inherent logic that shaped historical development. Thus, in discussing Napoleon's legacy, Fisher argued that it was the emperor's 'function in history to fuse the old France with the new.'²⁴ Even so, his scholarship was leavened by a strong dose of scepticism: 'The study of history, if it does not make men wise, is at least calculated to make them sad. In the mere attrition of experience we lose something of our freshness and hope.'²⁵ History did not repeat itself, he asserted, but it 'resembles itself, and there is no great difference in human nature from age to age.'²⁶ If Fisher's scholarship lacked a theoretical spine, it was nevertheless informed by a profound sense of a common European civilization, heritage and identity. His background in the classics had imbued him with a strong belief in the unity of European culture, derived from ancient Greece and Rome: 'We Europeans are the children of Hellas. Our civilization ... stamps us with a character by which we are distinguished from the other great civilizations.'²⁷

Europe's ancient foundations were of greater significance to Fisher's understanding of its past than its Christian heritage. A rationalist of the 'high and dry' variety not uncommon in Edwardian England, the mild-mannered Fisher could rise to great asperity on the subject of religion. Christian Science that had been coming out of New England, for instance, was 'an extraordinary farrago of nonsense' and a case of 'religious quackery.'²⁸ To the historian, '[t]here are few subjects more pathetic than the workings of the religious cravings in man', and it was one of the ironies of history that 'the development of scientific interests and habits is a greater power for internationalism than the most enthusiastic religion of humility and love.'²⁹ Unsurprisingly, the 'ecclesiastical innovations' of Archbishop Laud found no more favour with him³⁰ than the prince-bishops in the

duodecimo principalities dotted along the Rhine before 1789, whose courts were notable for 'petty intrigues and idle splendour, and a total absence of any serious political interests.'³¹ The peasants in the Papal possessions in the Romagna, meanwhile, 'vegetated quietly and comfortably under the Crozier.'³² He was unrelenting in his vituperation of 'the harsh tyranny of [Pope] Gregory XVI', as perhaps only a Gladstonian Liberal could be; and the decree of Papal infallibility struck him as 'the cordial which the Roman Church administered to itself in the hour of defeat, its defiance of the modern world, its protest against the sacrilege of Italian patriotism.'³³ Fisher, in fact, resisted the efforts of his publisher, Douglas Francis Jerrold, to tone down his anti-clericalism in the early drafts of his *History of Europe*.³⁴

Religious scepticism may explain, at least in part, Fisher's ambivalent attitude towards Jewry, which was not altogether free from elements of contemporary prejudices. Certain *en passant* comments, deploying common tropes of antisemitic stereotype, are suggestive of this. Thus, he defended the partial restoration of Jewish disabilities by the Napoleonic client states in Germany in 1808 as 'devised against a great evil [usury], and certainly adopted to promote the prosperity of the most deserving class in the community [peasantry]'.³⁵ He thought it necessary to describe Karl Marx as 'a German Jew [*sic*]' and Leon Trotsky as 'the Jew Braunstein'.³⁶ Echoing Gladstone's Midlothian rhetoric, he dismissed Benjamin Disraeli as 'a Hebrew adventurer of genius' whose foreign policy had 'elements of great unsoundness' and kept 'a Christian people under the Turkish flag'.³⁷ And yet Fisher took the side of Captain Dreyfus, and in the 1930s was instrumental in finding new berths for Jewish refugee scholars.³⁸

However strong Fisher's appreciation of Europe's roots in antiquity, a second – and no less powerful – current in his analyses arose from a sense of England's separate character and superior institutions. Tensions between England – Fisher, very much a man of Southern English outlook and sensibilities, continued to refer to 'England' long after Great Britain had come into being – and her continental neighbours lie at the heart of his European history. A few years after his return to Oxford Fisher confided to a former political associate that '[t]he whole place is full of ghosts'.³⁹ In a sense, the uneasy relationship between England and Europe was the ghost that haunted his understanding of the history of both.

It also haunted what Fisher considered to be the most significant aspect of European history: '[B]ehind this unity there were great differences. European development has run upon national lines.'⁴⁰ Seen against the wider ideological or political canvas of the 1930s, it is worth noting that Fisher was wary of 'race' as a category of analysis. He dismissed 'the pestilential nonsense of Houston Chamberlain and the modern racialists.' The races that played a significant role in history were 'mongrel. Nearly half the civilizations have been created by a mixture of races. There is clearly nothing in colour.'⁴¹ There was no doubt: 'the kind of civilization which we specifically designate as European reposes not upon a foundation of race, but on an inheritance of thought and achievement and religious aspirations.'⁴² Like many of his time and generation, he implicitly accepted an international hierarchy of 'races' but without being dogmatic on the subject. If anything, he remained doubtful about the value of racial explanations. When he used it, he did so in the loose and imprecise Victorian sense, which shaded into *ethnos* or nation.⁴³

In his focus on nation and nation state, Fisher was very much a man of the nineteenth century. National differences were the hallmark of European history: 'These differences

are unresolved. One by one the great attempts to impose a common system upon the energetic self-willed peoples of Europe have broken down.' And yet ever since the first century 'the dream of unity has hovered over the scene and haunted the imagination of statesmen and peoples.' No question was more important than 'how the nations of Europe ... may best be combined into some stable combination for the pursuit of their common interests and the avoidance of strife.'⁴⁴ That dream of unity arose from Western Europe's Roman experience, which had left the 'idea of the perpetuity, unity and sanctity of the Roman Empire' imprinted on European consciousness. It shaped the imperial mindset of Charlemagne or of Frederick II of Hohenstaufen, and also influenced many latter-day rulers, especially Napoleon: 'He was the new Charlemagne, lord of Aix-la-Chapelle and of Milan, controlling Gaul and Italy, freshly crowned and anointed Emperor.'⁴⁵

As for Europe in general, so for the British Isles. Only here the process of Romanization, though significant, was 'wholly superficial.' Underneath a veneer of Roman civilization, ancient Britons and the Teutonic tribes that came to settle here retained their native traditions, Fisher argued, echoing the high-Victorian ideas of Bishop Stubbs or E.A. Freeman.⁴⁶ Following the Norman conquest, England became a 'province of the Latin world', and by the thirteenth century she was 'a province of the French civilization', although significant influences came from the Low Countries and Germany.⁴⁷ The Latinization of England was by no means complete. Norman rule was a 'blessing in disguise', bringing with it centralization and order but also 'that imposing system of the Common Law', whose roots lay 'deep in the soil of Teutonic antiquity.' But to govern the conquerors had to coopt the native population: 'the fabric of Anglo-Saxon law and custom has continued, despite some Norman innovations, and all the more effectively by reason of the taut system of centralization which the Normans introduced.'⁴⁸ In their laws and customs lay the essential differences between the English, the French and the Germans. The latter were organized in a 'loose union' ruined by the Church. In all three countries the nobility played a significant political role, 'but it is only in Germany that the part is the winning one', and this too weakened the cohesion of the German polity.⁴⁹ In France the powers of the monarch were not checked by a strong middle class. While the French monarchy thus tended 'towards absolutism, England was set upon an opposite course.'⁵⁰ Here 'constitutional growth was sane and wholesome', as evidenced by the Magna Carta, 'the first example in our history of a national protest against bad government.' Living on 'in the national memory', the charter 'became a watchword',⁵¹ surviving Tudor despotism to reassert itself in the seventeenth century when '[g]radually ... the leaders of the parliamentary cause were driven to see that it might be necessary to depose the King and to create a Republic.' Even so, under Cromwell and Ireton, the 'whole machinery of English law assumed the existence of the monarchy', and the Commonwealth, in 'its outward structure', resembled the monarchy it had replaced more than the republic which it claimed to be.⁵² It was little more than an interlude in England's orderly development, just as the 'bloodless revolution' and the 'triumph of parliamentary principles' in 1688 restored a sensible equilibrium in England's constitutional arrangements.⁵³ Another factor emerged at the end of the Middle Ages that would propel England away from her continent. Beginning with the Hundred Years' War, fighting the French 'became part of the national background.' That conflict also transformed England in other ways: 'There is nothing so

efficacious in breaking the hard crust of custom as a sudden enlargement of the scale of state expenditure.' Edward III's fiscal needs were 'the financial opportunities of the Florentine bankers and the constitutional opportunities of the English parliament.' The barons could no longer ignore 'the great underworld of thrusting ambitions which was now helping to shape society', especially not after the feudal nobility committed collective 'suicide ... in the War of the Roses', the 'English epilogue' to the protracted conflict with France.⁵⁴ England had become a nation with 'a single common law, a centralized system of justice, a recognized type of national character, a settled national pride, a pronounced antipathy to foreigners.'⁵⁵

In the outcome of that war Fisher identified one of the ironies of history. Although the English were beaten, they 'emerged as a proud nation, ... consumed with restlessness within the boundaries of their small island.' As European seafarers ventured into new worlds, 'a good fairy' placed this 'remote island [England] right in the centre of the habitable globe.' Here, and in enlarging her influence over the whole of the British Isles, England now found her 'true line of development.'⁵⁶ Her 'real interest' lay in developing her naval and commercial resources, Fisher averred and betrayed some of that late nineteenth-century continental aloofness as he expatiated on the subject: 'The expediency of non-intervention on the continent, save to procure advantages for English trade, ... is clear to us now as we look back upon our history.'⁵⁷

It was in the spheres of literature and science that England came into close touch with European culture during the Renaissance period. Such contacts also affected the development that would ultimately lead to England's breach with Rome, as what Fisher called 'old Protestantism' – the remnants of medieval Home Counties religious dissent – 'was now ... making alliance with the new theology from Germany.'⁵⁸ He presented the severance of ties with the Pope as another paradox. '[U]ntheological', the English were nevertheless 'generally anti-clerical', especially the rising commercial classes. 'With a great flash of political insight', Henry VIII used parliament to secure the abrogation of papal authority and the Church's subjection to the Crown, while preserving religious orthodoxy: 'Herein, too, Henry showed his shrewd sense, for nothing commends a radical change to an Englishman more effectually than the belief that it is really conservative.'⁵⁹

England's independence from the continent was by no means secure, however, and the prospect of becoming a satellite of either Spain or France hovered over much of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. 'The master-key to national security', Fisher argued, lay in an Anglo-Scottish union. The reformation, then, accelerated England's expansion over the British Isles. While religious wars ravaged continental Europe, England enjoyed relative stability, undisturbed by internal turmoil or foreign invasion: 'Thus favoured by fortune, the English people received its education from Humanism, the Bible, and the sea', the latter now 'England's opportunity.'⁶⁰ She was a blessed isle, indeed.

The rise of England's sea power pitted her first against Spain and then increasingly against an ascendant France. Her 'chief function in the economy of European politics is henceforward to resist the forces of ... Catholic reaction.'⁶¹ Competition for power and commercial advantages aside, the Anglo-French antagonism revealed profoundly divergent political habits. Fisher left his readers in no doubt which were superior. Colbert covered French colonies with a 'forest of regulations', replicating 'in a wilderness the inequalities of feudal France.' But 'the New Englander breathed in the air of liberty.'

He was equally censorious of Colbert's bellicose monarch: 'Rarely had the peace of Europe been more wantonly disturbed' than by Louis XIV.⁶² But those same wars furnished proof of the greater efficacy of England's constitution. Outwardly, 'in 1689 the fabric of French government was the most imposing spectacle in Europe.' And yet it was the 'nation of civilians ... [which] proved itself equal to all demands of an exhausting war. In finance, banking, commerce, and the science and art of treasury control it stood far above its antagonists.' England, 'despite her revolution, had emerged richer and stronger than ever.'⁶³

The country's 'wholesome' political evolution now gathered pace. The Hanoverian succession and Sir Robert Walpole's long dominance at Westminster further entrenched 'responsible government ... by a Cabinet responsible to a parliament which is in turn responsible to the electorate.' It was this principle that mattered, for Fisher was by no means blind to the shortcomings of eighteenth-century politics, and in his critique revealed his own Liberal proclivities: 'controlled by a wealthy territorial class, the British parliaments of the Hanoverian age were not remarkable for the gift of social compassion. [...] The Whigs, exulting in their Revolutionary Settlement, were too apt to think that it had settled everything. This was an error.'⁶⁴

While England stood apart from the continent, British policy could not hold aloof from its affairs altogether. In fact, the antagonism with France also furnished the wider geopolitical context in which a new European great power rose. Prussia was 'a new force of startling and unmeasured potency [that] burst upon the scene and involved the continent in the havoc and carnage of a general war.' Here, too, there were differences between England and her eventual continental ally: 'England grew. Prussia was manufactured.' In its broad outline, Fisher's account of Prussia's rise reflected the 'Borussian' school of historiography, dominant in German scholarship since the early nineteenth century. He drew a direct line from the modest beginnings of the backwards margravate of Brandenburg to Frederick the Great's kingdom and beyond: 'The navy had to wait for Tirpitz and Kaiser William II, but the note of high ambition had been struck.'⁶⁵ Uncouth and thrusting, Prussia was nevertheless a useful ally for England in her global struggle with France. The elder Pitt had grasped this essential fact. In his 'fiery imagination the Prussian king was magically transformed into the champion of the liberties of Europe and the pillar of the Protestant faith.' England's guineas and gunpowder were crucial to the eventual success of the Protestant alliance in the Seven Years' War. Yet Fisher could not deny the greatness of the 'robber of genius who established the greatness of Prussia on the stolen provinces of Silesia and Posen.' The outcome of the great war of the eighteenth century was paradoxical: 'While the main result of the ... continental war was conservative, the consequences of the great conflict between France and England were revolutionary beyond expectation.' By his exertions, and aided by Pitt, Frederick had preserved the status quo in Germany, but 'England gained a new empire in the east and in the west.'⁶⁶

The first empire did not last. But here again Fisher detected the hand of a benign providence. While English politicians contemplated the loss of the American colonies, a 'greater thing passed unnoticed.' Through a series of unprecedented economic changes, England was becoming 'the workshop of the world and the principal centre of its finance.' This was a consequence of the English wars against the French throughout the eighteenth century. In the country's 'atmosphere of relative freedom ... the

descendants of the Puritans came into their own.’ From defeat in the Western hemisphere global England arose. While she experienced the first tremors of industrialization, France and then much of continental Europe lived through the earthquake of political revolution. Revolutions were not a new phenomenon in European history, but the French republic was. Previous republics had been aristocratic, civic or federal or else had combined elements of these. By contrast, the French republic ‘was a great unitary democratic state, founded in a sudden revolution and by a wonderful manifestation of national energy.’⁶⁷ That energy, and the ideological zeal it inculcated, fuelled the self-escalatory dynamic inherent in this revolution: ‘The compulsion of a universal doctrine, the constraint of an empty purse, combined to impel ... [the republic] to a course in which the role of the missionary was blended with that of the bandit.’ The revolutionary regime had ‘inherited the ambition [for the Rhine frontier] and completed the work.’⁶⁸

Although Britain became embroiled in the continental wars after 1792, the clarion call of revolution went unheard there. The unity France had now won through revolution, England had secured for herself in the twelfth century: ‘There was nothing which revolutionary France could teach Britain in the matter of Parliamentary government which was not better understood at Westminster than in Paris.’⁶⁹

Fisher was fascinated by the revolution. He had studied it in some depth, and he frequently reflected on it and on the phenomenon of revolutions in general. In the course of past revolutions, he contended, ‘certain broad phenomena’ could be discerned:

They rise out of real and admitted grievances, and receive support from the generous emotions and sometimes from the most enlightened speculations of the age; they begin with moderation, they steadily increase in violence, they end in the ostracism of their opponents. Then an inevitable revulsion sets in.

So it was with the French Revolution. It began in the idealism of 1789, rose to the Terror of 1793, and sank to the compromise of 1799, which only the authority of a despot could procure and enforce.⁷⁰

That despot was Napoleon Bonaparte. He ‘restored the respect for authority in France. He found chaos and left order, inherited mutiny and created discipline.’⁷¹ Fisher’s judgment on the Corsican usurper was balanced, admiration for his genius mingling with unsparing criticism of his failings. The codification of French law ‘was the most durable ... manifestation of Napoleon’s energy’, and the most constructive achievement of his statecraft. Fisher appreciated the subtleties of the five codes, which contained both conservative and modernizing elements, and ‘preserved the essential conquests of the revolutionary spirit.’ They were not original, but rather ‘a hasty amalgam of royal and revolutionary legislation.’ In France they symbolized ‘a strict but enlightened despotism’. Elsewhere, in Germany and Italy, however, they represented liberty: ‘Here they were the earliest message ... of the new spirit.’⁷² In its consequences, indeed, Napoleonic rule was comparable to ‘the conquest of Gaul by Caesar or the assumption of the imperial crown by Charlemagne.’⁷³ The new spirit affected large swathes of Europe, especially Western and Southern Germany whose Napoleonic satellite states Fisher had made the subject of a specialist study. The collision between France and Germany during this period was ‘more than a shock of arms’; it was an ideological struggle.⁷⁴ French occupation was ‘a harsh but salutary episode’, the ‘electric shock which woke Germany from her lethargy.’⁷⁵ But it was a painful experience. The Duchy of Berg, for instance, a region rich in steel-

making proto-industries, 'the Birmingham and Sheffield, the Manchester and Leeds of Germany rolled into one', for instance, was 'absolutely ruined' by Napoleon's ineffectual economic war against Britain. Spreading liberty had become indistinguishable from older French imperialism: 'side by side with this idea of beneficence there is the idea of exploitation.' French domination, then, planted and germinated the seeds of German nationalism.⁷⁶ And it was to the credit of the Prussian reformers around Stein and Hardenberg that they understood that 'a revolution militant' had to be answered by comprehensive social and governmental reforms.⁷⁷

Key to the eventual downfall of the Napoleonic empire was the war with England. To vanquish her, Napoleon had to conquer Europe first. The war thus pitted two opposing ordering principles against each other: 'Hence arises a great duel between the sea and the land, between England, who claims to blockade the continental coast, and France, who poses as the champion of liberty of the seas. By the inexorable logic of history, Napoleon the Pacific is compelled to fight.'⁷⁸ By that same logic, a 'consequence of the continental system', the warrior-emperor was also destined to lose. His empire rested on foundations, 'some of which were of granite, others of treacherous sand', and it was England's maritime might that washed that sand away.⁷⁹

In Fisher's judgment, the wars unleashed by the great Revolution were too violent to secure anything durable. If any confirmation was needed, the territorial arrangements made in 1814/15 furnished it, for 'in its essential features the Europe of 1789 does not differ from the Europe of 1815.'⁸⁰ Fisher the Liberal singled out the Tory statesman Viscount Castlereagh for his realism and restraint. It was to his credit that 'the vanquished country was still treated with moderation.' He also understood that, having played a central role in the coalition against Napoleon, England could not now withdraw into isolation: 'The war had forced the country out of its insularity, had brought English statesmen into a close association with the political chiefs of other countries, and had created ... a diplomatic *esprit de corps*.' Their alliance was no League of Nations, it was true, but at that time 'nothing better could be devised than this concert of four great powers pledged to one another to protect the cause of European peace.'⁸¹

The notion that European order could be maintained on the basis of some form of 'negative conservatism' was a chimera. Tsar Alexander I 'began life as a theoretical republican and ended it as an accomplice of Metternich.' In France the experiment of constitutional government failed, too shallow was the soil in which the restored Bourbons were to drive their roots. 'The Latin genius', Fisher reflected, was 'averse to compromise, and political movements in France have been too often armed with terror in place of argument.'⁸² Once again, England served as the counterfoil. Constitutional arrangements could be copied, not so the cultural assumptions that underpinned them:

The good-humour, the moderation, the pleasant give and take, the graded loyalties which made the working of that constitution successful were less easy to emulate. Whereas in England a newspaper was full of sport and advertisements, in France ... a newspaper was little more than a fierce political diatribe. The French legislator did not hunt the fox. No French Epsom or Newmarket sweetened the severity or abated the logic of his political meditations. He thought with bitter clearness, spoke with bitter violence.⁸³

It was little surprise that '[s]park[s] from the Paris furnace' flew across France in 1830 and 1848⁸⁴; and no surprise either that they flew far and wide across continental Europe or

that the revolutions remained abortive. In Italy it was a 'chronicle of ... failure', albeit one ending 'with a brilliant romantic epilogue' in the shape of Garibaldi. As for the Frankfurt *Paulskirche* parliament, it contained 'some of the finest characters and noblest minds in Germany', but they laboured in vain. It was 'one of the tragedies ... that the union of Germany was achieved, not by the *give and take of Parliamentary argument*, but by the blood and iron of civil and foreign war.'⁸⁵ England's *Sonderweg* was unmistakable. The rest of Europe was shaken by political turmoil, but in England reforms, allowing for 'a smooth and tranquil enlargement of liberty and well-being', had helped to avert the greater danger of revolution. The English

did not look far ahead. [...] Parliamentary statesmanship, though it had failed to provide the standard of education of which an intelligent German, like the Prince Consort, would approve, had nevertheless laid the foundation of that great system of social services which, more than any other force, had preserved the country from revolution.

Even later, there was no revolutionary pressure. England might have been the 'main scene of his labours', but here 'Marx was during his own lifetime almost a cypher.'⁸⁶

If England made rapid progress, France went backwards, and the 'policy of flat negation' led to the disaster of 1848 and, ultimately, the rise of Louis Napoleon. With it a 'new page of European history was about to unroll itself, marked by the triumph of nationalism, with its brilliant idealism ... but also with its blind passions, its great conscript armies, its wars of extermination, its standing threat to international harmony and peace.'⁸⁷ There was, then, a direct line from 1848 to the First World War. It led through the unifications of Italy – the Gladstonian Liberal Fisher hailed Cavour as a 'disciple of English Liberalism' – and Germany – the 'titanic figure' of Bismarck was less congenial, though he admitted his historic achievements⁸⁸ – to the tension-laden situation in Europe in the summer of 1914. In Germany the events of 1870/71 had given rise to a belief in 'a peculiar and flattering Providence': 'Nothing was impossible to German heroism [...] Rome would wrest the trident from Carthage.'⁸⁹ Germany's progress in education, culture and business was impressive, but she was 'heavily armed, obsessed with internal suspicions and anxieties, fearing her neighbours and by her neighbours feared.' Bismarck's diplomatic manoeuvres had not lessened international tensions, and his successors had imbibed only his duplicity, not his moderation. Wilhelm II was a man of many excellent qualities but also 'others of a baser alloy, an egregious vanity, an ungovernable temper, a love of theatrical ostentation.' The Kaiser, Fisher thought, was not 'among the war-mongers. [...] Yet the atmosphere of his court was steeped in militarism.'⁹⁰ No Germanophobe, Fisher was nevertheless highly critical of the ideas that shaped German politics: 'the sacred virtues of war', the supremacy of 'the material interest of the Fatherland' and 'the God-given imperial mission ... to control the world.'⁹¹

By 1914, 'save for a savage patch in the Balkans', Europe had reached 'an unprecedented level of comfort and civilization.' This 'ascending process of civilized well-being' was violently 'fractured' by the Sarajevo murders. There was 'genuine fear' of Russia at Berlin and a 'lively apprehension' of Slav nationalism in Vienna, but it was Germany's 'unfortunate' behaviour that propelled the powers towards war: 'She was arrogant when she should have been restrained, capricious when she should have been steady, and if she was in truth anxious to keep the peace, nevertheless behaved as a Power designing

on war.' The greatest indictment of German policy was that it 'created in the minds of the Liberal and peace-loving Cabinet of Great Britain the strong impression of a German peril.'⁹²

As in the wars against Louis XIV and Napoleon, parliamentary regimes proved better equipped to deal with the vicissitudes of modern conflict. It was 'won by the democracies of the west', while the 'three great military monarchies' collapsed, thereby confirming the essential superiority of Westminster-style constitutions: 'The downfall of Germany is not a little to be ascribed to the fact that she permitted the soldiers too great a place in the national life.'⁹³

Yet the war had shattered the belief in liberalism and nineteenth-century institutions. Never had 'the prophets been more active', he noted in November 1918: 'Never since the great age of Messianic expectation has the human race been so much absorbed with the dark prospect of the future.'⁹⁴ Now 'social discipline' had collapsed, and '[t]he trust in authority was undermined, the fabric and custom broken.' This was especially true of Russia, where, in Fisher's evocative phrase, 'the deep evangelical piety of the Russian went out to meet the new religion' of communism. It 'bore ... the marks of a religious faith.' '[C]osmopolitan, militant, propagandist', it was also feared to spread like a conflagration.⁹⁵ And Lenin, the 'stubborn doctrinaire' and as such 'quite third-rate', had 'a certain Messianic intensity of character' that helped its spread.⁹⁶ The war had given rise 'to the vague generalizations' about foreign nations. Only 'a sound knowledge of modern European history' would allow current and future generations to understand and so to shape 'the complicated course of international affairs', Fisher contended in the summer of 1917.⁹⁷ The presence of such knowledge at Paris in 1919 may be debatable, but Fisher defended the peace settlements on pragmatic grounds and for reasons of principle. They were not a Carthaginian peace, a 'misleading' epithet: 'Justice for justice, the political map of Europe ... compares favourably with the map which it replaced and is more closely in accord with the wishes of the populations concerned than any previous arrangements.' The real problem with the arrangements of 1919–21 was not that they were unjust, but that they were 'speculative and uncertain' in Eastern Central Europe. The Western Slavs had been the 'universal bondsman ... of Teuton, Muscovite and the Magyar' whose predominance had matured over centuries; and it might not be wise 'so suddenly to reverse the mighty engines of history'. The peace treaties did not lack for principle, but the creation of five new states, 'all of questionable stability' and all involving 'transfers of territory at the expense of the Teutonic and Magyar races', was fraught with danger.⁹⁸ Already before any of the treaties were signed, Fisher sounded a note of caution: 'The Polish settlement is ... the most unsatisfactory feature ... You cannot satisfy the historic ambitions of Poland without making an irredentist Prussia and you cannot make an irredentist Prussia without endangering the future peace of Europe.'⁹⁹ On this point his views had undergone some change since the end of the war, having previously emphasized the stabilizing function of smaller states as 'buffer states' that would reduce 'the general strains' of great power competition.¹⁰⁰ Later he viewed it as one of Europe's 'minor misfortunes' that 'the little peoples' separating 'the Teutonic from the Russian mass' had never developed 'any real gift for combination.'¹⁰¹

If Fisher defended the peace treaties, there was nevertheless an element of disillusion in his account of the League of Nations. As a pragmatic internationalist he was alive to the organization's failings. The high hopes of 1919 had been frustrated, and '[l]ike the

Papacy of the Middle Ages, the League may prove itself to be an ineffectual bridle upon the passions and appetites of man.¹⁰² Yet it offered 'to the world as much world-government as the world can stand.' The framers of its Covenant envisaged 'an association of nation states', not 'a super-state to override the national governments':

Not till the mind of man is filled with the conviction that modern war offers a peril ... so great that it is a crime, certain to be visited by condign punishment ... , will mankind be effectually rid of this menace. At present the world neither entertains nor is prepared to act upon these salutary and intelligent beliefs.¹⁰³

Here was a sage contemplating the follies of the world from a higher vantage point. But resigned or nor, it entrenched his conviction that a policy of small practical steps was more efficacious than the pursuit of grand designs. Once the flaws in the 1919 settlements had been rectified 'by mutual assent, the peace of Europe will still be further affirmed.'¹⁰⁴

By the time Fisher settled down to write the *History of Europe*, European politics had moved beyond the reach of small practical steps. The pacifism dominant in Britain was 'not ... shared by the governments of Paris or Berlin, of Rome or Moscow, of Tokio or Prague.' Nor was there any 'agreement as to the political objectives in Europe.'¹⁰⁵ Fear of Bolshevism was everywhere, and it explained, Fisher contended, the rise of Mussolini and Hitler. There were still traces of the old Liberal Italophilia in his discussion of the *Duce*. He did not glide over the excesses of the *fascisti* but noted that 'humane Italians' applauded a movement which had rekindled 'a sentiment of grandeur recalling the Imperial age. [...] The trains ran on time.'¹⁰⁶ Late trains were never a problem in Germany, and Fisher's treatment of Hitler was more critical. But here too amused contempt for the 'Austrian Messiah' was mixed with a grudging acknowledgement of his apparent achievements. Hitler was 'a tough, resentful, visionary figure, half-crazy with anti-Semitism ... but disinterested, patriotic, and charged with Teutonic pride.' He had succeeded in infusing 'a blast of courage and confidence into a dejected and distracted people' by means of street terror; and, having 'stormed his way to power', he now 'threw an audacious challenge to the four greatest forces of modern civilization, the Catholics, the Protestants, the capitalists and the Jews.' The now defunct Weimar republic had done much to restore Germany as 'a first-class power', but Hitler pushed further. Yet in his 'violent affirmation of Germanism there is much that is familiar.' In its broad outline Fisher detected a continuity between the foreign policy of the Nazi regime and the ideas of pre-1914 Pan-Germans. The regime's militarism was equally familiar. What was new, was 'that centralization replaces the ancient federation ... The kind of revolution which made France formidable as a military state in 1792 makes Germany a nation in arms ... in 1935.' This circumstance was 'the new fact of which Europe and the world must take account.' Intriguingly, he seemed to think that Hitler might not be in power for long, though he did not expect the general direction of German policy to change: 'When the leader goes the old hands will be found placed on the levers of policy, but the policy will not be altogether old.'¹⁰⁷

In the midst of this sea of troubles, Britain remained becalmed. 'The good old English constitution' which had weathered so many storms, he observed in 1924, rode 'the waves as buoyantly as ever.'¹⁰⁸ Nor did he have reason for altering his views by the mid-1930s. Elsewhere thrones had fallen, but 'the British monarchy has advanced in strength and popularity', and the country's parliamentary institutions remained unshaken, sufficiently

so for Fisher once again to revert to his Whiggish theme of Britain's wholesome development: 'Ever since 'the glorious revolution' Britain has been the most wisely governed of the European states. Cabinets have made mistakes, but never ... such ... as to provoke a serious protest under arms or to compromise the future.' There was a 'natural' inclination, he suggested with implicit reference to the National Government's embrace of preferential tariffs in 1931/32, now to withdraw from the continent, 'its perils and complications', to seek 'a life of economic and political self-sufficiency' based on the Dominions and the Empire. And yet he warned that isolation was no longer possible. The advent of the long-range bomber – the dominant theme of interwar defence debates – meant that 'Britain is no longer an island.' In 1914, it was imperative to prevent Belgium or the French Channel coast from falling into German hands; 'it is even more important for national security that these changes in the European balance should not happen now.' This was understood by many 'wise men' on the continent, too. They recognized that the British, 'these eccentric, incoherent, apparently stupid people', wished for peace and were 'able to exercise a mediatorial office which no other first-class European power can well fulfil.'¹⁰⁹

The state of European politics led Fisher to raise two fundamental questions: 'Will peace be preserved? Can liberty survive?' Never since the fall of Rome had Europe been 'under a single sceptre.' Now it was entering 'a period when competition may be expected to be sterner than in the past.' He called upon his readers to accept this 'as a challenge.' Old Europe, with all its faults, 'must make a stand on quality.' Two contrasting destinies lay ahead: '[Europe] may travel down the road to a new war or ... work for a permanent organization of peace.' For now, 'the moral unity of Europe' was broken: 'Nordic paganism assails Christianity. An insane racialism threatens the seamless garment of civilization. May future generations close the rents, heal the wounds, and replace our squandered treasure of humanity, toleration, and good sense.'¹¹⁰

It was the plea of a nineteenth-century Liberal. On the eve of war, he resignedly noted, that 'we Europeans live under the shadow. Over a great part of the continent the lamps of humanity are burning low.'¹¹¹ His old internationalist instincts had not died, however. At the beginning of 1939 he co-signed a peace manifesto, an appeal to 'men of good will who value the fruits of civilization.'¹¹² In the autumn, he expressed his hope that '[s]ome day the Germans will return to the comity of European life.'¹¹³ In his last publications, in February and March 1940, he argued that the 'real lesson' of recent events was that 'no peace can be assured unless France, Britain and Germany can cooperate to maintain it'; and he tentatively suggested that 'a wider measure of European federation' might furnish the basis of a durable settlement.¹¹⁴ Not all Germans were Nazis, he thought, and 'the Nazi fever' would abate: 'We Europeans are more of a piece than the political fanatics would have us believe, and there things less likely than that France and Britain will at last find a *modus vivendi* with the Germans and Italians, who have helped with them to build up the fabric of European civilization.'¹¹⁵ Fisher did not live through the purgatory that was necessary for that rebuilding to commence, though he still made a posthumous and – in the literal sense – material contribution to the outcome of the war.¹¹⁶

* * *

Fisher's hopes for a rebuilding of Europe were curiously misplaced in the immediate context of the European war. That he uttered them speaks to the strength of the liberal

internationalist tradition in British public life. But it also underscored the fact that even to some as sensitive as Fisher to the ‘haunting dream’ of European unity, Britain – or rather England – was not wholly of Europe, that her character and identity were separate. This is one of the themes, perhaps its principal theme, of Fisher’s account of Europe’s past. The sense of separation, the drift away from Europe asserted a powerful influence over English imagination ever since the Hundred Years’ War. And yet the gravitational pull of the continent was equally powerful, and at certain times stronger. England’s semi-detached existence on the fringes of Europe, linked to it by innumerable cultural, economic and political ties, but also distinct from her continental neighbours informed Fisher’s reading of European history. There are further strands to Fisher’s analysis, all of them linked to the main theme. The *History of Europe*, as were his earlier works, is infused with a Whiggish notion of England’s steady growth of ordered political liberty. Her institutions and society were not only different from those of continental countries, they were also superior. They had inured the English people against the temptations of absolutism and other forms of despotism as much as against zealous officialdom of the Colbertian or Bolshevik variety, and so saved her from the extremes of suppression and revolution.

England’s ‘true line of development’ pointed away from Europe and towards the open sea. Colonial expansion and the founding of free and dynamic offshoots in North America and the Antipodes was her true destiny. In Europe, England was an offshore island on the northwestern fringes of the continent. In the wider world, she was the ‘mother country’, the centre of the anglophone world. Europe could not be ignored altogether, however. At regular intervals England had to engage herself in its affairs to save it from the tyrannical hegemony of continental despote. But she remained opposed to ‘forced European unification in the name of European liberty’ or a common historical heritage.¹¹⁷

Some of Fisher’s arguments may strike the twenty first-century reader as self-satisfied, simplistic and stale. Many of the assumptions underpinning them may be said to be questionable or, at any rate, insufficiently cognizant of the complexities of the past. But Fisher gave expression to beliefs and ideas about Britain and Europe, and the relations between them, that were widely held in his lifetime, and that still resonate today.¹¹⁸

Notes

1. H.A.L. Fisher, ‘Preface’, L.B. Namier, *Germany and Eastern Europe* (London, 1915), vii [v-vii].
2. *Inter alia Storia d’Europa* (3 vols., Bari, 1938), *Geschiedenis van Europa* (3 vols., Amsterdam, 1939), and *Die Geschichte Europas* (2 vols., Stuttgart, 1952). Fisher agreed terms with his publishers in 1931, Fisher to Higham, 12 Feb. 1931, Fisher MSS, Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS Fisher 69.
3. H.A.L. Fisher, *The Whig Historians: The Raleigh Lecture 1928* (London, 1928), 8 [also in *Proceedings of the British Academy* xiv (1928), 297-339]. Fisher was nevertheless critical of ‘Whig history’, J. Rosebank, ‘G.N. Clark and the Oxford School of Modern History, 1919-1922: Hidden Origins of 1066 and All That’, *English Historical Review* cxxxv, 572 (2020), 155 [127-56].
4. N. Annan, ‘The Intellectual Aristocracy’, J.H. Plumb (ed.), *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan* (London, 1955), 241-87.
5. C.H.S. Fifoot, *Frederic William Maitland: A Life* (Cambridge, MA, 1971), 86-7.
6. See Fisher’s reminiscences in *The Wykehamist*, no. 776, 13 Oct. 1933, 286-7.

7. There is no modern biography of Fisher. D. Ogg, *Herbert Fisher, 1865-1940: A Short Biography* (London, 1947) provides a succinct account of his life and career, which should be read in conjunction with H. Judge, 'H.A.L. Fisher: Scholar and Minister', *Oxford Review of Education* xxxii, 1 (2006), 5-21.
8. Memo. Fisher, 'Memorandum of an interview with David Lloyd George, August 27, 1916, at 310 St. James's Court', and 'Some memories and ideas', n.d. [1922], Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 61 and 91; also H.A.L. Fisher, *An Unfinished Autobiography* (Oxford, 1940), 89-92.
9. L. Robbins, *Autobiography of an Economist* (London, 1971), 112-3. Robbins was a Fellow at New College from 1927 to 1929, coinciding with Fisher's time as Warden there. Fisher used to irritate Fellows by invariably opening conversations with "'When I was in the Cabinet ...'", Berlin to Dudley, 5 Dec. 1944, H. Hardy (ed.), *Isaiah Berlin: Flourishing. Letters, 1928-1946* (London, 2004), 503.
10. Quotes from G. Murray, 'H.A.L. Fisher (1865-1940)', L.G. Wickham Legg (ed.), *Dictionary of National Biography, 1931-1940* (London, 1949), 277 [275-8]; and K.O. Morgan, *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition, 1918-1922* (Oxford, 1979), 211.
11. Hankey diary, 15 Aug. 1917, Hankey MSS, Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge, HNKY 1/3; see also and V. Bogdanor, 'Oxford and the Mandarin Culture: The Past That is Gone', *Oxford Review of Education* xxxii, 1 (2006), 153 [147-65].
12. H.W.B. Joseph, 'The Warden', *New College Record, 1939-1940* (Oxford, 1941), 3 [1-5]. My thanks to Gwendolen Otte for tracking down the document.
13. See also H.A.L. Fisher, *The Place of the University in National Life* (Oxford, 1919) (= Barnett House Papers No. 4); see D.W. Dean, 'Reconstruction and the Development of the 1918 Education Act', *British Journal of Educational Studies* xviii, 3 (1970), 259-76; G.E. Sherington, 'The 1918 Education Act: Origins, Aims and Development', *ibid.* xxiv, 1 (1976), 66-85; and L. Andrews, *The Education Act, 1918* (London, 1976), 16-19 and 35-60.
14. K.O. Morgan, 'Lloyd George's Stage Army: The Coalition Liberals, 1918-1922', A.J.P. Taylor (ed.), *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (Aldershot, repr. 1994), 231 [225-56]; D.W. Dean, 'The Dilemma of an Academic Liberal Historian in Lloyd George's Government: H.A.L. Fisher at the Board of Education', *History* lxxix, 253 (1994), 57-81.
15. Cecil to Fisher, 24 Sept. 1920, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 64; also Hardinge diary, 25 Dec. 1920, Hardinge MSS, Cambridge University Library, Hardinge Add. I. 26.
16. H.A.L. Fisher, *The Common Weal* (Oxford, 1924), 267.
17. Fisher to Lettice Fisher, 27 Aug. 1919 and 15 July 1919, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 206.
18. 'Mr H.A.L. Fisher', *The Times*, 19 Apr. 1940. New College had just voted to extend Fisher's term as Warden for another five years or the duration of the war, Ogg to Fisher, 10 Feb. 1940, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 78. For his wardenship see the memoirs in J. Buxton and P. Williams (eds.), *New College Oxford, 1379-1979* (Oxford, 1979), 107-43.
19. Maitland to Fisher, 26 Jan. 1890, C.H.S. Fifoot (ed.), *The Letters of Frederic William Maitland* (London, 1965), no. 79.
20. H.A.L. Fisher, 'Modern German Historians', id., *Studies in History and Politics* (Oxford, 1920), 113 [112-27] [first published in *Quarterly Review* (1913)]; see also Fifoot, Maitland, 130-1, and A. Saitta, 'Prefazione', Fisher, *Storia d'Europa* (3 vols., Bari, repr. 1969), viii-ix [v-xx]. I am most grateful to Matthew D'Auria for a copy of this introduction.
21. Id., *Frederick William Maitland, Downing Professor of the Laws of England: A Biographical Sketch* (Cambridge, 1910), 107; also *Whig Historians*, 6.
22. Fisher to Murray, 20 June 1903, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 54. This was with reference to Fisher's recent *Studies in Napoleonic Statesmanship: Germany* (Oxford, 1903).
23. H. Fisher, *The Medieval Empire* (2 vols., London, 1898) i, 10-11. For a discussion of contemporary historiographical trends, see M. Bentley, *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970* (Cambridge, 2005), 19-44 *et passim*.
24. H.A.L. Fisher, *Bonapartism: Six Lectures, delivered in the University of London* (London, 1908), 31; for the strength of Idealism see *inter alia* S. Collini, 'Hobhouse, Bosanquet and the State: Philosophical Idealism and Political Argument in England, 1888-1918', *Past &*

- Present no. 72 (1976), 89–90 [86–111]; J. Morefield, *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire* (Princeton, NJ, 2005), 55–72.
25. Fisher, *The Republican Tradition in Europe* (London, 1911), 282.
 26. Id., ‘The Place of History’, *The Teacher’s World* xxxv, 1172 (18 Aug. 1926), 934 [906, 916, 934].
 27. Fisher, *History of Europe* i, 1. For the importance of his classics background see also P. Bell, ‘A Historical Cast of Mind: Some Eminent Historians and Attitudes to Continental Europe in the Middle of the Twentieth Century’, *Journal of European Integration History* ii, 2 (1996), 7 [5–19].
 28. Fisher to Balfour, n.d. [1928], Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 66; and id., ‘The House of Religious Crazes: Why they thrive in America’, *John o’ London’s Weekly* xxxi, 531 (22 June 1929), 316–7; see also his treatise on the subject *Our New Religion* (London, 1929).
 29. Id., *Common Weal*, 206.
 30. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 40.
 31. Id., *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 11–12 and 351.
 32. Id., ‘A Napoleonic Vignette’, *Empire Review* xxxix, 281 (June 1924), 628 [628–37].
 33. Id., *A History of Europe* (3 vols., London, 1935) iii, 914, and *Bonapartism*, 5.
 34. Jerrold to Fisher, 9 Mar. 1932 and also 18 Jan. 1934, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 69. Jerrold was the director of Eyre & Spotswood, 1929–45. A Tory but outside the party’s mainstream, he showed strong sympathies for fascist Italy and Spain, and also favoured the tradition of Catholic historiography, as his correspondence with Fisher shows; see also G. Love, “Real Toryism” or Christian democracy?: The political thought of Douglas Jerrold and Charles Petrie at the New English Review, 1945–50”, *Historical Research* xciii, 261 (2020), 551–576.
 35. Fisher, *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 369. For some contemporary, amorphous social antisemitism, see G. Himmelfarb, *Victorian Minds: A Study of Intellectuals and Ideologies in Transition* (Chicago, IL, repr. 1995 (pb)), 260–62.
 36. Fisher, *History of Europe* ii, 784 and iii, 1144.
 37. Ibid. iii, 1044–45. There was an echo here of E.A. Freeman’s accusation that Disraeli led Britain by ‘crypto-Judaism’, id., *The Ottoman Power in Europe: its Nature, its Growth, and its Decline* (London, 1877), xviii–xix.
 38. Fisher to Murray, 29 Sept. [1898], and Einstein to Fisher. 1 May 1933, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 54 and 69.
 39. Fisher to Irwin, 15 Mar. 1928, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 66. Lord Irwin, later Earl of Halifax, had been a Fellow of All Souls, 1903–10, and succeeded Fisher as President of the Board of Education in October 1922.
 40. Fisher, ‘Europe’, unpubl. TS, n.d. [1938], Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 99.
 41. Id., ‘A Universal Historian’, *Nineteenth Century* (Dec. 1934), 3 [1–12], copy in MS Fisher 169.
 42. Id., *History of Europe* i, 6.
 43. Id., *Common Weal*, 141–57; also ‘Imperial Administration’, id., *Studies*, 128–46, and ‘On Nationalism’, *The Teacher’s World* xxxvii, 1236 (17 Aug. 1928), 1027. Contemporary usage was loose and impressionistic, D. Stack, *Queen Victoria’s Skull: George Combe and the Mid-Victorian Mind* (London, 2008), 219–230.
 44. Fisher, *History of Europe* i, 6–7.
 45. Id., *Medieval Empire* i, 17, 28 and ii, 276, and, *Napoleon* (London, 1945 [1st 1912]), 112.
 46. Id., *History of Europe* i, 85, and *Republican Tradition*, 5; see T. Koditschek, ‘A Liberal Descent?: E.A. Freeman’s Invention of Racial Traditions’, G.A. Bremner and J. Conlin (eds.), *Making History: Edward Augustus Freeman and Victorian Cultural Politics* (Oxford, 2015), 199–216.
 47. Fisher, *History of Europe* i, 211 and 292–93.
 48. Ibid. i, 213. Fisher had made similar arguments earlier, *Medieval Empire* i, 165.
 49. Id., *Medieval Empire* i, 303. A notable exception, according to Fisher, was the Hanseatic City of Hamburg: ‘Nowhere save in England was so much important public work done for nothing, and it may account for the high feeling of municipal patriotism in Hamburg

that it was one of the few German cities uncontaminated by aristocratic privilege', *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 341.

50. Id., *History of Europe* i, 296–97 and 301.
51. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 8, and *History of Europe* i, 302–3. Fisher was by no means uncritical of the mythologization of *Magna Carta*, id., untitled lecture on the 700th anniversary of the *Magna Carta*, 1915, MS Fisher 87, and *Whig History*, 5–6.
52. Id., *The Political History of England*, v, *From the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of Henry VIII* (London, new ed. 1919 [1st 1913]), 7, and *Republican Tradition*, 40 and 42–43.
53. Id., *History of Europe* ii, 660 and 678.
54. Ibid. i, 314 and 333–34.
55. Fisher, 'The Place of England in European History', lecture in South Africa, 1908, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 86, fo. 4.
56. Ibid., 335 and 414, and ii, 471.
57. Fisher, *Political History*, 24–25.
58. Ibid., 235.
59. Id., *History of Europe* ii, 510 and 516–7; see also *Political History*, 328–29.
60. Id., *History of Europe* ii, 639 and 641.
61. Id., 'England's Place in European History', fo. 14.
62. Ibid., 665 and 670.
63. Ibid., 679 and 696. See also id., *Republican Tradition*, 53, for further reflections on the prevalence of absolutism on the continent.
64. Id., *History of Europe* ii, 703–4.
65. Ibid., 742.
66. Fisher, 'Modern German Historians', 119, and *History of Europe* ii, 758.
67. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 88.
68. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 812; and *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 27.
69. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 812–13.
70. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 117.
71. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 835.
72. Id., 'The Codes', A.W. Ward, G.W. Prothero and S. Leathes (eds.), *The Cambridge Modern History*, ix, *Napoleon* (Cambridge, 1907), 148, 150–1 and 179; also id., *Napoleon* (London, 1912), 81.
73. Id., 'Thoughts on the Influence of Napoleon', id., *Studies*, 198 [198–213].
74. Id., *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 1. Fisher broke new ground with his study, pipping Charles Schmidt to the post by two years, id., *Le grand-duché de Berg (1806–1813): Étude sur la domination française en Allemagne sous Napoléon I^{er}* (Paris, 1905).
75. Fisher, *History of Europe* iii, 855, and *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 22.
76. Ibid., 206, 376 and 381.
77. Id., 'The Resurgence of Prussia', id., *Studies*, 194–95 [180–97].
78. Id., *Bonapartism*, 71–72; see also *Napoleonic Statesmanship*, 49. There is an intriguing parallel here to the notion developed by Carl Schmitt during the Second World War of a 'European Monroe Doctrine', *Land und Meer: Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung* (Leipzig, 1942).
79. Id., *Napoleon*, 72, and *Bonapartism*, 70.
80. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 150.
81. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 874.
82. Id., 'Ollivier's Memoirs', id., *Studies*, 52 [45–74] [1st published in *Quarterly Review* (1912)].
83. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 151, and *History of Europe* iii, 886–87.
84. Ibid., 891.
85. Id., *Republican Tradition*, 208, and *History of Europe* iii, 924 (my emphasis). Note again the absence of a parliamentary tradition.
86. Ibid., 901 and 1017.
87. Ibid., 911–12.
88. Ibid., 949 and 967–68; for academic Italophilia see C. Harvie, *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy* (London, 1976), 100–5.

89. *History of Europe* iii, 995 and 996-97. The Carthage-Britain reference had been popularized by Heinrich von Treitschke in the 1880s, see id., *Deutsche Geschichte im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (5 vols., Leipzig, repr. 1927 [1st 1879-94]) v, 126.
90. Ibid., 1056 and 1060.
91. Id., *The War, Its Causes and Issues: Three Addresses given in Sheffield on Aug. 31, Sept. 1 and Sept. 2* (London, 1914), 9.
92. Id., 'Introduction', G.P. Gooch, *Germany* (London, 1925), v-vi; id., *The War*, 21. In August 1914, Fisher thought that 'we are fighting the ghost of Bismarck' and that, if Germany was defeated, it would encourage the German people 'never again ... [to] be led by the Junkers', Fisher to Murray, 7 Aug. 1914, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 54; Murray agreed, *vice versa*, 10 Aug. 1914, Murray MSS, Bod., MS Gilbert Murray 133.
93. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1151.
94. Id., *Political Prophecies: An Address to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society, delivered November 5, 1918* (Oxford, 1919), 3-4.
95. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1186-87.
96. Id., 'Lenin', *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s. lvi, 333 (Mar. 1924), 258-9 [257-65].
97. Id. to editor, 7 June 1917, *History* ii, 6 (1917), 66 [65-66].
98. Id., 'Foreword', R. Dyboski, *Poland* (London, 1933), 9, and *History of Europe* iii, 1161.
99. Id. to Murray, 12 May 1919, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 54.
100. Id., 'The Value of Small States', id., *Studies*, 169 [161-79] [1st published in the *Oxford War Pamphlets* series in 1915; also id., *Bryce* ii, 205-6.
101. Id., 'The Historical Background', id. et al., *The Background and Issues of the War* (Oxford, 1940), 17 [1-24].
102. Id., *An International Experiment: The Earl Grey Memorial Lecture, Delivered February 26, 1921* (Oxford, 1921), 6.
103. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1172 and 1175; see also id., 'East and West', *Empire Review* xxxviii, 265 (Feb. 1923), 81-90.
104. Id. to Rode, 25 Oct. 1928, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 66. Ove Rode, former Danish Minister of the Interior, was the editor of the liberal newspaper *Politiken*; see also Fisher, 'Education for Peace', *The Central European Observer*, 31 Aug. 1928, 545-7.
105. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1176.
106. Ibid., 1194 and 1195. It was perhaps the reason why Fisher's history was closely read in Fascist Italy, Saitta, 'Prefazione', v.
107. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1204-5 and 1207. He took a similarly sanguine view of the Bolsheviks' prospects, see *International Experiment*, 11, and also 'Foreword', G. Norlin, *Hitlerism: Why and Whither. Some Aspects of a Religious Revolution* (London, 1935), ii.
108. Id., 'Politics and Politicians Today', *Nineteenth Century* xcv, 565 (Mar. 1924), 347 [347-53].
109. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1208, 1209, 1211 and 1212. Fisher made a similar point already in 1921, *International Experiment*, 38. It is instructive that he supported Winston Churchill's nomination for a fellowship of the British Academy in recognition of his contribution to historical literature, and that he resigned when the Academy declined to consider him, Fisher to Gooch, 13 Jan. 1937, Fisher MSS, MS Fisher 73, and to Kenyon, 5 Feb. 1938, *ibid.*, MS Fisher 77.
110. Id., *History of Europe* iii, 1220, 1221 and 1222.
111. Id., 'Academic Freedom', *Dalhousie Review* xviii, 2 (1938), 133 [133-7].
112. 'Appeal to Germany by Eminent Britons: Manifesto on Peace and Cooperation', 27 Jan. 1939, *Carnegie Magazine*, copy in MS Fisher 169; the appeal was initiated by Geoffrey Dawson, the pro-appeasement editor of *The Times*, on behalf of Lord Halifax, the foreign secretary, Dawson to Fisher, 24 Jan. 1939, MS Fisher 77.
113. Id., 'Historical Background', 23. This was a public lecture given in the Michaelmas term 1939 at Oxford's Sheldonian Theatre.
114. Id., 'Beyond the War (I)', *Fortnightly Review* cxlvii, 2 (Feb. 1940), 122 and 124 [117-26]. Jerrold, his publisher, had hoped that the article might prepare for 'a continuation of my

- [Fisher's] History [of Europe]', but Fisher resisted the idea, to Jerrold, 23 Nov. 1939, MS Fisher 77.
115. Id., 'Beyond the War (II)', *Fortnightly Review* cxlvii, 3 (Feb. 1940), 264 [256-65].
 116. Fisher's high-quality pre-war undergarments, still at the warden's lodgings at New College, were used to lend credibility to the (real) corpse of the (fictitious) 'Major Martin' in the intelligence deception 'Operation Mincemeat' in 1943, see B. Macintyre, *Operation Mincemeat: The True Spy Story That Changed World War II* (London, 2010), 67.
 117. Philip Bell's apt comment, 'Historical Cast of Mind', 18.
 118. See the contrasting views offered by R. Tombs, *The English and Their History* (London, 2014), 873-91, and D. Reynolds, *Island Stories: Britain and its History in the Age of Brexit* (London, 2019), 84-86 *et passim*; also D. Abulafia, 'The British have never been good Europeans – and rightly so', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 Mar. 2023.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Archival

Fisher MSS Bodleian Library, Oxford.
 Hankey MSS Churchill College Archive Centre, Cambridge.
 Hardinge MSS Cambridge University Library.
 Murray MSS Bodleian Library, Oxford.

Printed

'Mr H.A.L. Fisher', *The Times*, 19 Apr. 1940.
 C.H.S. Fifoot (ed.), *The Letters of Frederic William Maitland* (London, 1965).
 H. Hardy (ed.), *Isaiah Berlin: Flourishing. Letters, 1928-1946* (London, 2004).

Works by Fisher

H. Fisher, *The Medieval Empire* (2 vols., London, 1898).
 H.A.L. Fisher, *Studies in Napoleonic Statesmanship: Germany* (Oxford, 1903).
 Id., 'The Codes', A.W. Ward, G.W. Prothero and S. Leathes (eds.), *The Cambridge Modern History*, ix, *Napoleon* (Cambridge, 1907), 148-79.
 H.A.L. Fisher, *Bonapartism: Six Lectures, delivered in the University of London* (London, 1908).
 Id., *Frederick William Maitland, Downing Professor of the Laws of England: A Biographical Sketch* (Cambridge, 1910).
 Id., *The Republican Tradition in Europe* (London, 1911).
 Id., *Napoleon* (London, repr. 1945 [1st 1912]).
 Id., *The Political History of England*, v, *From the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of Henry VIII* (London, new ed. 1919 [1st 1913]).
 Id., *The War, Its Causes and Issues: Three Addresses given in Sheffield on Aug. 31, Sept. 1 and Sept. 2* (London, 1914).
 H.A.L. Fisher, 'Preface', L.B. Namier, *Germany and Eastern Europe* (London, 1915), v-vii.
 Fisher to editor, 7 June 1917, *History* ii, 6 (1917), 65-66.
 H.A.L. Fisher, *The Place of the University in National Life* (Oxford, 1919) (= Barnett House Papers No. 40.).
 Id., *Political Prophecies: An Address to the Edinburgh Philosophical Society, delivered November 5, 1918* (Oxford, 1919).

- H.A.L. Fisher, 'Ollivier's Memoirs', id., *Studies in History and Politics* (Oxford, 1920), 45-74 [1st published in *Quarterly Review* (1912)].
- Id., 'Modern German Historians', *ibid.*, 112-27 [first published in *Quarterly Review* (1913)].
- Id., 'Imperial Administration', *ibid.*, 128-46.
- Id., 'The Value of Small States', *ibid.*, 161-79 [1st published under the same title in the *Oxford War Pamphlets* series in 1915].
- Id., 'The Resurgence of Prussia', *ibid.*, 180-97.
- Id., 'Thoughts on the Influence of Napoleon', *ibid.*, 198-213.
- Id., *An International Experiment: The Earl Grey Memorial Lecture, Delivered February 26, 1921* (Oxford, 1921).
- id., 'East and West', *Empire Review* xxxviii, 265 (Feb. 1923), 81-90.
- H.A.L. Fisher, *The Common Weal* (Oxford, 1924).
- Id., 'Lenin', *Cornhill Magazine*, n.s. lvi, 333 (Mar. 1924), 257-65.
- Id., 'Politics and Politicians Today', *Nineteenth Century* xcv, 565 (Mar. 1924), 347-53.
- Id., 'A Napoleonic Vignette', *Empire Review* xxxix, 281 (June 1924), 628-37.
- Id., 'Introduction', G.P. Gooch, *Germany* (London, 1925), v-vi.
- Id., 'The Place of History', *The Teacher's World* xxxv, 1172 (18 Aug. 1926), 906, 916, 934.
- H.A.L. Fisher, *The Whig Historians: The Raleigh Lecture 1928* (London, 1928) [also in *Proceedings of the British Academy* xiv (1928), 297-339].
- Fisher, 'Education for Peace', *The Central European Observer*, 31 Aug. 1928, 545-7.
- id., 'The House of Religious Crazes: Why they thrive in America', *John o' London's Weekly* xxxi, 531 (22 June 1929), 316-7.
- 'On Nationalism', *The Teacher's World* xxxvii, 1236 (17 Aug. 1928), 1027.
- Id., *Our New Religion* (London, 1929).
- Id., 'Foreword', R. Dyboski, *Poland* (London, 1933), 9.
- Id., [untitled reminiscences], *The Wykehamist*, no. 776, 13 Oct. 1933, 286-7.
- Id., 'A Universal Historian', *Nineteenth Century* (Dec. 1934), 1-12.
- Id., *A History of Europe* (3 vols., London, 1935).
- Id., 'Foreword', G. Norlin, *Hitlerism: Why and Whither. Some Aspects of a Religious Revolution* (London, 1935), ii.
- Id., 'Academic Freedom', *Dalhousie Review* xviii, 2 (1938), 133-7.
- Id. et al., 'Appeal to Germany by Eminent Britons: Manifesto on Peace and Cooperation', 27 Jan. 1939, *Carnegie Magazine*, copy in MS Fisher 169.
- H.A.L. Fisher, *An Unfinished Autobiography* (Oxford, 1940).
- Fisher, 'The Historical Background', id. et al., *The Background and Issues of the War* (Oxford, 1940), 1-24.
- H.A.L. Fisher, 'Beyond the War (I)', *Fortnightly Review* cxlvii, 2 (Feb. 1940), 117-26.
- Id., 'Beyond the War (II)', *ibid.* cxlvii, 3 (Feb. 1940), 256-65.

Secondary Works

Biographies

- Fifoot, C. H. S. *Frederic William Maitland: A Life*. Cambridge, 1971.
- Ogg, D., and Herbert Fisher. *1865-1940: A Short Biography*. London, 1947.
- Robbins, L. *Autobiography of an Economist*. London, 1971.

Monographs

- Andrews, L. *The Education Act, 1918*. London, 1976.
- Bentley, M. *Modernizing England's Past: English Historiography in the Age of Modernism, 1870-1970*. Cambridge, 2005.
- Buxton, J., and P. Williams. *New College Oxford, 1379-1979*. Oxford, 1979.
- Freeman, E. A. *The Ottoman Power in Europe: its Nature, its Growth, and its Decline*. London, 1877.

- Harvie, C. *The Lights of Liberalism: University Liberals and the Challenge of Democracy*. London, 1976.
- Himmelfarb, G. *Victorian Minds: A Study of Intellectuals and Ideologies in Transition*. Chicago, 1995.
- Macintyre, B. *Operation Mincemeat: The True Spy Story That Changed World War II*. London, 2010.
- Morefield, J. *Covenants without Swords: Idealist Liberalism and the Spirit of Empire*. Princeton, 2005.
- Morgan, K. O. *Consensus and Disunity: The Lloyd George Coalition, 1918-1922*. Oxford, 1979.
- Schmidt, C. *Le grand-duché de Berg (1806–1813): Étude sur la domination française en Allemagne sous Napoléon Ier*. Paris, 1905.
- Schmitt, C. *Land und Meer: Eine weltgeschichtliche Betrachtung*. Leipzig, 1942.
- Stack, D. *Queen Victoria's Skull: George Combe and the Mid-Victorian Mind*. London, 2008.
- Reynolds, D. *Island Stories: Britain and its History in the Age of Brexit*. London, 2019.
- Tombs, R. R. *Tombs, The English and Their History*. London, 2014.
- Treitschke, H. von, *Deutsche Geschichte im Neunzehnten Jahrhundert* (5 vols., Leipzig, repr. 1927).

Articles, Chapters in Books, Miscellaneous Pieces

- Abulafia, D. 'The British have never been good Europeans – and rightly so', *Daily Telegraph*, 30 Mar. 2023.
- Annan, N. "The Intellectual Aristocracy." In *Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan*, edited by J.H. Plumb, 241–87. London, 1955.
- Bell, P. M. H. "A Historical Cast of Mind: Some Eminent Historians and Attitudes to Continental Europe in the Middle of the Twentieth Century." *Journal of European Integration History* ii 2 (1996): 5–19.
- Bogdanor, V. "Oxford and the Mandarin Culture: The Past That is Gone." *Oxford Review of Education* xxxii 1 (2006): 147–65.
- Collini, S. "Hobhouse, Bosanquet and the State: Philosophical Idealism and Political Argument in England, 1888-1918." *Past & Present* 72 (1976): 86–111.
- Dean, D. W. "Reconstruction and the Development of the 1918 Education Act." *British Journal of Educational Studies* xviii 3 (1970): 259–76.
- Id., "The Dilemma of an Academic Liberal Historian in Lloyd George's Government: H.A.L. Fisher at the Board of Education', *History* lxxix, 253 (1994), 57–81.
- Joseph, H. W. B. "The Warden." *New College Record* (1939. -1940 (Oxford, 1941), 1-5.
- Judge, H. "H.A.L. Fisher: Scholar and Minister." *Oxford Review of Education* xxxii 1 (2006): 5–21.
- Koditschek, T. "A Liberal Descent?: E.A. Freeman's Invention of Racial Traditions." In *Making History: Edward Augustus Freeman and Victorian Cultural Politics*, edited by G.A. Bremner, and J. Conlin, 199–216. Oxford, 2015.
- Love, G. "'Real Toryism' or Christian democracy?: The political thought of Douglas Jerrold and Charles Petrie at the New English Review, 1945–50." *Historical Research* xciii 261 (2020): 551–576.
- Morgan, K. O. 'Lloyd George's Stage Army: The Coalition Liberals, 1918-1922', A.J.P. Taylor, *Lloyd George: Twelve Essays* (Aldershot, repr. 1994), 225-56.
- Murray, G. "H.A.L. Fisher (1865-1940)." In *Dictionary of National Biography, 1931-1940*, edited by L.G. Wickham Legg, 275–8. London, 1949.
- Rosebank, J. "G.N. Clark and the Oxford School of Modern History, 1919-1922: Hidden Origins of 1066 and All That." *English Historical Review* cxxxv 572 (2020): 127–56.
- Saitta, A. 'Prefazione', H.A.L. Fisher, *Storia d'Europa* (3 vols., Bari, repr. 1969), v-xx.
- Sherington, G. E. "The 1918 Education Act: Origins, Aims and Development'." *British Journal of Educational Studies* xxiv 1 (1976): 66–85.