

A new mythology?

Russell as archetypal libertine

No one denies that the love of women had a major part in Bertrand Russell's life. He himself confessed he "would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy". However, many of the reviewers of Clark's *Life* treated Russell's love of women as if it had been his one dominant passion, and they often sacrificed the greater part of their space to this joy, as did the *Sunday Times* in their serialization of Clark's book. Perhaps the most extraordinary statement by a reviewer was that Russell "could also, at an age when, according to North American mythology, sex is all over and done with, drop into bed with [women] as casually as other men drop into conversation" (Patrick Nowell-Smith, *Toronto Star*, 22 Nov. 1971). This statement, while telling against the myth of geriatric sexuality, merely substitutes another myth. Some writers of letters to the *London Times* have tried to destroy the new myth. We reprint three letters on the subject, including one which, far from trying to explode the myth, claimed that, in Mediterranean terms, it is a credit to Russell. The letters are respectively from the *Times* of 26 November, 2 December, and 9 December 1975, and are reprinted with the permission of the writers. --K.B.

Sir, Since I was a friend of Bertrand Russell and three years ago wrote for you the article on the centenary of his birth,¹ I feel a special challenge to comment on the general reaction with which the press have met Mr. Ronald Clark's biography of him, published the other day. So far I have only read enough of the book to see that, whatever it is not, it obviously is the result of long research. The reviews, with the usual honourable exceptions, are a different matter. So many have taken their tone from the instalments in *The Sunday Times*, which have concentrated almost entirely on Russell's sex life; reaching their nadir with the headline to Dame Rebecca West's article "Bertie in Hot Pursuit".²

¹Bertrand Russell: St. George and the Dogma", *The Times* (Lon.), 18 May 1972, p. 18.

²*Sunday Telegraph* (Lon.), 2 November 1975, p. 14.

It seems that our national mythology is about to adopt as its archetype of libertines a man who slept with no one till, at the age of 22, he married, then for about seven years only with his wife, then for about nine years, till he was nearly 40, with no one; a *faune*, in other words, with a busy *après-midi*, and a long and serenely happy evening with his last wife (which the instalments find worth no more than a footnote). This is not Casanova.

The Sunday Times advertised the instalments as a chronicle of Russell's "countless loves".³ I have had no difficulty in counting them. Readers may care to do the same, and then make up their own minds whether or not the total, over so long a life, adds up to their picture of a "satyr";⁴ and also whether a satyr would have been interested in maintaining such devoted friendships as Russell did (for example, with Lady Ottoline Morrell), continuing long after the love affair was over and, with her, until her death.

A biographer of Russell is doubtless obliged to say a good deal about his loves, not for the sake of scandal, but because he helped to pioneer what was by him called the "new morality" and has since been restyled *ad nauseam* the "permissive society". One expects to find in the reviews some serious discussion of what he meant by it, how workable it is, where he personally succeeded, and where he failed. One also expects something of the frustrations and miseries of his early life, that help to elucidate the kind of person he became. Of all that, almost nothing.

One is glad to learn yet again that great men have had great weaknesses; it makes it easier to identify. But so many reviews have been conducted on so trivial, vulgar, and even spiteful a level, that one receives almost no idea of the way he transmuted some of those weaknesses, or of their submersion and generalization into the weaknesses of mankind, that led to some of his most influential work and a deeper tolerance amongst us all.

A final point, among many that occur to me. In old age Russell gave his wife the manuscript of a lyric that now prefaces his autobiography. One reviewer called it "doggerel". I am a poet, and it seems to me a beautiful lyric, both technically and in feeling. This is a matter of critical opinion. What is not a matter of opinion is that the word was used during the life-time of the woman to whom the poem was written, who stood between Russell and the loneliness of something not far off

³*Sunday Times* (Lon.), 26 October 1975, p. 33.

⁴E.g., the title of Philip Toynbee's review, "The Sage and the Satyr", *Observer* (Lon.), 2 November 1975, p. 30.

despair. It was a brutal comment to have printed, conferring a wound that might surely have been spared her.

Yours faithfully,
Michael Burn

Beady Gwyn,
Minffordd, Gwynedd.
November 15.

Sir, Mr. Michael Burn's letter (*The Times*, November 26), deploring the emphasis on Lord Russell's libertine activities contained in reviews of Mr. Ronald Clark's biography of Bertrand Russell and excerpts of it that have appeared in the press, is obviously addressed to a British audience. By referring to the chaste or monogamous long periods of Lord Russell's life Mr. Burn wants to prove that he was much closer to the accepted values of his society than the excerpts and reviews might suggest.

Values vary however and in many a Mediterranean society Mr. Burn's evidence would seriously have undermined the prestige that I am sure would have accrued to Lord Russell's memory had the excerpts and reviews been published there. Morals are conventional and sexual morals perhaps more conventional than others. Lord Russell devoted some time and effort to try to explain just that. It seems to me that to pass moral judgments of any kind on his amorous behaviour is to misunderstand him.

Yours faithfully,
Jose Cutileiro

67 Belsize Park Gardens, NW3,
November 28.

Sir, Your correspondent Senhor Cutileiro (December 2) is engagingly frank in expressing his disappointment at the admirable letter from Mr. Michael Burn in your issue of November 26: the intrusion of truth into stories about other people's sexual morals is often a sad letdown. However, in thinking that Mr. Burn was concerned with Bertrand Russell's relationship to "the accepted values of his society", Senhor Cutileiro has missed the point.

Mr. Burn was concerned simply with truth. Normally, qualities, even qualities so stimulating to public discussion as those of a "satyr", which make their first appearance in a man's life when he is over 40, and has recently suffered a disastrous marriage, an unhappy love affair, the loss of his job, imprisonment and widespread social ostracism, may be thought to be the results of overwhelming stress. Qualities which need such powerful circumstances to force them into the open may be thought to be accidental, rather than essential, to a man's nature. They may all the more be thought to be the result of stress if the man concerned ultimately settled down to an exceptionally successful and stable marriage.

The reviewers who have so freely discussed Mr. Clark's biography of my father should perhaps ask whether my father's success in other fields has led them to judge his private life by a different standard from that which they apply to themselves and their contemporaries. It should perhaps be said, in fairness to the reviewers and to Mr. Clark, that his biography is very long, and is not meant to be read in snippets. Only those who have read the whole book are qualified to judge it. Similarly, only a person who had known my father for his whole life would be qualified to pass an adequate judgment on it. It perhaps makes my point that there is no such person.⁵

29 Hamilton Road, SW19.

Yours faithfully,
Conrad Russell

⁵Mr. Russell is not, of course, excluding the possibility that there was such a person (as there was).