

Two recollections

Ronald W. Clark, in writing his Life of Bertrand Russell, used a little known article on Russell as a teacher at Cambridge in the 1940s. The article is called "Bertrand Russell: An Impression", by Vincent Buranelli, and it appeared in Prairie Schooner, vol. 29 (1955), pp. 44-8. Dr. Buranelli kindly amplified the article when I wrote to him about it.

McMaster University was founded by Baptists as "a Christian school of learning". Consequently the links between it, Hamilton, and Bertrand Russell were (except for Cyrus Eaton) few until the Archives arrived. I was therefore intrigued when, in sorting Archives II, I came upon a letter to Russell from a McMaster alumnus who is also a divine and who sat with Russell, not in Trafalgar Square, but in a chapel in Chicago. In reply to my inquiry, Rev. Booth explained the occasion and described a later meeting with Russell.

- K.B.

Dear Mr. Blackwell,

Thank you for your note and for the copy of the Russell journal, of which I have been only vaguely aware since I deserted philosophy for history twenty years ago.

To answer your questions. I have no mementoes of Russell except half-a-dozen autographed copies of his books. He never required written work in the classes I attended. At this distance in time, I can't recall if he ever provided hand-outs or work sheets. My impression is negative.

His Saturday morning lectures consisted of material that appeared as the first four parts of *Human Knowledge*. I bought the book when it came out, checked the text against my memory of the lectures, and found a basic similarity - allowing for the inevitable cuts, asides and anecdotes introduced for the benefit of a listening audience.

The fifth part of the book derived from his special lectures on the theory of probability before a small class of students of logic.

Your reference to my article has prompted me to dig it out and re-read it. I'm surprised to find how much I left out. Today I would add the following:

There was one episode ironic in the light of Russell's subsequent opinions. The American Club of Cambridge entertained him as guest of honor at a Thanksgiving dinner, and in the course of his post-prandial remarks he said, "I don't like the idea of any nation dominating the world, but if one is going to, I prefer it to be the United States."

Another irony, at one of his Thursday sessions, "The Americans not only consider everything in their country bigger and better, they expect the visitor to keep saying so all the time."

Yet another irony, "Stalin is the Pope of the Communist Church, and he is bound by its Scriptures just as the Pope of the Catholic Church is bound by the Christian Scriptures. The Russians can't develop an atomic bomb because their dogma forbids them to understand the behavior of subatomic particles."

I can imagine Russell responding to the Soviet bomb by commenting dryly, "The Pope in the Kremlin obviously prefers his bomb to his dogma." That kind of remark was typical of him. However, I never heard him discuss the subject.

His verdicts on some individuals:

"Lenin laughed a lot during our talk in the Kremlin, but after a while it began to sound rather sinister."

"Bernard Shaw went to Russia to see what he intended to see. Naturally he saw it."

"The Existentialists are not philosophers, they're literary men playing at philosophy."

"I was impressed by Copleston. He defended Thomistic philosophy as well as anyone could."

"Something went wrong with Wittgenstein after the *Tractatus*."

"Spinoza was sincere, Leibniz not."

Incidentally, the unknown logician to whom Russell sent his copy of Frege's book was Peter Geach.

Perhaps there is nothing new to you in the above, but any mention of Russell tempts one to reminisce.

Sincerely yours,
Vincent Buranelli

Dear Mr. Blackwell:

I am pleased to learn that my letter of July 8, 1962 to Bertrand Russell exists in your archives. You are puzzled over my comment in it that I used to see him "sitting at the opposite end of the same pew in the Rockefeller Chapel at the University of Chicago", your having assumed that he ceased going to church in late adolescence.

The explanation lies in the nature of Rockefeller Chapel. Although founded with money from the family whose name it bears, nominally Baptist, from the very beginning both it and the university surrounding it have successfully endeavored to be liberal and ecumenical, with heavy emphasis on scholarship. On Sundays the chapel pulpit would be occupied by the most distinguished thinkers and my memory seems to say that not all were "men of the cloth", though they predominated. Professors noted

in areas of theology and philosophy, often seminary trained, like Reinhold Niebuhr and Amos Wilder, were regulars, in the pulpit and sometimes in the pews of that cathedral-like edifice.

It would be safe to conclude that Lord Russell did not go to church for its own sake, followed no speaker or particular church with regularity or was physically a part of any religious movement as such, after his adolescence. The late Right Honorable J. Chuter Ede, one-time Home Minister in the British Government, once told me that Russell's [grand] mother was responsible for the founding of the Unitarian Church in Richmond, Surrey, England. She obliged him to attend services, and Sunday School there - an experience which perhaps accounts in part for his lack of appreciation of organized and traditional religion.

Lord Russell's reply to my letter requesting an interview with him in Penrhyndeudraeth, Wales, did not reach me before I departed London for many weeks' work on a documentary film that I was shooting of the United Kingdom. What I did not know, when I eventually phoned him from the Welsh village near his home, on a Saturday evening, was that his response was negative due to the volume of work facing him at that moment. On the phone, however, after a minute's conversation, he changed his mind and set aside twenty minutes for me on the following (Sunday) afternoon.

I arrived at his farmhouse-type home in a light drizzle, but he rushed out in purple slippers to greet me. As is well known, he was actually a handsome man. Though small and slight, he gave me the impression of a physically strong and healthy person, a notion his lengthy life confirms. His conversation was precise, congenial and clear, in marked contrast with the rambling, repetitiveness and confusion often characteristic of elderly persons. In the course of my work I have interviewed the heads of many of the world's better known states, figures like Nehru, Tito and others, but none packed so much thought into each block of minutes as did Russell.

At the end of twenty minutes, I reminded him of my promise. He waved a hand, rose to his feet and poured me another cup of tea. A fire was crackling in the fireplace before which we sat in big overstuffed chairs facing one another. At fifty minutes, I spoke up again. "Have some more tea," he exclaimed, leaping up and pouring another cupful. We had been together just over an hour when his American-born wife, a beautiful smiling woman who appeared to be slightly plump, quietly opened the door and said something. Dr. Russell waved her away. Later, I assumed she was giving him an excuse to clear me out which he did not do.

Many people have remarked on the long period we spent together that afternoon. Why did he allow it? Twenty minutes was his almost rhythmic habit for journalistic interviews at that period, I was assured by others. In the first place, instead of it being the usual form of interview, it became a pleasant debate between two persons with very similar viewpoints on major issues but with my trying to break down his reasoning (probably to strengthen my own where I thought loopholes might exist).

Secondly, as a Unitarian clergyman (I was then senior minister of the Second Church in Boston, which had numbered among my pulpit predecessors Ralph Waldo Emerson and Cotton Mather) in the humanist tradition, he found my points of views a pleasant surprise. American and British Unitarianism are markedly different, the latter being conservative, traditional, the former tending to be humanist, social-action oriented.

When I told him that he could well fit, intellectually and action-wise, into the philosophical and theological system of the American and Canadian Unitarian movements, he did not demur. I had the feeling that he was rather pleased to know that he was not such an isolate from the world of organized religion or perhaps, expressed differently, that today's churches, some of them, are not necessarily as far removed from concepts that he regarded as important, as he had thought. His absence from churches with nineteenth-century traditions still overwhelming them, had given him reason to suppose that all ecclesiastical institutions resemble those he knew in his boyhood. Rockefeller Chapel, to him, must have seemed like an oasis of light in an otherwise rather gloomy religious environment.

The philosopher had just declined being photographed by an Italian company reportedly doing a film on his life, or some aspect of it. Our rapport was so fine that I had the temerity to ask if he would be willing to step out onto the porch, free of the rain, for a minute or two of close-up filming for my own documentary. Without a moment's hesitation he agreed. That photographic study in color of him strolling down the porch, in the shadow of the then invisible Mount Snowdon, puffing on his pipe, gazing across the estuary nearby, is, to me at least, a highlight of the entire 85 minute film.

Some of the highpoints of that afternoon with Bertrand Russell in Penrhyndeudraeth are recorded in the enclosed photocopy of my article in the November 1962 issue of the *Unitarian Universalist Register-Leader* monthly magazine.

Sincerely yours,
Rev. Dr. John Nicholls Booth,
McMaster '34