

BERTRAND RUSSELL

1872-1970

RECOGNIZING BERTRAND RUSSELL AS A GREAT MORAL LEADER OF this century is somewhat complicated by the fact that he was also one of its famous scoundrels. A characteristic remark in this vein was his comment to a woman friend in 1947: "How right you are about chastity. I gave it a good try once, but never again." An appropriate response from another woman friend was that if Russell thought that he was the nearest man could get to being God, he was close to being Satan as well.

Russell's refusal to endorse the war fever during World War I was, nonetheless, a courageous assault on the moral indifference of that period. For his pacifism, he lost a major fellowship at Cambridge University; from then until his death in 1970, at ninety-eight, he effectively exposed the immorality of pompous and pious Christians. While they went off to war, killing their brothers and sisters on the other side with easy consciences, Russell, the agnostic, withheld his approval and suffered the consequences of his dissent. With impressive logic and enviable humor, he won a permanent place in the history of movements for social justice, calling nations and their leaders to task for their inhumanity to one another and fostering a moral regeneration on issues of war and peace during the dark ages following World War II.

Although hesitant at times about supporting widespread civil disobedience, he was nonetheless an advocate of direct action, arguing in *Which Way to Peace?* (1936) that

all great advances have involved illegality. The early Christians broke the law; Galileo broke the law; the French revolutionaries broke the law; early trade unionists broke the law. The instances are so numerous and so important that no one can maintain as an absolute principle obedience to constituted authority.

Or, as he said at the time of World War I: "I don't know how one can advocate an unpopular cause unless one is either irritating or ineffective."

Born in Revenscot, Monmouthshire, England, on May 18, 1872, Bertrand Russell was reared by his grandmother, Lady Russell, wife of the former prime minister under Queen Victoria. His parents had both died by the time he was four. His brother Frank gave "Bertie" his first lessons in Euclid, which thrilled him and led to his early love of mathematics. After private tutoring, he entered Trinity College, Cambridge University in 1890, and was elected a fellow there five years later. The following year he married an American woman, Alys Smith, the first of four marriages, and traveled to the United States.

Elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1908, Russell collaborated with Alfred North Whitehead on *Principia Mathematica* (1910), and continued to lecture widely in Europe. Support for a conscientious objector and agitation against England's entrance into World War I got him into trouble. He lost his fellowship in 1916, and for writing against the war he later served six months in Brixton Prison, where he wrote *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*. The attitude that overtook him, as news about the slaughter on the Western Front poured in, surprised him.

I have at times been paralyzed by skepticism, at times I have been cynical, at other times indifferent, but when the war came I felt as if I heard the voice of God. I knew that it was my business to protest, however futile protest might be. . . . As a lover of truth, the national propaganda of all the belligerent nations sickened me. As a lover of civilization, the return to barbarism appalled me. As a man of thwarted parental feeling, the massacre of the young wrung my heart.

In the early 20s, Russell traveled to Russia, China, and Japan, and ran for parliament as a member of the Labor Party. After a second marriage and parenthood, he returned to lecture several times in the United States, and in 1931, on the death of his brother, he became the

Third Earl Russell, though he rarely used his title. In 1940, he gave the William James lectures at Harvard, an inquiry into meaning and truth, and then was refused permission to teach at the College of the City of New York because of his political and moral views. Re-elected to a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge, he continued to lecture widely both in his native country and abroad. In 1949, he was awarded the Order of Merit by the British government; and in 1950, he received the Nobel Prize for Literature, "in recognition of his many-sided and important work in which he constantly stood forth as a champion of humanity and freedom of thought."

Internationally famous at 30, Russell was destined for immortality from the beginning, and the books by and about him are legion. His friends, associates, and students included many famous people of his time: Aldous Huxley, T.S. Eliot, Ludwig Wittgenstein, D.H. Lawrence, John Maynard Keynes. Sometimes regarded as the greatest logician since Aristotle, he combined a skeptical turn of mind with wicked wit and regarded "impersonal non-human truth as a delusion." A rationalist even in his eighties, he thought neither misery nor folly had any part in the inevitable lot of man. "And I am convinced that intelligence, patience, and eloquence can, sooner or later, lead the human race out of its self-imposed torture provided it does not exterminate itself meanwhile."

But the quality which gives Russell special claim on one's attention is his persistence in the pursuit of peace and justice. "Seldom indeed," wrote Daniel O'Connor, "has a philosopher shown such a sense of responsibility."

Faithfulness in upholding values of social justice has, of course, characterized the lives of many heroes of nonviolence. One thinks of Dorothy Day, at 78, arrested in California in support of the United Farm Workers; Ammon Hennacy, at 76, picketing the capitol building in Salt Lake City against capital punishment; and Eugene Victor Debs, at 65, serving a three-year sentence in Atlanta federal prison for draft resistance. Among those who persisted, however, Bertrand Russell, Nobel laureate and lord of the realm, may hold the record. Jailed at 89 for planning a demonstration advocating unilateral

disarmament, he said later, "What I want is some assurance before I die that the human race will be allowed to continue." There were, at the same time, his speeches at rallies in Trafalgar Square against apartheid and against nuclear weapons, and the initiation of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, which continues to thrive, more active than ever, in England and other European countries.

BY BERTRAND RUSSELL

The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 3 vols. New York: Allen Unwin, 1967, 1968, 1969.

The Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell. Edited by Robert E. Egner and Lester E. Dennon. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961.

Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957.

Portraits from Memory and Other Essays. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956.

And many others.

ABOUT BERTRAND RUSSELL

Clark, Ronald W. *The Life of Bertrand Russell*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.