

# A discussion with Bertrand Russell at Plas Penrhyn, 4 August 1968

## 1. Introduction

I have admired Bertrand Russell's work and his style of writing ever since I first heard of him in my schooldays, but my personal acquaintance with him was slight, being confined to a few occasions in 1946-7 when I was at Trinity College, Cambridge and attended some of his lectures on philosophy.

I reviewed the three volumes of Russell's *Autobiography* as they appeared in 1967-69 for the journal *Nature*<sup>1</sup> and I wrote to Lord Russell in April 1967 to say how much I had enjoyed reading Volume I, and to give him a list of misprints. His reply is transcribed as Letter 1 in section 2 of this paper.

In 1968 we arranged a short family holiday at Portmeirion from 2 to 6 August, and in July I wrote to Lord Russell to ask if he could spare the time to see me for a short while to discuss the book *The End of the Twentieth Century?* which I was then writing. His reply is given as Letter 2. I duly called on him at the appointed time and talked with him from 4 p.m. to 5.15 p.m. Notes about my visit, made on the same evening, are given in section 3. Words are quoted as remembered at the time, but are not always exact.

## 2. Two letters from Bertrand Russell

1. From: The Earl Russell, O.M., F.R.S.,

Plas Penrhyn,  
Penrhyndeudraeth,  
Merioneth.

14 April 1967.

D.G. King-Hele, F.R.S.,  
3 Tor Road,  
Farnham, Surrey.

Dear Mr. King-Hele,

Thank you very much for your kind letter. I am happy to know that my book has given you pleasure. Your corrections of misprints are most helpful. I have sent them on to Sir Stanley for incorporation in subsequent editions.

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<sup>1</sup>*Nature*, 214 (15 April 1967), 323-4; 218 (27 April 1968), 397; 222 (17 May 1969), 699.

With all good wishes,

Yours sincerely

Bertrand Russell.

2. From: The Earl Russell, O.M., F.R.S.,

Plas Penrhyn,  
Penrhyndeudraeth,  
Merioneth.

July 27, 1968.

D.G. King-Hele, Esq., F.R.S.,  
3 Tor Road,  
Farnham, Surrey.

Dear Mr. King-Hele,

Thank you for your letter of July 24. Please come to tea here at 4.0 p.m. on August 4, when I look forward to seeing you.

Yours sincerely

Bertrand Russell.

### 3. Notes on our conversation

Lord Russell's house, Plas Penrhyn, is about 200 ft. above sea level, near the highest point of the "promontory with two beaches" which is the translation of "Penrhyndeudraeth". The house proved surprisingly open to public view, being reached by a single-track unmade road, which leads to farms and a scout camp, as well as to Plas Penrhyn. The house is about half a mile north of Portmeirion, from which it can be reached by a foot-path. As the map at the end shows, Plas Penrhyn has fine views northwards across the mudflats to Tremadoc, where Shelley's white cottage stands out sharply against the black wall of the mountains behind, Snowdon being about 11 miles to the north.

It was very hot on the afternoon of 4 August, but the drawing room where Lord Russell received me seemed quite cool. He was sitting in a high-backed armchair, wearing the usual "countrified" greenish suit with waistcoat and gold watch-chain, and carpet-slippers. He was as spry as ever, and poured out the China tea for me himself with a steady hand.

The reason (or was it the pretext?) for my visit was to discuss the book I was writing, *The End of the Twentieth Century?*, and I enquired first whether he had changed his views on our likely future.

"No. I have had the same views since the first hydrogen bombs. The disagreements of politicians make me despair. If only the Russians

and Americans, Kosygin and - what's his name - Johnson, would agree, the whole thing could be settled in five minutes."

"The trouble is", I replied, "that 'the wise want power, the powerful goodness want, and all best things are thus confused to ill'. And that the present political systems inevitably bring to the top the people who seek power, not the benevolent." He agreed to this, and remarked that nothing gets done unless it brings someone a profit.

He asked about my book and I explained that it was one of a series on "the making of the twentieth century". "Ah", he said quickly, "the others will explain how nice it all was, and you will say why it is going to end."

He could see well and was only slightly deaf. While we were talking, his little dog tried to come in, but it was filthy from having run in sea-mud and was kept outside by his secretary. The dog remained on the verandah, breathing - or puffing would perhaps be a better word - with a curious regularity once per second. Although the sound was not at all loud, Russell heard it after a minute or so, and said, "What's that ticking noise?" When his secretary said it was the dog, he replied, "I thought a misguided Anglican clergyman had planted a bomb". His wit was as lively as ever!

I mentioned that I had never been able to follow *Principia Mathematica*, and he said it was really very easy to read if you gave enough time to it, because everything was defined. But it took him more than ten years of hard labour and he never felt the same again. I asked about Whitehead's contribution, a point which has always puzzled me. He said it was very important: Whitehead provided proper mathematical proofs and did all the polishing. Russell began the work in 1900 at Tilford, where he remembered a Mrs Caldecott, who made a special kind of tea and was most upset when the price was increased in the budget. So much so that she went to London to attend some protest meeting, and she went by a car that she insisted on calling a "buzz-buzz".

He said it was in some ways a pity that people couldn't be idle, because it was the busy people who caused all the trouble. "I once wrote a book *In Praise of Idleness*, but it didn't take on." "Perhaps the people who would have appreciated it were too idle to read it", I suggested, and mentioned Erasmus Darwin's saying that it was the men of energy rather than the men of intellect who rule the world. "Very true", he said.

He was delighted to hear that I liked his stories *Satan in the Suburbs* and *Nightmares of Eminent Persons*: "I'm so glad you liked them. I

didn't know anybody read them. They came out of the blue, out of some unknown part of my mind: it's strange what untapped recesses there are." I mentioned that I occasionally had spells of writing verse. "Have you had any published?" "No, I expect I shall have to pay for their publication", I said. "Well", he replied, "you'll have to restrict the number you write to what you can afford!"

Returning to my book, I mentioned that I thought a method to prevent ageing might possibly be discovered. He seemed surprised to know that brain cells die off daily from the age of 20 or so, and I remarked that all the neurons got hooked up by then and that we remembered early events better than more recent ones. Did he, I asked.

"Yes," he said, "I remember how at the age of 5 I saw some limpets on the rocks while walking with my aunt. I tried to pull them off and couldn't, and I said to her, 'Do limpets think?' She said, 'I don't know', and I said, 'You ought to learn'". He laughed, and asked "Do you know whether limpets think?" I didn't; nor did I know whether they enjoyed continual bliss or suffered endless boredom. He also remembered, at about the same age, asking his tutor the name of a curve of light seen reflected in a teacup and being told it was "a four-cusped hypocycloid". "You must have had a very knowledgeable tutor," I remarked.

I said I should be discussing advances in technology in the book, and he commented that most of them seemed to bring more trouble than good: "English villages are not so beautiful now as they were ten or twenty years ago". "But there is less smoke in cities", I replied. "Yes", he said, "there are none of those terrible pea-soupers in London now. But in my house in London we have to have smokeless fuel, which doesn't give any heat. I don't visit London much, because I have a complaint that prevents me walking more than a quarter of a mile".

I asked whether he thought the food/population problem was a serious danger. He said "No, not really: there is plenty of time to solve it." He asked how I thought it should be solved and I mentioned better varieties of wheat, irrigation and fertilizers. "Ah, fertilizers," he said, "I remember walking through a field recently and noticing a really terrible smell. Then I looked and saw packages of Eden's fertilizers. A good name."

He spoke with affection about Shelley, with whom he felt he had much in common, and said he would have liked to write a book called "Shelley the Tough", emphasizing his robust and practical side. I said that my own book on Shelley emphasized this aspect among other things, and when I told him I had a copy of the book to present to him, he was

amazingly keen to receive it.

As I left, he said "Well, perhaps I shall see you in twenty years' time, when you'll be looking just as young!" He looked out over Tremadoc and continued, "I'm nearly 100 now: people don't live much longer than that". Then he walked with me to the open door, on the east side of the house.

#### 4. *Later repercussions*

1. When I reviewed the third volume of Russell's *Autobiography* in 1969 I was pleased to see that he had made good use of my book on Shelley. The text of the *Autobiography* ends (p. 172) with the paragraph:

My views on the future are best expressed by Shelley in the following poem:

Oh, cease! must hate and death return?  
Cease, must men kill and die?  
Cease! drain not to its dregs the urn  
Of bitter prophecy.  
The world is weary of the past,  
Oh, might it die or rest at last!

(478. 1096-1101)

The fact that this was taken from page 328 of my book is shown by the numbers at the end, which are my "coding" for the location of the lines in Hutchinson's Oxford edition of Shelley.<sup>2</sup>

2. My book *The End of the Twentieth Century?* was published in February 1970, and I heard of Russell's death on the very day when I was intending to post a copy to him, which left me regretting the delays in publication even more.

3. Rupert Crawshay-Williams, in his *Russell Remembered* (1970), repeatedly refers to Russell's deafness in his later years, e.g. "Bertie was too deaf to have a coherent conversation" (p. 145). This was certainly not my experience: perhaps he was just deaf to certain people, or to certain subjects, or to specific tones of voice?

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<sup>2</sup>[This is borne out by the typescript of Volume 3. Ed.]

