

## United Kingdom

Annie Hayter interviewed **Ray Ockenden**.

Interview date: 8 November 2020

**Hayter:** I am very excited to present Dr Ray Ockenden, who after completing his Oxford undergraduate degree studies in German and French, doing an exploratory year as a schoolmaster and a year as a graduate student at Balliol [Balliol College, University of Oxford], took up a post as a lecturer in German at Bedford College, London. After seven years there, he joined Wadham College as its first fellow in German in 1967 and has been teaching German literature and language for the university and for many other Oxford colleges since at Wadham, where he is now an emeritus fellow. He has fulfilled several college offices such as Dean, Senior Tutor and Sub-Warden, and since 2003 has been Wadham's dean of degrees. Ray's research work, like his tutorial, teaching and lecturing, has been concerned with German literature, especially poetry from 1750 to the present day. He's written about Goethe, especially his classical verse and the later poetry of Brecht. His most recent publications are two essays on the German romantic poet, Eduard Mörike.

Just to introduce myself, [I am] Annie Hayter, who will be interviewing Dr Ockenden. I read English for my undergraduate degree at the University of Oxford. I am a writer and poet and I won the BBC Proms Young Poet, and was runner up for the Times Young Poet. I performed at the Brighton festival, the Southbank Centre, the Barbican and on Radio Three. I am an alumna of the Barbican Young Poets and the London Writers Awards and I work as a tutor and a workshop facilitator.

So those are our very long introductions over, and just to start things off, Ray, I wanted to ask you, which is a very huge question, but how would you describe your childhood?

**Ockenden:** It was seriously interrupted by the war and because when a German bomb fell on the house immediately opposite the one in which I was living as a small child, my mother decided that it was not a good city to bring up small children in. And since my father had already joined the Air Force and been sent off to Yorkshire.

She thought she would take the two children and go to Yorkshire. So all in new life started. I barely remember London or the bomb that fell and left our garden full of interesting remains of the house opposite.

But I started a new life in Yorkshire [a county in Northern England], which was a foreign country in an interesting way in those days before the Second World War. People didn't travel except sometimes to find work, but on the whole, people stayed where they were. And my mother was strongly advised against going to Yorkshire because she was told she wouldn't understand anything they said. And it was true that their habits, customs, the food they ate, everything was totally different from anything that she had known.

And it's hard to believe that now because it was, of course, radio, but there was no television and people just simply didn't travel as much as they do now.

**Hayter:** So it was quite a culture shock for your mother then, this move?

**Ockenden:** My mother did find it difficult. Yes. I mean, it took her time to get used to the place. She was lucky. She found good friends. And my brother and I were very lucky because there was a school right next to where we started living. And it was a private school which was known then as a preparatory school. And I found myself starting school at the age of four and three quarters. Which was also an unexpected benefit in many ways. And that's where I stayed until I was 13, and then I moved on to secondary school, and one of the things about that school was that the headmaster was very ambitious for his pupils. He wanted them to get scholarships to big public schools, as they would call private public schools. And that was why I finished up following my brother, who was older than me and paved the way for me in most respects. I followed him to Marlborough College [a famous independent boarding school in Wiltshire, South-West England], which is where I completed my secondary education. But at that preparatory school in wartime, of course, the teaching was extremely haphazard because all the men had gone off to join the forces. So, a lot of curious people. But we were lucky to have a brilliant French woman, half French she was, who had managed to escape from France just in time at the beginning of the war. And she taught French to a very, very high standard. I started learning Latin, I think about the age of six and French about the age of eight. So I had an enormous advantage, and it was then when I moved on to secondary school, I had the choice between becoming a classical scholar adding Greek to my Latin or a modern linguist, adding German to my French. And I simply followed my brother's example, as I did in most things and decided to add German to my French. So I started learning German at 13.

But these were terrific advantages, which I'm not sure I would have had if we had stayed in London, so it was from my point of view, it was a real good fortune that moved us to Yorkshire.

**Hayter:** Is it a place that you feel connected to still, Yorkshire? Is it somewhere you go back to at all?

**Ockenden:** No, erm, the school after varied fortunes is no more. It was taken over by the choir school from the cathedral in Ripon, but the school is no longer. I have been back a couple of times to Ripon. But no, Yorkshire isn't a place that I go back to a lot. I support the cricket team and it's about as far as my loyalty to Yorkshire goes. Otherwise I don't feel I belong. And this is what distinguishes me from all my German friends, is that I don't feel I belong anywhere. In a way that if you're German, you absolutely do need to have to want to be somewhere. And I don't feel I have those roots. I mean, I was born in London. I went back to live in London briefly and then started my academic career, taught at the University of London. I spent seven years there. I don't feel myself to be a Londoner. And I've spent of course, I spent most of my life in Oxford without feeling that this is a place where I have roots, I just have my life. That may have helped this feeling that I could find roots elsewhere in other places.

And as soon as I settled myself into learning French and German, I was keen, of course, to go to France and Germany, which I was able to do again, foreign travel wasn't something that happened much in those days. But I was able to go on a school trip to Paris and before that very fortunate, I went with a youth group from Arundel who were taking an opera, an 18th century little opera from by Thomas Arne called 'Love in the Village'. And somehow

they had a connection to Hamburg and they were asked to take this opera to Hamburg. And I was taken along as somebody who could sing a bit, but also had a smattering of German. I then it led German for two years when I went off to Hamburg for the first time. But it was a wonderful experience, including having to express the thanks of the group in my primitive German to the Oberbürgermeister [the mayor], the senior mayor of Hamburg who had greeted us in a characteristically friendly way. They were delighted to see us. They made a great fuss of us there and in Bremen, which is where we moved on to briefly. They loved our opera and they loved having English people. There we were in this town, Hamburg, which we, the RAF, had systematically destroyed.

They were building it up again very rapidly and it wasn't looking too bad. But nonetheless, it was characteristic, I think, of German reactions after the war that we were welcomed so warmly.

**Hayter:** It sounds like your first experience abroad, felt like a really positive one. Is that fair to say?

**Ockenden:** Absolutely, yes. I stayed with three different families during that brief time in Hamburg. They were all tremendously welcoming. And I thought, this is a wonderful, wonderful country. And when I got back to England, I explained to my mother I rather preferred tea without milk of course which came as something of a shock to her because the idea of tea without milk is very strange. And I have I have drunk my tea without milk ever since.

**Hayter:** Sounds like a cultural revelation for you, Ray, on your visits abroad. Do you feel like this sowed the seeds, as it were, for you, for your further study of languages and for your interest?

**Ockenden:** Yes. I mean, I was already by then absolutely committed. Once I had started learning German and following my brother, studying French and German, I was really absolutely committed to that. And it was understood that we would go on to university and that was what we would study at university. And it certainly dominated my school life in a positive way. These are the things I really cared about. I was commenting earlier today to somebody about my experience of science. I must be one of the very, very few people in this world who can claim to have had a complete education without a single science lesson. Of any kind, and it's significant that the only time I attended a science lesson was in Hamburg with the boy who I was staying with as part of this opera visit. He took me along to his school in which they were describing how you made water, that's to say H<sub>2</sub>O, scientifically. So that's my only ever science lesson.

Otherwise, I managed to get by with no physics, no chemistry, no biology, which is shameful, but that's one of the eccentricities of the then system.

**Hayter:** But it sounds like you mentioned the incredible French woman who taught you, do you feel like she was someone who I suppose encouraged your interest in Europe, was Europe a concept that you understood from her as a child? Or did you have a greater understanding of that?

**Ockenden:** Yes. Well, I mean, Europe was a long way away in the sense that we didn't travel much in those days. On the other hand, as an idea it was certainly there.

And we had at some stage a French maid. All middle-class families had maids in those days, mostly from the north of England. But we at one stage had a French maid. So I knew about these people who were different and spoke a different language. And my parents had honeymooned in the Channel Islands, which were then still called the Îles Normandes. I think they're now called the Îles Anglo-Normandes, but they spoke warmly about the Channel Islands. My father took a party of school children to Germany in 1935, so we knew a little bit about Germany as well. He came back. He came back with a swastika flag which was handed out to everybody, which my elder brother put on his tricycle and cycled around the garden with his swastika flag.

**Hayter:** Oh, my gosh.

**Ockenden:** My father was somewhat taken aback by the fact that on arrival in Germany, his newspaper was taken from him at the front, you know, foreign newspapers were allowed into Germany. Any news they had was news controlled by Goebbels. And but he had found it interesting and curious. And he'd obviously met a lot of people who 1935, it was still possible to be enthusiastic about Nazism and be halfway decent. That wasn't a problem unless, of course, you were Jewish or had Jewish friends. But that, of course, changed as soon as the war broke out, my very first memory, nobody believes this, but my very first real memory was the moment when war was announced by Mr. Chamberlain over the radio and I was sitting in a chair [Neville Chamberlain served as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from May 1937 to May 1940]. We had been sent off to the New Forest because people were anxious about what was happening and the sort of moves away from London, even though the war hadn't started and this broadcast arrived and my mother and Mrs. Brown were making blackout curtains, which we were encouraged to create. And when this news came through, Mrs. Brown burst into tears. And I was three years old, three and a half years old. I had never seen an adult crying. And it was a broadening experience. So that's why I think I remember that moment. And once the war started, of course, we knew that the Germans were our enemies.

**Ockenden:** And I was taken out into the garden to watch a dog fight, as they were called, between British and German fighter planes over Croydon, not very far away from us in South London.

**Hayter:** Not far from me now as well, Ray, actually, where I am!

**Ockenden:** And then came the bomb, so we knew that these were our enemies. Strangely, there wasn't hostility to the Germans, wasn't whipped up in any kind of way and that some sort of level.

I think we were still aware that the Germans had always been our friends. We were related to them through the royal family, etc. and this awful thing that was Nazism and this awful person who was Adolf Hitler became the focus of this. Like when I first went to Germany, as I say, I had good experiences. And when I then went for a whole year to Germany after my studies were completed at school and I decided I didn't want to go straight to university, but I wanted to spend what would now be called a gap year. It wasn't known as that then because very few people did it. I was able to get a scholarship from the British Council to go and study for a year in Germany before going up to Oxford. And what I found when I went to Heidelberg was an enormously friendly welcome from everybody. And that feeling that somehow they'd always been friendly with England and this war had been an aberration and

the Nazis have been a terrible aberration. And basically, we had the same values, the same culture, the same interests that was very much affirmed by all my experiences in Heidelberg, which was a shaping year in many, many ways for me.

**Hayter:** So it sounds like you had an affinity with Germany and elements of Europe from a young age, and that was almost instilled in you by not only your parents, but also people who taught you at school. Is that fair to say?

**Ockenden:** That is absolutely fair to say. Yes, I was. I mean, I was taught by enthusiastic people say this lovely French woman whom I remember fondly from my first school, and then the teachers who taught me there was no question about how odd it was.

I mean, occasionally when I talked to elderly relatives who still remembered the war, they said, are you sure you want to study this language? And I couldn't understand that because it all seemed somehow very positive and very familiar. And of course, I was then reading German literature from the age of 16 onwards. I was beginning to read German literature and being absolutely fascinated by it.

**Hayter:** This is all so interesting to hear, Ray, and it's really wonderful to hear about all of your experiences. You said earlier on that you almost felt like you didn't have roots in a particular place or that it's been very difficult for you to feel a sense of rootedness. Do you feel like you've ever had a real strong sense of belonging in a place even in one point? I know you feel perhaps more grounded in Oxford now where you live, but have you ever had a really strong sense of belonging?

**Ockenden:** I feel I fell in love with Heidelberg. Absolutely. Who wouldn't? It is a most beautiful place and I was completely blown away by the beauty of the city.

I loved being in a city where, as you walked about the skyline was higher than your natural vision. That's because it's a city between, as you well know, between mountains on both sides of mountains, perhaps exaggerated, but high hills on both sides. But everywhere you go, you have to look up and see the skyline.

That was one important thing the other not terribly relevant thing about going to Heidelberg was that I discovered that there were a whole group of people, all of whom I knew very, very little, having been at boarding schools, which were, of course, all male, having unhappily not had a sister only a brother. I had a mother. I had beautiful aunts. But somehow women were a completely unknown area. So that was also part of my experience of Heidelberg was falling in love with a variety of German women singing in choirs with I was very, very lucky and I've been lucky all my life in lots of ways. But arriving in Heidelberg knowing nobody. And I bumped into somebody who sang in a church choir who then recommended that I joined the Oxford company and the Heidelberg Bach Choir. And so, I was singing in two different environments and meeting lots of people in both of those.

And I also had the extraordinarily good fortune to go on a trip to Mannheim, to the art gallery and a student visit a small number of people. And there was somebody there who was also going around the gallery who was English. And so the question arose to this group of Germans, does anybody here speak English? So, I immodestly said, yes, I think I can manage that. So, I interpreted and the Germans who were there were impressed, of course, by the quality of my English. Then a few weeks later, we had another excursion to an interesting place, a monastery, the up the Neckar river. And there were these same students

who greeted me and said, gosh, we remember you. You were there in Mannheim in the art gallery.

We then became firm friends. I was brought into this group. They were all lawyers. They knew each other from studying elsewhere because in those days people moved around when they studied from university to university so they'd known each other elsewhere. And there was this small group of lawyers who just simply took me on board. And that was priceless, because if you go to a place to work, you are busy working. If you go to a place nowadays to study, you are surrounded by people who only speak English as their common language. But in this particular situation, I was surrounded by Germans who wanted to make sure I spoke German. Well, that was their pride. And they taught me I mean, I had already studied German and I had a very good a-level and I was about to go to Oxford as a scholar, etc., but they taught me how to speak German and that was absolutely priceless. So, I was very, very lucky at my time in Heidelberg. And I fell in love with the city as well. Yeah, I can't pretend that I feel I have roots there, but I have the warmest affection for the place and I love going back there.

**Hayter:** That's really lovely. It's wonderful that you had that experience so early on because it seems to have had such a huge impact on you. And, you know, I suppose that would only encourage you to study German and to develop love of the country that so openly accepted you. And what was your experience at the university then, did that change?

**Ockenden:** Yes, the university was so different, of course, from what I was going to find in Oxford because it was a lecture system. You had no direct contact with the teachers. The lectures went on and on forever. I mean, they were two hours long and they started at an ungodly hour in the morning. So, I can't say I got a great deal out of the university, I did have a nice talk with a young man who was later to become a very distinguished professor in Berlin and who sympathized with the fact that I wanted some kind of human contact with teachers, which the university didn't quite provide.

But I mostly went to lectures in German literature because that was what I was really interested in. But it was the people I met. It was sitting in the Mensa [university canteens in Germany are called Mensa.] having lunch with these law students that I really got something out of. And all the expeditions that I took were either with the choir from the church there where I was living or with these students who took me to Munich to show me. And we had lots of Germans up the Neckar. Two other beautiful places, though, it was an absolutely wonderful year.

**Hayter:** You mentioned Ray, that, I guess, at various points in your life you've been interested in music and singing and performance. Do you feel like this is something that was also instilled in you from a young age, or is this something you grew to learn and discover for yourself?

**Ockenden:** Music was part of middle-class families. Everybody did an instrument. My mother played the piano. My father played the fiddle. He stopped playing it. And he never really got very good at the piano. But my mother was a serious singer and she was always joining choirs, forming choirs. As she moved around, she moved around the country quite a bit with my father's work as a teacher training college lecturer. And everywhere she went, she made sure that she joined or if there wasn't one, she formed a choir.

So, no, singing was important.

And my brother and I got our first disc when I was. I suppose, and he was 14, we both still had unbroken voices and we were persuaded to sing carols onto an ancient disc thing which went round and round, and then you could listen to this extraordinary thing.

**Hayter:** Oh my gosh. So did you feel like music was a way of fostering community in your life.

**Ockenden:** Yes, I mean.

**Hayter:** It sounds like musical communities have been a big part of your life across your lifetime.

**Ockenden:** Yes, that's true. I mean, it was always a shared activity, you know, within the family. It was something that you shared with others. But most of the singing was associated quite a lot, of course, with going to church and singing there. That was important. And the strange school that I went to and started at the age of four and three quarters, morning service started off with three verses of a hymn. So you always had to sing.

**Hayter:** So did you have quite a religious education then?

**Ockenden:** It was just an automatic part of things. We had, yes, we studied the Bible and every, every morning session of what would now be called 'assembly', was a reading out of all the names and everybody had to say that they were there. But it also started off with a reading from the Bible, mostly New Testament. And then we sang a hymn, only ever three verses, and led by the headmaster's wife, who could sing quite well. But we also had music, piano lessons I had from a very, very distinguished organist from the cathedral in Ripon, who, for some reason had been persuaded. I can't think they paid him very much, but he'd been persuaded to come out to this school and give piano lessons to problematic small boys.

So I learned to play the piano. I was never terribly good at it, but singing was always important and it became obviously a part of that community world, wherever you were. Well, that was something that I discovered so much when I went to Heidelberg singing in two different choirs, mixing with quite different people in both those situations.

**Hayter:** Was that true then of the time working in London when you got your first job as sort of a teacher and a lecturer?

**Ockenden:** And I wanted to go on singing in a choir, but by then I was married to my first wife and she wasn't, she wasn't a singer. And I sort of felt that this was something that was taking me away from the home. So I didn't - I had sung in the Bach choir as a student in Oxford. And that was very important to me as well. Singing with the Chelsea Opera Group when they visited and singing with the Oxford University Opera Group, they put on a big opera every year. Extraordinary to think of now. But the other thing that I did in London with regard to music was to go to a lot of concerts. So I was taking it in. I wasn't, as it were, putting it out. But when I came back to Oxford, I started singing again, not in the Bach choir, because that would have been too much of a time commitment. That was only possible when I retired from my full-time job. I rejoined the Bach choir, which was a special moment as I stood next to somebody who said, "You are new here." I said, "Yes, I think I am. It's 46 years since I last..."

**Hayter:** Have you always felt a vocation towards teaching? Given that's something you've done across your life.

**Ockenden:** Yes, I mean, that that is absolutely a part of my family heritage. And both my paternal grandparents were teachers and they started teaching in the wake of the big 1860 development of education and the foundation of schools. And my grandmother in particular was an absolutely devoted teacher. And that was then handed on to my father. My mother was also a teacher from time to time. Granny had taught music in the middle of Dartmoor [Dartmoor is a vast moorland in the county of Devon, in southwest England] and taught singing, had a tuning fork, which my mother treasured, but teaching was absolutely a part of the family tradition. And my brother then automatically became a teacher, and he followed my father by going, first of all, into school teaching, but then going into teacher training work, which was what my father had done. And, and I started off after leaving Oxford, going into school, teaching in the belief that that was what I really wanted to do, but then was persuaded to move over into university work instead. It's a family tradition that has lasted. I was talking on the phone earlier today to one of my grandsons, who is half French and half English, who is currently in Barcelona teaching for the Alliance Française, having been in Sri Lanka, where he taught English and German and French and learned a little bit of Tamil and his younger brother, another grandson of mine, teaches German in France. So it's a tradition. And my middle grown-up son is a teacher, and I wouldn't be surprised if my younger children, Sasha and Jessica, also at some point in their life became teachers. They do quite a lot of teaching. Private pupils simply in order to turn a more or less honest penny.

But I'm afraid teaching it's just absolutely part of the Ockenden heritage.

**Hayter:** Wow, you've definitely passed your polyglot tendencies onto your descendants, as it were. And in that case, do you think, looking back on your choices around work: Is there anything you would do differently with hindsight?

**Ockenden:** No, I think most of the time when I look back, I just think how fortunate I was. I mean, it's so many tiny ways. I mean, when I came back to study in Oxford for a doctorate in order someday to become an academic, it was the year of massive expansion in the wake of the Robbins' report [a report commissioned by the British government which encouraged the expansion of universities, causing a large rise in the enrolment of students in Britain], and departments were springing up all over the place. Jobs were opening up. And it's embarrassing to talk to students nowadays about it. But at the end of my first year of doctoral research, when I hadn't written a word of my doctorate and was still exploring where it might go, I was given a job teaching in the University of London.

There were three of us in the graduate seminar run by the professor in Oxford, and three jobs in different parts in the UK came up and we just took them one by one. Again, I was very fortunate, the senior person went to Aberdeen [in North-East Scotland] and I don't think I'd have enjoyed that nearly as much. I went to what was a women's college in London, Bedford College, Regent's Park, and found it so stimulating and I enjoyed it enormously. So I can't think that I would have done any of these things differently. I just think I keep reckoning how lucky I was to have that start, including seven years to write my doctorate as I was teaching full time and I just managed to finish it in time to apply for a job at Oxford.

That was also good fortune and in fact, the first job that came up at that time was a job at St Edmund Hall in Oxford, which I knew because the German tutor there, who was now retiring,



had taught me and my brother had studied there. And I thought, well, this is a job I think I might get. I wasn't even shortlisted and I was rather unhappy about that. Two weeks later, there was a job at another college I didn't know anything about called Wadham College [also part of the University of Oxford]. And I thought I well, try again. And that, of course, was I mean, I'm sure I would have enjoyed Teddy Hall in its own way [an affectionate name for St Edmund's Hall], but joining Wadham was just a completely different kind of experience. It was the most marvelous and still is the most marvelous place. I was just very, very lucky to get that job.

**Hayter:** So it sounds like a lot of very fortunate and lucky choices all around.

**Ockenden:** Lots of, a lot of lucky choices all the way. Yes.

**Hayter:** And I was just wondering and Ray, just to clarify, as we're doing this interview over Zoom, and obviously, we're both using computers: How did the rise of new technologies affect your way of teaching? Can you remember when you first had to use a computer as part of your job, for example?

**Ockenden:** I remember the Amstrad [a UK based company that produced a popular computer that was widely sold across Europe in the 1980s]. I can't say it had an enormous impact on me. I mean, I lost patience with it as I still lose patience, as Julie [Julie Curtis is Ray's wife. She is a Professor of Russian Literature, and a Fellow of Wolfson College, Oxford] will tell you things because they have a life of their own. I can't say that it has affected my teaching until of course, this year when I have had to teach on Skype which I use rather than Zoom and teaching at a distance is a different experience.

And that was a rather curious learning curve. It's much more exhausting than teaching face to face, I'm not quite sure why. It's partly because you can't move and you're sort of fixed in a different kind of way. It is more tiring, but of course the pupils are still the same. And although you can only see a quarter of them on the screen, you know they're there and the contact is crucial.

It's the physical contact, of course, which I miss under the present conditions in all aspects of my life, but not least in teaching, because just actually relating to a real person is different from relating to a screen. So I can't pretend that I really got excitedly on board and a lot of people immediately became techno whizzes and found out all the excitements [about using the new technologies]. I learned how to use the thing in order to get documents and things like that. But it's not been the happier part of my life, I must say.

**Hayter:** That's very that's fair to say, Ray, I think a lot of people can empathize with you at the moment on that score. And moving on to notions of politics, in your childhood, were you aware of political events? I mean, obviously, you've mentioned the catastrophic effects of World War Two on your life growing up. But were there any other political events that sort of stand out? Because I know you had a very strong memory of hearing about the onset of the war.

**Ockenden:** Yes, about the onset of war. No, I mean, I think my memories are scattered, of course, at that early stage and not all of them real memories, that is a real memory, I know. As is things like that bomb that fell, as is things like watching airplanes, learning. I mean, I could identify any German airplane by the age of five or six. That was absolutely clear. I

could tell my Heinkels, from my Dorniers, from my Junkers, without any problem at all to say nothing of my Blohm & Voss.

**Hayter:** (Laughter).

**Ockenden:** And no, political discussion wasn't very strong. People talk about it very much. There was a sort of feeling that they were nervous about socialism and that lasted. There was a feeling that the liberals were nice people. And I think my, a lot of my ancestors came from Devon. So, so a sort of west country feeling that liberals were a good thing, but I remember the shock and horror of the postwar election. Because nobody could believe that the socialists had won and that Winston Churchill [Prime Minister of the United Kingdom from 1940 to 1945 during WW2], who had won the war for us, was being booted out and there was one boy at my preparatory, my first school. There was one boy whose father was a clergyman who was known to have voted socialist. This was regarded as shocking.

And my mother explained this election defeat for the Tories [the Conservative Party] by saying: "Well, they promised people all kinds of things that they thought they would like. They won't ever be able to give them, but they promised them and people believed." And I said, "You mean like, like ice cream?" She said, "Yes, like ice cream." And that was the image of 1945, that they had been promised ice cream.

When my father moved from teaching in London to being a teacher training teacher, he found himself in a strange ex-American hospital camp in near Cambridge, and he was looking after wonderful, bright people who wanted - they'd all just come out of the forces - and they all wanted to be teachers and they believed in a new world which they were going to help build. And they were very, very moving and I, again, was slightly shocked because the group of students that my father particularly was looking after decided, well, they had a kind of mock election. They were going red. They were going to the left. My mother was deeply conservative in her political views, and she was also shocked by this. But my father was much more understanding, he knew that these people wanted to believe in a new world and they were going to go out and teach in order to create it.

**Hayter:** And so as you grew older, you have a similar view of a more halcyon world ahead of you, whether that was sort of in a UK context, from a European context, or did you similarly have dreams of a better world as you were growing up?

**Ockenden:** Yes, I think we certainly wanted to believe that. The Cold War cast its own light over that, and the Korean War, always more was going on. And the Vietnam War, that was a different issue again. But somehow within Europe, we had believed that it was possible to have a better world. And we are coming down. The Iron Curtain was then a bit of a blow. I have to say that I was one of many Oxford teachers who decided to pursue an interest in East German literature. And I actually went to Germany a couple of times and then spent a whole summer term at the University of Jena, in the GDR. It happens to be the summer term of 1989.

So you might say, what signs did you glimpse of a gigantic change about to overtake Europe? Answer - nil, zero, nothing. (Laughter). A few people were leaking over the front here into Hungary. And some people were protesting a bit about the communist regime. But the idea that the wall was going to fall within a matter of months, absolutely no sign at all.

And I felt sorry in many ways for the people I had known among the East Germans who were of an older generation, who genuinely believed in 1945 that they could get away from the awful German past of fascism and they really could create a new and better world. And communism was offering that and they really believed it. And for people of my or slightly older generation, I always thought to have twice in one lifetime to say, oh, woops, I thought this was absolutely the right thing. And it was marvelous and wonderful. And I've suddenly got to say, no, no, absolutely it's the worst possible thing imaginable. To have to do that twice in one lifetime. It's just unthinkable.

So I did I did feel very sorry for those people. And I retained a certain sort of romantic view of what East Germany might have been like if it had been united with West Germany in a more positive way. It was, of course, a takeover by the West. It was an economic takeover particularly, and any ideals that the East might have still believed in got entirely buried and that I regretted.

No, sorry, that's taken that's rather a long way from politics. I was never a serious political person. Because it means factions and divisions, and I suppose I've always been interested in what brings people together, like singing and lining up with this party may be a necessity, but it means you're lining up against that [other] party. And I would so much like to be a sort of Joe Biden figure and be there for everybody. It's not possible, but it's a marvelous thing.

And as far as Europe is concerned, I've always thought it has the potential to show how democracy can work in a capitalist system. It must be possible. And under Merkel, Germany really was doing very, very well, may we get here? Who knows?

But I think one of the obvious tragedies about Britain is that really rather interesting and quite important Englishness, which we can bring to bear on the continental system. I mean, what we are losing, of course, is gigantic and I don't need to stress that. But the European Union is losing a certain measure, I think, of good old-fashioned sense, common sense and, of course, a feeling of tradition, because we do still have that from the good fortune of having not been invaded since 1066. And we have certain continuities which are loved. Our best friend among the younger generation in Germany, godfather to our children, is somebody who is passionate about the royal family, not that Germany is ever likely to reinstate that. But it [the UK] represents something of continuity and tradition, which I think our German friend feels really is important.

**Hayter:** So on that note then, what, what does Englishness mean to you, and are you someone or Britishness even, are someone who feels a particular sense of Englishness, or Britishness in your life?

**Ockenden:** Yes, I mean, Britishness I would want to commit to because I have always had from my earliest years a deep love of Scotland. I always wanted to go to Scotland. I didn't get there till I was 21 for some reason, but there were maps. Maps were so important to my childhood because you could travel with maps.

And so my first novel was about the Boer War and took me through South Africa, my second novel was about an aristocratic Swiss figure who spent time in Sicily.

And all this, all the places and all the journeys simply came from studying maps. So, I mean, my Englishness was always tempered, I think, with that sense of how important Scotland was and how beautiful Ireland would be if we ever got there. Took me ages to get to Ireland.

But Englishness is, for me, is attached to humor and understatement in important ways and I think not, not taking things too seriously is very important. There are times when you have to take things desperately seriously, but just that little bit of distance is something that English people, I think have and causes them sometimes to regard foreigners as "wild people". Even the French and the Germans as wild and uninhibited people who don't put a brake on their emotions firmly enough.

I have to say that Paris, in many ways, simply because it's so easy to get to, or used to be by the wonderful trains that run from St Pancras, Paris has become very much a city I love and almost ousted Heidelberg in my affections. And my wife truly spent quite a long time there, working there, doing her own work, not engaging in French work of any kind, but simply as a place where she could get on with her own studies and work. And she loved living in Paris and I loved visiting her there. So Paris, which I did actually go to quite early on, I suppose that was still at school and that was that was an important experience to discover Paris and its smell. It should be the smell of Metro.

**Hayter:** The smell of the Metro.

**Ockenden:** The Metro has a wonderfully distinctive smell. Garlic is only part of it!

**Hayter:** Do you think then, Ray, it was important for you to have a life partner who shared the values that you had about, I guess, Europe and shared a love of European culture?

**Ockenden:** I mean, my first wife, from whom my three grown, really grown-up children, she studied French and German at Oxford and became a teacher of French and German for all her life. So that was important. And I met Julie when she was studying at Oxford and studying Russian language. I still know very little about and find fairly impenetrable, that is the [Cyrillic] alphabet. But that's as far as I've got.

But I think yes, I mean, I think her love of France, she studied at the Elysee in London. That was her education, which shaped her very much, her love of France and things. French is very important. Oh, I should have mentioned not only has my love of continental things shaped my tastes in all kinds of intellectual ways, it's also, of course, shaped my taste in my most significant way, and that is wine.

Because the modest cellar that I have, although it does have a few strange things from other places, is essentially a cellar full of French and German wine, little bit of South African or Australian occasionally staggers in. But the bulk of it is always going to be French and German. So, no, I think finding life partners, I've been lucky with both my life partners in very different ways. But I think that commitment to a European idea is an important part of what has brought us together, yes.

I forgot to add something. If I may just add something.

**Hayter:** Please!

**Ockenden:** If that's alright? It was just about the political awareness within my family. And I forgot to tell you an important story to illustrate that my family wasn't enormously politically aware, and that is that my father, then aged thirty-six and his younger brother, he was thirty-four, and his youngest brother aged twenty-seven. They decided that they would like to do a walking holiday together on the continent, particularly France. So they set off for this walking holiday. And once my father had finished his school teaching term, they set off this

walking holiday in August 1939. And when they got to Paris, and went, of course, to visit the famous Louvre Museum, somewhat disconcerted to discover that all the paintings were being taken down and taken away. Because, of course, everybody knew that there was going to be a war and they were taking the paintings to safety. So the three not so young men decided that perhaps they ought to abandon this plan, how they had ever conceived it, I don't know.

But anyway, it turned out and ever afterwards, my father would say, "Ahhh. My one night in Paris." I don't believe they went to The Folies Bergères [famous cabaret music hall] or even if The Folies Bergères were still operating at that time, but he spoke about it to say it was something that he had missed out on. And I'm not sure. I mean, he travelled quite a lot in later life and not particularly in France. But he didn't talk about this one night in Paris, which was as much as they had of that August 1939 holiday.

**Hayter:** Oh, my gosh. Wow. That's a very impressive anecdote. Wow.

**Ockenden:** It's crazy.

**Hayter:** Well, on that note, actually, Ray, given your love, of all things cartographical, can you remember a particular moment when you crossed a European border? Obviously in your time in East Germany? I mean, I'd be really interested to hear, if you can remember a border crossing or a moment when this happened.

**Ockenden:** Well, I mean, I did Checkpoint Charlie. Before I spent my month, months in Jena because I wanted to go across and see Brecht's Theatre in the Schiffbauerdamm, which was of course in the East, so I had experienced Checkpoint Charlie, I don't have any very clear memories of that. The train journey was always a bit odd, because of the behaviour of the guards, they knew they had to behave badly and so they behaved badly and they made you perfectly aware that you were entering a communist country and things were different. What I do remember, but this is slightly different, is when Julie, my present wife, Julie, was traveling to Moscow, the train started from Hook of Holland [town in the southwestern corner of Holland]. But it was already a Russian train in the sense that it was manned by Russian guards and so on, and it was going all the way through to Germany and beyond, and then crossing over at the famous moment where they take the carriages off the rails because they need to put different wheels underneath for the Russian gauge. But she just remembers and I remember a similar occasion when I said goodbye to her in Hanover when she was going to Russia, that you wanted to say a tearful farewell and have a last embrace. The doors were shut as soon as she was on board, and that was the end of that.

**Hayter:** Not very romantic then!

**Ockenden:** And there was the guard, the Schaffner, whatever on the train, and he was making quite clear to you that there weren't going to be any more last-minute embraces of any kind. This was the end. My own border crossings... let me just think if I can remember and, I can't remember very clearly, and I remember one interesting experience which was crossing over into Germany in 1990.

When Julie and I had been in Italy and then travelled through what was then Czechoslovakia and we'd come into Germany, because we found ourselves travelling through a country which was changing all its name plates and so much, that was just about to change its name. You could see people changing signs and that has also happened to us when we flew into

Leningrad and flew out of St. Petersburg. And I remember being in Moscow when the names on the metals were being changed. These are not crossing frontiers in the same way. These are changes of regime, which mean changes of names.

**Hayter:** On that note, did you have any - and obviously this is a question that you can answer if you feel comfortable to, and you don't have to answer anything, you don't feel comfortable to. Did you have any more disturbing experiences when you travelled through Europe?

**Ockenden:** No, Julie had trouble, really difficult experiences travelling out of Russia on a plane that was still Russian and the treatment of the people who were hoping to escape from Russia, whose goods were then taken off them by the people on the train.

But I can't think that I was ever stuck at a frontier point, no, no. I'm - I had difficulty with university authorities in Heidelberg because, as I told you, I was the first ever person at the British Council they had sent straight from school rather than from university, where there was a regular path of people taking a year out from university and going to foreign universities. And I was going straight from school and the authorities didn't think I had the necessary qualifications. And so it took me a very, very long time to get accepted as a fully paid-up 'immatrikuliert' [enrolled] student of the University of Heidelberg. That was only borne in on me because when I went back as a teacher at the University of Oxford and already a significant contributor to German literature and things like that. And when I went back to Heidelberg on one occasion, I was told that I ought to get a student pass because it would be much easier in lots of ways.

And I wasn't going to be a student in the same way, I was a kind of visiting lecturer, but it would be helpful if I got a form.

So when I turned up to get to this student pass, I was told that I needed certain papers. So I said, "OK, well, I'll try and get papers." and I went to and talked to somebody who said, "well, here's a letter." And I presented the letter, and the woman said, well, this is a nice letter, but these aren't the documents that I require. So I said, what do you require? And she said, well, more proper and proper documents. I kept trying and I kept being turned down by this powerful lady, until the moment when I said, this is absolutely crazy and insane. But I suppose I should be familiar, exactly the same thing happened to me when I came here and studied as ordinary student. And she said, "oh, you once studied here as a student?". I said, yes, I did indeed, in 1954 to 1955. "Ah, well," she said, "Oh, well, in that case, that's absolutely fine." And so I got my pass.

**Hayter:** Bureaucracy!

**Ockenden:** That is bureaucracy at work here. So, German bureaucracy has a bad name and just occasionally it lives up to its bad name. It's not always like that, I think.

**Hayter:** Very fair. Do you think, well, I guess on that note, you like freedom, whether that's freedom of movement or even intellectual freedom. Do you think that's something you've ever taken for granted in your life?

**Ockenden:** Yes, and I suppose I have never been permanently in in situations where that was under threat. I remember Atlanta, Georgia, at a time when the movement for reform - this was my trip to America in 1958, when the Movement for Change had already started [refers to civil rights movement in the United States], but was nowhere near fulfilling its aims and realizing that there were people who were human beings like me, but were being treated

as a different species, was rather terrifying. But that's not a continental, that's an American situation, rather than a European situation.

**Hayter:** That's really interesting to hear about, I guess, especially given the different experiences you might have had in Europe and the US.

And do you think there are any moments in your life where you've yearned freedom, or have you always been happy with the amount of freedom that you've had in your life?

**Ockenden:** I think I've always had enormous amounts of freedom, I suppose. The freedom to say what I felt and thought, to write what I thought and felt, and I don't think that that's ever been in question in my life. And I've been again, I've been very fortunate in that respect. I can't think of any any situation where I felt that was that was being limited.

**Hayter:** And do you think some of the current changes to Europe, do you think that might affect an understanding of freedom within the EU at present? In terms of, I guess England's specific relationship.

**Ockenden:** Are you talking about what's happening within Europe. Or are you talking about Brexit?

**Hayter:** I'm talking about Brexit specifically, because I know you mentioned it was a major blow for you as well, in some ways.

**Ockenden:** Sure, sure. That was I mean, Brexit and Covid have been two really sort of life-changing things and how they're going to work out in terms of my relationship with Europe? You know, we sit here, we had Eurostar tickets [and were] desperate to go, and we can't even get as far as Paris now, and, as for the interrailing, in which we had hoped to do, we did a marvelous Interrail, which was sort of three weeks, seven countries, Julie and I, that was the most marvelous experience and not being able to do that again - yeah, is, is worrying. So how that will, how that will work out, what the post-Brexit relationship with Europe is going to be is still completely unknown, in terms of travel and passports and all these sorts of things.

And that was a wonderful moment, of course, in Europe when they decided to have a single currency and you had longer had to set off for your European travels with a gigantic number of different bags, all with different coins in them.

And I can see why we didn't join the euro. And they may have been, for different reasons, sensible, I'm not sure, but the idea of having to get visas to move around within Europe is not a happy one.

**Hayter:** Do you think your expectations of Europe or for Europe, rather, in 2020 are rather different to what they would have been, say, 40 years ago, then? Did you have a particular set of expectations that have changed?

**Ockenden:** I mean, the political situation in Europe as a whole is always a little bit difficult to measure. In particular, of course, the populist swing which is affecting so many countries and which is a statement about being separate, being different, doing our own thing. And I thought that Europe had actually rather brilliantly solved the question as to how you could be your own person and yet part of a family, that's surely something that, you know, we all live and learn in our private lives - that you belong to somebody, but you are also an individual. And I see no reason why countries shouldn't be able to do that now. And so, I

mean, the rise of right-wing populist movements in various countries is is seriously concerning.

**Hayter:** Absolutely. Have you yourself ever participated in acts of resistance in a demonstrative way?

**Ockenden:** I'm just trying to think - I haven't I haven't ever been a great sort of demonstrator. I did march down the High Street in Oxford complaining about Mrs Thatcher taking milk away from small children.

**Hayter:** The milk snatcher - as it were! [The British press dubbed the future Prime Minister "Thatcher, Thatcher, milk snatcher" for sponsoring legislation to eliminate the free milk program for students over the age of seven.<sup>1</sup>]

(Laughter from both).

**Ockenden:** The milk snatcher - I don't know how you know that! It's before you were born! Anyway, now, I've not been a great a great joiner of protest movements, but if circumstances rose and I was invited to, I know where I know where I would stand on these sorts of issues. When I was in East Germany, obviously, I wasn't invited to talk about what I felt about communism and I talked about German literature, because that was what I was there really to do.

I gathered impressions, but I didn't particularly share them with the people there. So now, I don't, I've not been, I've been a little bit shy, I think, of demonstrating.

**Hayter:** That's completely fair enough. Do you think there are moments where you wish you could have resisted, or were there points where there might have been something you'd done differently?

**Ockenden:** I mean, I suppose if I'd known that the Brexit vote was going to go the way it did, not many of us had realized, that we might have tried to get a message across, which was very different. Nobody remembers now what the Brexit message was, it was about immigration. It wasn't about Europe and the way it was run and so on. Although subsequently people, I mean, I have colleagues, friends who said, oh, well, it's an undemocratic outfit and we want out of it. But the basic issue was, was one about immigration, which was completely skewing the realities in all sorts of ways. And I guess if it had been possible to do something to alter that vote, I think now I wish I could have done something, yes.

**Hayter:** I've been thinking a lot about ideas around shame and Europe, and do you think there's anything to feel ashamed about as a citizen in Britain or of England in relation to Europe?

**Ockenden:** There is, of course, close to what I was talking about earlier in respect of Hamburg, there is the way in which we conducted the last stages of the Second World War in terms of bombing everything flat and causing massive, massive loss of life in Germany. And it's not clear came who knows what the realities of the situation were. But the evidence suggests that there was a lot of gung-ho [overly enthusiastic or energetic] stuff about

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.mcgill.ca/oss/article/food-history/thatcher-thatcher-milk-snatcher>



bombing German cities, which one now regrets. And I think our colonial life, which is a different issue from Europe and all kinds of things that we should be ashamed of.

**Hayter:** Absolutely.

**Ockenden:** And, you know, our history has been on the whole a pretty murky affair, in that respect, not necessarily different from a lot of other countries. Our colonial heritage is not the worst, but that isn't saying very much.

**Hayter:** Do you think Europe as a whole then has a lesson to learn about its behavior during colonial times?

**Ockenden:** Yes, I mean, Germany is very interesting. It was only marginally involved in the colonies because Bismarck wasn't a great believer in the colonies, and it took time before there was any serious interest expressed and they then picked up on corners of the south of Africa. It's very interesting that the Germans have confronted that much, much more rigorously, I think, than any of the other European countries have done.

I mean, when Belgium is going to seriously try to confront its past, who knows? But the Germans have decided to look at what they did in what is now Namibia. And I think that's very much to their credit. It's - you can't rewrite history, but you can get people to understand, and I think the teaching of colonial history is something that will become much more important. I just hope that the teaching of European history won't get buried, because we need to remind ourselves of how things happened in Europe - to which we were always in some respect or another related.

**Hayter:** Absolutely. I guess on that note, would you have any advice for someone working in your profession as a teacher, or as a lecturer, for someone, I guess, from the future generation? What advice would you give someone wanting to become a teacher in terms of that principle of kind of educating others?

**Ockenden:** I mean, I think from my experience, there is nothing like traveling to the country and seriously engaging with its people. As many as possible. And finding different views, seeing different generations and their responses. I think that is going to bring you to bring back messages for your teaching, which are important, and we just hope that travel will recommence and that people will be able to go because you only really understand a country when you're there. And I also think you only really understand a country when you speak its language and the fact that English is such a dominant language and that this country is turning into a monoglot country, is, of course, a source of great sadness to me because I know what riches lie in learning other languages, and opening up their cultures.

I mean, my taste in music, my taste in art, I can't imagine if I were limited, simply - we have some good composers, often like Handel coming from elsewhere. But we have some good composers. We have some good artists. But, you know, if we don't have access to the art, the architecture, the music, say nothing of the ideas and the philosophy of European countries, then we are very, very impoverished.

**Hayter:** Absolutely. And in terms of thinking about what the future might be like for different generations, how do you imagine England will be in 50 years' time? What differences would you expect?

**Ockenden:** I can't have expectations in the sense of knowing what it's going to be like, I can only have expectations in the other sense of hopes. And that is, of course, that we will be part of Europe again and actually being able to contribute what is characteristically English and characteristically British to the European mix, and that the channel continues to be merely 25 miles of water and not anything more serious than that.

**Hayter:** Do you have certain hopes for how the future of Europe will look?

**Ockenden:** I would just want it to be much more together. I think its future lies in realizing that it has fed its ideas, its traditions and its languages, in many cases into countries all over the world. They have now developed their own life or in the case of China, discovered their buried life. But Europe leads, I think, to be able to say we are a different sort of unit, we have a different history, we have different customs and traditions, but we are also quite important. And we like waving at America and we like waving at Russia, China and the Far East. But we do actually want to be an independent place ourselves. And I hope very much that that will be achievable.

And I hope, and that's a different sort of hope, that the massive decline in learning of European languages, which we can see now in schools, is somehow reversed.

**Hayter:** Absolutely.

**Ockenden:** I mean, I started teaching at a time when German was suddenly expanding both at schools, but also very much in universities. And I've just seen it shrinking and shrinking. And it's not good for people to suppose that they have the only language that matters. And then the only set of ideas that matter.

**Hayter:** On that note, I guess, what values do you think that have been important in your lifetime do you hope will continue to carry on?

**Ockenden:** Well, I suppose I've always been called a people person, people do more to me than anything else. And I suppose what I miss in the current situation is real contact with people. And all my social life, as it was, depended on meeting people, whether it was wine tastings or singing in the Bach choir or sharing in degree days, running week long sessions with students in the West country, all the things I really cared about. I hope those will return and I shall value them when they do. I miss them. I miss them very much.

**Hayter:** Of course. Oh, well, Ray, we're coming to the end of our interview. And I guess I just wanted to ask you; do you have any advice for my generation? Obviously, you've just talked really beautifully about, I guess, the importance of community and the importance of sharing. What would you what would you hope for my generation?

**Ockenden:** A tad more listening and a tad less talking.

**Hayter:** *Laughter.*

**Ockenden:** Is that all right?

**Hayter:** That is absolutely perfect. Thank you so much, Ray. I don't know, it's really wonderful to hear about your thoughts and I'm really glad that I got to speak to you.

**Ockenden:** I mean, I did I just do want to stress that I belong to a family that is actually literally a European family because of all my grandchildren in different countries, France,

Switzerland and Spain. And it has - Europe has - entirely shaped my life and my tastes. Everything I value, I'm very grateful really.

**Hayter:** And it's grateful to you, I think, Ray! (Laughs) And, and I think it's really, it's really wonderful to hear you speak so positively about your experiences of Europe, particularly from a young age, and also to know that there were ripple effects in your life that led you in that direction. I think from the influence of your brother, who really powerfully pushed you in the direction of lots of different things, but also from your French teacher, but also to hear that you come from a generation of teachers. And that's something, you've, a gift, you passed on to your children as well.

**Ockenden:** They seem to have picked it up a lot. Yes, it is. It's an infection. And I must just correct you. My brother didn't push me into anything. He was the most gentle man, very much like my father in that respect. He simply led by example. He would never have pushed me anywhere.

**Hayter:** Thank you. That makes, that makes a lot of sense.

### CULTURE – CLOSING COMMENTS

*We included this below, rather than editing it out. A classic example of an interaction between British people if you ask us.*

**Ockenden:** Lovely to see you, Annie.

**Hayter** Lovely to see you too, Ray.

**Ockenden:** //One day we will meet!// One day we will meet! [sings the lyrics to a Vera Lynn song. Vera Lynn was an English singer whose career flourished during World War II]

**Hayter:** Yes! One day we certainly will! And just before we end, Ray, thank you so much for all of your time. If I were to send you a thank you gift, would wine or flowers or what would you what would what would you prefer?

**Ockenden:** You don't have to send me a thank you gift!

**Hayter:** I would love to send you a thank you gift! I just don't know what you, I don't know - I know you're a big wine connoisseur, but –

**Ockenden:** Yes of course. I mean I drink a lot of wine. That's lovely, but I don't need anything. It's an enormous pleasure talking to you, it really has.

**Hayter:** Thank you so much, Ray, and have a lovely rest of your week –

**Ockenden:** I think I'm tempted. Should I not send something to you?

**Hayter:** OH! No, no, no!

**Ockenden:** You must know that story about the Oxford don in the early days of television. At the end of this interview with this learned Oxford don, the man said, oh, we haven't talked, we ought to talk about payment. And the Oxford don immediately took out his wallet.

**Hayter:** (Laughter). Oh, my gosh. No, I haven't heard that story, but that's a great story. I'm going I'm going to ferret that one away for my next interview.

**Ockenden:** That's why I say I should be sending you something!

**Hayter:** Aw, thank you so much, Ray.