

MIRIAM ROTHSCHILD

SIR JOHN FOSTER AND THE JEWS

Elizabeth Bowen once remarked thoughtfully that God had not really made enough faces to go round. And it is true that almost any new acquaintance seems to fall, both in appearance and character, into a vaguely familiar slot or pigeon hole. John Foster was an exception to this generalisation for he was totally unlike anyone any of us had ever met. And the longer you knew him the more pertinent this observation became. John was disconcertingly different.

People were set wondering whether he was an 18th-century utilitarian born too late or a 21st-century man born before his time. His total egalitarianism, and the fact that he was lacking in all sense of property, marked him out as an unfamiliar character of the future, but his views about the requirements of the human animal smacked of the 18th century.

First and foremost John Foster had a remarkably fine and powerful brain. He was extremely clever, and his mind was nimble and quick and he used his intellect with excessive virtuosity. This combined with a great *joie de vivre* - characteristic of a man with an iron constitution - produced a stream of stories, anecdotes, comments and rejoinders both sparkling and fascinating. He perceived connections between ideas, propositions, theories and hypotheses with lightning speed and he did this with consummate skill. On the other hand he did not enjoy long drawn out conversations or analytical discussions and avoided them. What he really enjoyed was lively gossip! I suppose, broadly speaking, this was the only level at which he found his equals. (Presumably it is no fun for Ian Botham to bowl against the vicar on the village green.) Moreover, what fascinated and enthralled John Foster was the fantastic variety of human lives, the kaleidoscope of human existence what went on in the world. He never read a novel but devoured the newspapers from end to end. Breughel was his favourite painter. He was profoundly interested in social behaviour both public and private and this coupled with his vitality and prodigious selective memory and almost adolescent type of humour, produced a superb *raconteur*, a great *animateur*, who could amuse and shock and excite both sexes and all classes of society. I think he was the greatest life enhancer I ever knew. He was also one of best informed men of his day but information had to be imparted briefly and was assimilated quickly. He refused to read long letters and scarcely listened to long-winded stories. Laughter was the only stimulant John Foster indulged in, for he drank only water, regarding even tea as a poison to be eschewed.

The key to some of the astonishing contradictions in this man's character lay in his very unhappy and stressful childhood - abandoned by his parents to the care of a governess, first in France and then at school in Germany. In order to deal with this profoundly traumatic experience he had totally suppressed the past and become a man only interested in the present and future. Furthermore he had taken a conscious decision to become emotionally two-dimensional - to protect himself by developing a special sort of carapace which eventually became a part of him. Many of his strange characteristics were over-compensations and rationalisations which could be traced to his early deprivations. His love of crowds and parties and animated gatherings

was a reflection of his isolation and great loneliness as a child and to the end of life he was happiest in crowded rooms - especially those crowded with Americans. His gargantuan appetite was a reaction to the fact that he was often, as a boy, very hungry. However, this does not explain the fact that John Foster could eat 27 dozen oysters, 22 quails and five beefsteaks at one meal - and hurriedly pour a bucket of Malvern water down his throat as a grand finale. In all spheres he tended to be disconcertingly larger than life.

I do not know if, as a child, the governess forced him to bed early but another curious facet of his adult life was a dislike of sleep. He claimed that three hours per night was sufficient and explained that he actively fought against sleep which he regarded as an equivalent to death. When he got old he developed a horse-like ability of dozing standing up, and I witnessed the astonishment of a fellow guest after a lunch party when, while waiting for a taxi, John put an arm casually round a lamp post and fell asleep. Nor do I know if, as a child, the governess scrubbed him mercilessly with carbolic soap. Be that as it may, as an adult he banned soap for health reasons, as fiercely as he banned alcohol. Two baths a day was a minimum requirement, but without soap.

It would not seem, from reading John Foster's diaries, which he kept meticulously from the age of 7 to 17, that harsh restraints were imposed upon his daily comings and goings, but he developed almost a phobia about personal freedom. When at a certain point in his political career there was talk of high ministerial office, he refused to consider the appointment because Anthony Eden insisted on the company of a security man on his travels abroad.

Another curious contradiction in his nature was his great interest in churches, in church architecture, liturgy and in ecclesiastical matters in general. The late Monseigneur Beauchamp remarked that until he met John Foster he had no idea so many churches could exist in the world. Yet John was a died-in-the-wool atheist who considered all religion sheer, childish nonsense.

It is an interesting fact that so complete was John Foster's break with his past that he listened to readings from his diaries with shocked incredulity. Yet he retained an adolescent ebullience, a vitality, an eagerness and a streak of the enfant terrible throughout his life - a concatenation of characteristics of a brilliant school boy out to *épater* and shock his elders and betters. In one sense he never grew up yet in another he possessed the harsh, objective, unemotional judgement of an old Judge.

As I have said already, John was a natural egalitarian - more so than anyone I have ever met. He was totally without prejudice about the human race, totally lacking in a sense a hierarchy and modest about himself. His manner was identical whether he was talking to Harold Macmillan or a taxi cab driver, a man or a woman, a handsome black or a stammering white. He was genuinely interested in everybody's problems and added to this he was deeply benevolent and invariably good tempered and kindly.

His great hatreds were those situations which engendered pain - blackmail, violence, sadism and aggression; his mild dislikes centred on cold rooms, lack of hot water and cynicism. I only saw him irritable once - the day war was declared in 1939.

Briefly, John Foster was a dedicated do-gooder, he believed, broadly speaking, that everyone should have a fair deal and a good time. He was prepared to fight hard to

achieve this for anyone who sought his help and advice, or a human cause in which he believed. He was the champion *par excellence* of the underdog and the dedicated upholder of civil rights.

During the Hitler regime and after the end of World War II John Foster was a unique friend to the persecuted Jews. I can say with deep conviction born of a practical experience that he was the most effective private champion my co-religionists have ever had in this country. Some day I hope this particular chapter of his life will be written in detail, but this is improbable because he kept no records and put no importance whatsoever on his good deeds. He treated everything - once a task was finished - especially in his own successes, in a disconcertingly casual manner. It will never be known, therefore, how many Jewish refugees - from the inmates of a Shanghai ghetto to some penniless old woman from Hungary - owed their very existence to his tireless and determined efforts on their behalf.

Quite apart from John's sympathy with people who in his opinion experienced a 'Raw Deal' - which ranged from the Tamils to his charlady's mother - he was a great admirer of the Jews, and was attracted by their vitality, vivacity, industry, humour and life-style. He considered Isaiah Berlin the cleverest man alive and the playwright Sam Behrman the most amusing and humorous. He entertained an almost boyish hero-worship for Sam. Jewish humour was something he really enjoyed and John's knowledge of Jewish jokes and amusing stories was encyclopaedic. On one occasion in Israel he noticed that the driver of his car - in which he was travelling from Mount Meron to Jerusalem - was ominously nodding over the wheel.

'If we are to survive this drive,' he remarked cheerfully, 'we must keep this fellow awake.'

He began with a well-worn Jewish joke about the difference between a cherub and a seraph, and one funny story followed the next without pause interspersed with Yiddish phrases - until six hours later the car swayed to a standstill outside the King David Hotel - both John and the driver apparently in great good humour.

John considered his life had been a failure, not because he had escaped high office as Lord Chancellor or Attorney General - both offices being well within his capacity - but because he had been unable to initiate an era of rationality - his sort of rationality - an era of human rights and the elimination of persecution by the triumph of industry and common sense.. At one time this had seemed an attainable objective, at least in certain limited areas, but the doors of power were closed against him. He himself enjoyed a curious freedom from the bondage imposed on most of us by conditioned loyalties to king and country, religious beliefs, monogamy, imprinted or accepted rules of behaviour, political parties or even intellectual principles or aesthetic values.

He was feared consciously and sub-consciously and envied by men who based their sense of security on a moral framework, and whose cherished beliefs he threatened with good humoured but ruthless iconoclasm. Very few people would acknowledge they are no better than the butcher and the baker and they found John's logical utilitarianism and extreme tolerance - if not lack of discrimination - deeply disturbing and even outrageous. John refused to accept the possibility that his type of freedom - which carried with it certain unpredictability - could not be imposed on others. Women, on the other hand, had no such reservations and unquestionably accepted his view that what mankind requires is physical well being free of pain, and physical

satisfaction, resulting in pleasure and happiness. Furthermore, if some people found delight in, say, historical research or writing obscure poetry - although such activities were totally unimportant unless, as in scientific research they might confer some direct benefit on mankind - it was like any other game, be it football or chess - the legitimate pursuit of harmless hobbies.

John genuinely preferred the company of women. To have a meal alone with a man if you could have it alone with a woman was, in his view, lunacy. He found that the female of the species, due largely to their relative lack of personal ambition, produced more honest human beings, more kindly, less aggressive, infinitely appreciative and cosily uncritical.

I will leave you ponder the pros and cons of the 18th- versus the 21st-century man, but we can all agree - especially those among us who can remember with admiration John Foster's sheer brain power, unquenchable and infectious high spirits and endearing good humour - that, since he left the stage the world has become a far duller and less attractive place.