

## *Philosopher as Father-Confessor*

### *Bertrand Russell and the No-Conscription Fellowship*

Because he was beyond military age (1), Bertrand Russell could probably have sat out the Great War - writing philosophy, lecturing at Cambridge and seeking solace in the warm brilliant company of the Morrells' Garsington Manor where pacifists could vent their rage against the folly of suffering humanity in a quiet harbour sheltered from the storms of public abuse. (2) Instead, Russell threw himself into the anti-War movement because, as he said in his *Autobiography* (Vol. II, London: Allen & Unwin, 1968, p. 18), "it was my business to protest. ... My whole nature was involved." This attitude cost him a good deal. In the course of the War he was arrested and fined £100 for writing an anti-conscription leaflet, dismissed from his academic position at Cambridge, denied a passport so that he could take another at Harvard, forbidden to travel to some parts of the United Kingdom and finally imprisoned for six months for still another anti-War article. Actually, the Government's elephantine desire to silence dissenters like Russell caused him to become ever more deeply involved in a movement which he otherwise might have abandoned as futile (*ib.*, p. 33). In the end, however, futility seemed to prevail. At the War's end Russell felt that all he had done was "totally useless except to myself. I had not saved a single life or shortened the War by a minute" (*ib.*, p. 40).

Perhaps Russell did not, in fact, save lives or shorten the War, but there were those who would have disputed his assertion of uselessness. Certainly many conscientious objectors in the No-Conscription Fellowship - an organization to which Russell devoted much of his time and energy from early 1916 till 1918 - would credit him with more success than he allowed himself. In his *Autobiography*, Russell generally makes only passing reference to his work in the N.-C.F. (*ib.*, pp. 24-40 *passim*). And while he is often given a prominent place in the literature of the Fellowship, only when one sees the N.-C.F. material in the Russell Archives does the true nature and extent of his role become clear.

When the young leaders of the N.-C.F., men like Clifford Allen and Fenner Brockway, were imprisoned for their refusal to accept conscription, the work of the organization was left with "associate" members - women and older men - of whom the two most important were Russell and Catherine Marshall. Miss Marshall, a truly remarkable

woman who left the suffragist movement to devote herself to the N.-C.F., was a human dynamo whose energy and organizational skill were chiefly responsible for the N.-C.F.'s amazing range of activities and accomplishments. From the spring of 1916 Russell worked with Miss Marshall and largely under her direction - writing letters, pamphlets and occasional editorials for the N.-C.F.'s weekly paper *The Tribunal*, as well as undertaking a lecture tour in South Wales on behalf of the C.O.s.(3) By the autumn of 1916, however, the strain of an enormous work load and constant worry about C.O. prisoners had begun to tell on Catherine Marshall. As she told Russell: "I don't often feel helpless like this - and shouldn't now if C.A.[Allen] were here, or if I were not so tired" (letter of 1 Oct. 1916). Russell's thoughtful commiseration helped Miss Marshall to recover her equilibrium at least temporarily and thereafter she became increasingly dependent on "Mephy" (for Mephistopheles, Russell's nickname on the National Committee, see Marshall's letter of 2 Oct. 1916). On December 1, 1916 she told him he would "have to be interim chairman" in place of the imprisoned Clifford Allen. Although Russell already had expressed misgivings about the usefulness of his efforts (see, e.g., *Autobiography*, Vol. II, p. 74) he dutifully accepted the position as the Fellowship's Acting Chairman. No doubt Russell was buoyed up in his decision by letters such as one dated 4 March 1917 from C.O. Emrys Hughes (a future Labour M.P.), thanking him

... for helping us to understand the first principles of the philosophy of the pacifist ideal ... those of us in prison will go on much more confident knowing that the work outside is in the hands of people who can be relied upon so well.

Unfortunately, the work on the outside was being continuously disrupted by a series of divisive disputes over policy. The question of C.O.s accepting alternative service instead of holding out for absolute exemption caused a long and bitter controversy as did the problem of whether the N.-C.F. should diminish its peace propaganda effort in order to work for the release of C.O. prisoners.(4) In these quarrels Russell took the middle ground and attempted, with some success, to mediate between factions, stressing the necessity for unity of purpose in the face of growing Government pressure against the N.-C.F. This rather unfamiliar role certainly took its toll on Russell, but even more troublesome and fatiguing was the growing animosity between him and Catherine Marshall (e.g., see her letter to "Mephy", 1 May 1917). When he became Acting Chairman, Russell took the responsibility of managing the N.-C.F.'s Central Headquarters, even though he found the routine of office work exceedingly distasteful. At the same time, however, Miss Marshall, always a formidable personality, apparently manifested her state of nervous exhaustion through continuous and caustic criticism of the office staff, Russell included. These attacks had a particularly devastating effect upon him; and, when added to mental fatigue and an overwhelming sense of public hostility, they drove him to the edge of despair.

Russell's near obsession with Catherine Marshall's onslaughts is vividly expressed in a long letter to her which he composed on 5 May 1917, apparently because he felt that his mental health absolutely required some resolution of the differences between them. Russell began the letter by admitting shortcomings in his work, adding that he disliked it "so much that I should be overjoyed if I could have a painful and dangerous illness from now until the end of the war." Miss Marshall, however, said Russell, was not equally aware of her deficiencies and if someone did not inform her of their effects, the entire Central Office staff might be driven to resign. "After you have been criticizing", he noted, "I have to go round consoling and persuading people that they are not so incompetent that they ought to retire." Furthermore, he concluded, her own methods of handling the work simply added to the difficulty: "You have an immense amount of system, which you never adhere to; and you let all routine matters drift, because there is always a crisis."

Russell's letter was not really vicious and his criticisms of Catherine Marshall were no doubt mainly justified. But in her overwrought condition such an attack, especially from a man she admired so deeply, would have literally destroyed her. Russell, of course, realized this and after he had vented his spleen, he did not send the letter and put it aside to

be read by posterity instead of Miss Marshall. The incident is perhaps a small one but I feel the letter is important because it not only reveals something of Russell's state of mind during the War but also illustrates his deep-seated sense of responsibility, humanity, and, one must say, Christian charity. Catherine Marshall deeply troubled Russell's days and nights, which were already afflicted by frustration and futility over the ceaseless slaughter of the War. But he would not lessen his burden by adding to hers. He remained in the N.-C.F. office throughout 1917, supporting Miss Marshall, smoothing hurt feelings, directing routine operations, writing articles for *The Tribunal* and arbitrating disputes among factions within the Fellowship.

Early in 1918, however, Russell finally decided that he needed respite from the strain of what for him was still exhausting and unpleasant work. Indeed, by February, 1918 Clifford Allen, now released from prison, voiced his fear that Russell would return to academic life. Allen felt this "would be a disaster for the breezy ... young people like me ... who are so dependent upon you for compelling us to think carefully and act honestly and fearlessly" (letter of 6 Feb. 1918). Allen need not have worried, for even as he wrote the authorities were preparing an indictment against Russell for writing a *Tribunal* article which allegedly insulted Britain's American allies.(5) The irony of the situation was that Russell had written the article as a favour to Lydia Smith, the *Tribunal's* new editor. (6) In any case, Russell's decision about leaving the N.-C.F. was made for him when he received a six months' sentence. His exit was, however, accompanied by a chorus of letters praising his contributions. Two from Clifford Allen eloquently express the general tone:

One of the moments I look forward to most is ... when the men in prison are free and we can unite in telling you what we feel about the things you've done. ... If ever I contribute anything of value to the world, it will be in great measure due to the fact that you were willing to help me understand my own mind without patronizing with yours. (11 March and 10 April 1918)

Thus for Allen, as for many of the idealistic, though probably frightened and not a little confused conscientious objectors of the N.-C.F., Russell's role as philosopher-father confessor gave them greater confidence in the rightness of their stand. They could feel that in their resistance to the awesome force of patriotic militarism, they had risen above the mundane world in which most of them played so small a part. In this one way they had been more humane, more intelligent, more civilized than all the generals and leaders and kings. As Emrys Hughes put it in a letter already cited:

When I think of my life before I was arrested, of trying to fit into the environment of one of those soul-killing schools in the Rhondda Valley, of disheartening little encounters with the headmasters of the old regime and all the dismal shabbiness of life in a South Wales village, I feel a thrill to think how we have challenged it all, refused to fight for the foul old ideas and tried to show the way to a better world.

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(1) Russell did become eligible for conscription under an amending act of 1918 which raised military age from 41 to 51 years.

(2) E.g., see Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Remembering My Good Friends* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1944), p. 78.

(3) See Jo Newberry, "Russell in 1916", *Russell 2* (summer 1971), pp. 9-10, which describes Russell's early work with the N.-C.F. Also see *The Tribunal*, 17 August and 12 October 1916, and Allen to Russell, 27 June 1916.

(4) For a discussion of dissension within the N.-C.F. see my unpublished doctoral dissertation *The Hound of Conscience: A History of the No-Conscription Fellowship, 1914-1919* (University of South Carolina, 1967), pp. 328-74.

(5) For the article see *The Tribunal*, 3 January 1918 and *Autobiography*, II, pp. 79-81.

(6) See Lydia Smith to Russell, 29 April 1918 and *Autobiography*, II, p. 33.