

# Russell's return to America, 1938

*(We are grateful to Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils for allowing us to print this chapter (minus documentation) from their Bertrand Russell's America: his transatlantic travels and writings, Vol. I, 1896-1945. It is copyrighted © by George Allen and Unwin Ltd., and will be published this fall. The Canadian publisher is Methuen and in the U.S. it is Viking. "Return to America" is one of 14 biographical chapters which together present much new information about Russell's relations with the U.S. The biographical chapters are followed by 27 articles by Russell on American civilization. Several of them have never been published before. Messrs. Feinberg and Kasrils, who earlier collaborated on Dear Bertrand Russell ..., are actively working on Volume II, 1946-1970.)*

After more than a decade of popular writing, Russell decided to return to work on technical philosophy, and delivered a course of lectures at Oxford on "Words and Facts". He had married again and a son, Conrad, was born to his third wife, Patricia, in 1937. *The New York Times*, repeating certain wide-spread myths about Russell, noted on 18 April:

White-haired Bertrand Russell, whom sophisticates know for his unique views on sex, marital relations, how to bring up children, and international affairs, was proud tonight after becoming a father at the age of 64. "I'm very pleased - very," the philosopher said at his country home after announcing the birth of a son. "The mother and the baby are doing extremely well."

But Earl Russell, whose pen has flowed freely to advise other fathers how to rear their families, insisted the upbringing of his family was "a private affair".

He once ran a school where the children could do just what they pleased - go naked when they felt the urge, swear and attend classes as the spirit moved them.

Bertrand Russell succeeded to an earldom in 1931, when an elder brother died, but he has taken little part in the deliberations of the House of Lords. Besides being a pacifist, he favors total disarmament and the surrender of all Great Britain's colonies to the League of Nations. These ideas are not very popular with most of the peers....

Russell was beset by growing financial problems, since he was already providing for Frank's dependants as well as for Dora and their two children. This caused Logan Pearsall Smith, Alys's brother, to observe: "the burden of life on his aging shoulders sometimes weighs heavily, and he talks of being forced to return to Brixton Prison, owing to his inability to pay his legal obligations."

Because Russell had been having great difficulty in securing a permanent academic position in England, he had, in 1936, asked Warder Norton to inquire into the possibilities of a post at an American university. In his letter of 28 December 1936, Russell explained to Norton his reasons for wanting to work in America:

My feelings are threefold: (a) I have a lot of ideas in my head that I long to work at and believe to be important. (b) I am faced with the likelihood of such poverty that I may be unable to give a proper education to the child that is coming. (c) That Europe is no place

for children, with the imminent risk of war - particularly England, which is likely to suffer most in the next war.

When the University of Chicago approached Russell in April 1937, offering an appointment as Visiting Professor of Philosophy for the winter term of the following year, he gladly accepted. Together with his wife and infant son, he sailed for America in September 1938.

On arriving in New York, Russell gave his usual press conference, and reporters were particularly interested in his views on events in Europe. *The New York Times* reported on 26 September: 'Bertrand Russell here; says world will be "mad" after the next great war.' The report continued:

Earl Russell, English author and philosopher, said on his arrival from Europe yesterday that after the next great war the entire world will be as "mad" as part of it is today. He arrived on the Cunard White Star liner, *Britannia*, accompanied by his wife and their 17-month-old son, Conrad, to lecture on semantics at the University of Chicago throughout the winter.

Lord Russell said that he had never held a very high opinion of Neville Chamberlain as Prime Minister, but after Mr. Chamberlain's dramatic decision to meet Hitler personally he began to think his judgment had been faulty.

Lord Russell said that he was "an extreme pacifist," but he realised that there were occasions "when it is very difficult to keep out of war."

"I am afraid war would do an extraordinary amount of harm to the world", he continued. "Even if we win, after the war I am afraid we would be just as mad as Hitler is. You go into such a thing believing that you are going to accomplish something, but you get so angry that all proportion is lost."

Russell was met by Norton and Feakins; the latter hoped to arrange a lecture tour after Russell had completed his term at the University of Chicago. In his *Autobiography*, Russell recalled his time in Chicago....

Temporarily cut off from England, Russell was anxious about the growing threat of war. He continued to maintain a pacifist position: "I still thought that there was some possibility of war being avoided, and that, if war came, it would again, as in 1914-18, be an imperialist war on *both* sides." After Chamberlain's Munich agreement with Hitler, he wrote home to Dora Sanger, from Chicago, on 5 November 1938, about the Czechoslovakian crisis: "I was immensely glad when the crisis passed, but I don't know how soon it may come up again. Here in America, nine people out of ten think that we [the British] ought to have fought but America ought to have remained neutral - an opinion which annoys me."

Russell kept in touch with Lucy Donnelly, writing to her on 31 January 1939 from Chicago: "I am here till 20 March, then I go touring under the auspices of Feakins. ... I find this university very good in philosophy and I have some remarkably able pupils. The intellectual level is very markedly higher than at Oxford, so I enjoy my work."

Russell had considered returning to England that spring, but when his contract with Chicago terminated, he was offered a professorship in

philosophy with the University of California at Los Angeles, to run for three years, from September 1939. At the age of 66, the prospect of being continually on the move, debating, interviewing and lecturing was not a happy one and, above all, the life of a freelance lecturer with the uncertain income entailed, was not conducive to the serious writing he wished to do. These factors influenced his decision to remain in America and accept the California post. Russell moved to California at the end of March, renting a house in Santa Barbara. "After the bleak hideousness of Chicago, which was still in the grip of winter," he observed, "it was delightful to arrive in the Californian spring." Before commencing duties at the University of California, Russell undertook the lecture tour arranged by Feakins. Of this he remembered only two things:

One is that the professors at the Louisiana State University, where I lectured, all thought well of Huey Long, on the ground that he had raised their salaries. The other recollection is more pleasant: in a purely rural region, I was taken to the top of the dykes that enclose the Mississippi. I was very tired with lecturing, long journeys, and heat. I lay in the grass, and watched the majestic river, and gazed, half hypnotised, at water and sky. For some ten minutes I experienced peace, a thing which very rarely happened to me, and I think only in the presence of moving water.

In the course of his lecture tour Russell visited Boston, where he was interviewed for a college newspaper. Many years later the interviewer recalled the occasion:

We had tea at the Ritz in Boston, and then we had dinner there, too - just the two of us. I still can't quite believe it. He was sixty-six and famous, obviously with an empty evening to fill, and I was a freshman and I didn't know *anything*. I don't remember what we talked about, but he kept the conversation going and saw to it that I got a good story for the paper, and he paid for the dinner, too. Looking back on it afterwards, I realised, of course, that *he* had interviewed *me*. And then, years later, I began to understand that he had been willing to spend all that time with me simply because he was far more interested in my mind than I was. I think this is the ultimate compliment.

Russell continued to write for American journals. Three important articles, apparently unpublished and written before the outbreak of war were "The American Mind", "Individual Freedom in England and America", and "America: The Next World Centre". In the second article, he contrasted the casual impressions of an English visitor to the United States with the reality learnt from long experience. Russell showed how traditional freedoms are undermined by the workings of American capitalism, again reiterating his support for President Roosevelt and the New Deal:

The power of the leading men in finance and industry in America is astounding. At present they do not control the Federal government, but they have done so at most times since the Civil War. They still control most of the State governments, and can invoke the aid of the State militia in labour disputes except where the governor is exceptionally liberal. Most of the great newspapers support them. All the best universities live on their benefactions and have powerful motives for not offending them. The outlook of the very rich is so

reactionary and dictatorial that they look askance at any approximately impartial treatment of economics and social questions and suspect all supporters of the New Deal of communism. Their hostility to the President is inconceivably bitter.

In an article "Democracy and Economics", published in *Survey Graphic*, February 1939, Russell discussed the consequences for America of the oligarchy of "2,000 individuals" who controlled half the country's industry. "No attempt is made to cause them to obey the law", he wrote, "even when, like Mr Henry Ford, they openly boast of being law-breakers." Russell argued that this group controlled politics in America because of their hold on economic power and advocated the transference of this power "into the hands of the democratic State". The article, containing numerous references to contemporary statements and writings, demonstrated in particular his interest in the turbulent labour clashes of the 1930s, and leaves no doubt about his own sympathies.

In March 1939, Russell contributed an article to a forum on "If War Comes - Shall We Participate or Be Neutral?", initiated by the journal, *Common Sense*. His contribution, in which he stated "The Case for U.S. Neutrality", was described by the editors as "particularly significant" since it came from "an Englishman whose life has been dedicated to all that democracy implies". As in the First World War, Russell advocated neutrality as the only way of preserving democracy in America. He argued: "The best hope for the world, if Europe plunges into the madness of another great war, is that America will remain neutral, but will, when the fighting is over, use economic power to further sanity and liberalism, and to restore to the parent continent as much as possible of the civilisation that the war will have temporarily destroyed."

Russell enthusiastically supported Roosevelt's attempts to avert the war in Europe, and wrote to the President on 15 April 1939:

... I cannot resist expressing to you my profound gratitude and admiration for your peace plea to Hitler and Mussolini. In so far as a humble professor can, I have worked for peace before the Great War, during it, and ever since; to this cause I have sacrificed all conflicting loyalties. Never before have I felt moved to express such feelings as now master me to any possessor of power.

Roosevelt replied briefly to Russell on 18 April: "It was very kind of you to write me that fine letter approving the course which I took. I do appreciate it indeed."

During the summer of 1939 John and Kate arrived in America to spend the school holidays with their father. The outbreak of war in September dealt a harsh blow to Russell's work for peace and caused him, with much pain, to question his pacifist position. His immediate concern, however, was for his children. War made it impossible for them to return home, and Russell had to make provision for their education. John was entered at the University of California and Kate, despite her youth, followed

soon after when it was discovered that the high school she was attending had "only one subject taught that she did not already know, and that was the virtues of the capitalist system."

Although the horrors of the war and Britain's beleaguered isolation had not yet become fully apparent, Russell, who, throughout his life, expressed a deep love for England, suffered great distress at being safely ensconced in America. Until the California appointment, he had planned to stay in the United States for only eight months. As a parent, he was naturally relieved that his children were in a safe country, but it was predominantly the needs of employment that kept him away from home. His views on the war had been gradually changing, and Russell held to his pacifist convictions with increasing emotional strain. Unlike in the First World War, he was unsure of his attitude and this indecision was made all the more unbearable by his absence from home. He wrote to Robert Trevelyan, in England, from Los Angeles, on 22 December 1939:

I am established here as Professor of Philosophy in the University of California. John and Kate came out for the summer holidays, and stayed when the war came, so they are having to go to the university here. John has a passion for Latin, especially Lucretius; unfortunately your Lucretius is stored in Oxford with the rest of my books. (I had expected to come back to England last spring.)

... I wonder what you are feeling about the war. I try hard to remain a pacifist, but the thought of Hitler and Stalin triumphant is hard to bear...

Americans all say "you must be glad to be here at this time", but except for the children's sake that is not how we feel...

Write when you can - it is a comfort to hear from old friends.

A letter to Lucy Donnelly, also on 22 December 1939, hints at the anguish Russell was beginning to experience:

It is the custom of this country to keep all intelligent people so harassed and hustled that they cease to be intelligent, and I have been suffering from this custom. The summer at Santa Barbara, it is true, was peaceful, but unluckily I injured my back and was laid up for a long time, which caused me to get behind hand with my lectures. John and Kate, who came for the summer holidays, stayed when war broke out; it is a comfort to have them here, but John does not find the University of California a satisfactory substitute for Cambridge. I think of sending them both East to some less recent university, but last September there was no time for that. Apart from home-sickness and war misery, we all flourish.

I am, when I can find time, writing a book on "Words and Facts", or "Semantics" as it is vulgarly called. The only thing to be done in these times it seems to me is to salvage what one can of civilisation, personally as well as politically. But I feel rather like a strayed ghost from a dead world.

The visit to you was delightful. As time goes on, one values old friends more and more. Remember me to Miss Finch. With love to yourself.

Although he preferred the Californian climate to that of the Midwest, Russell found the University of California academically "much less agreeable" than Chicago, and dominated by a president, Robert Sproul, for whom Russell "conceived, I think justly, a profound aversion".

Describing the atmosphere at the university, Russell wrote: "If a lecturer said anything that was too liberal, it was discovered that the lecturer in question did his work badly, and he was dismissed. Where there were meetings of the faculty, the president of the university used to march in as if he were wearing jack-boots, and rule any motion out of order if he did not happen to like it. Everybody trembled at his frown, and I was reminded of a meeting of the *Reichstag* under Hitler."

While at the university, Russell learnt a considerable amount about the economic life of California. He wrote:

During the depression most people who had land had been unable to pay the interest on their mortgages and the mortgages which were generally held by the Bank of America had been foreclosed, so that the Bank of America owned the greater part of the farming land of California. Now the Bank of America was entirely governed by a certain Italian fascist, a man of very extreme reactionary views, who, in spite of being a fascist, was universally accepted as great and grand because he was so rich. I was credibly informed that if one were to say anything against him one would be assassinated. I don't know whether this were true or not but it was certainly true that he completely governed the University of California which had to do whatever he told it. He depended largely upon migrant labour which was very cheap and very much oppressed and one man at the university made an investigation of migrant labour and suggested that the only cure for its troubles would be the formation of trade unions among the migrant labourers. As soon as he had published this document, the university decided that he did not do enough research and was a very bad teacher and he was therefore dismissed from his post. A certain number of people protested against this action but the supreme authorities in the university ruled any motion in his defence out of order, and he was sacked and destroyed as a teacher.

A few years later, Russell, referring to the issue of migrant labour, remarked: "At the present day, Californian fruit would taste less sweet to consumers if they realised the conditions of the migrant labour by which it has been picked."

Early in 1940, soon after it was announced that Russell would deliver the William James lectures at Harvard that autumn, an opportunity arose for him to take up a professorship at the College of the City of New York. Russell accepted and gave President Sproul notice of his resignation. Shortly afterwards, he learnt that the New York appointment was not yet official and he therefore asked Sproul to withdraw his resignation, but was informed that it was too late. Russell suspected that Sproul's attitude was occasioned by the fact that "earnest Christian taxpayers had been protesting against having to contribute to the salary of an infidel, and the president was glad to be quit of me." Over the subsequent months, Russell was to become involved in a bitter public dispute concerning the City College appointment; this occurred at a time when the Nazi onslaught in Europe appeared invincible, and Russell was becoming preoccupied with Britain's desperate fight for survival.

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