Why a Bertrand Russell Society?

On various occasions I have been asked, "why a Bertrand Russell Society?" Surely, it is argued, although many people admire both the man and his work, they would not join any sort of memorial or commemorative society for him. If this amounted to all that the Bertrand Russell Society is, or could be, then I too would not wish to be part of it. Russell himself was not an active member of societies, but he would work with others to achieve a specific goal he thought important.

Secondly, in the academic world the intellectual study of a man's work, its criticism and interpretation, can become an end in itself. This is often a cynical god which can destroy the meaning and inspiration which the creator sought to express and stimulate in others. Milton is a case in point; how many learned literary reviewers, pointing out the problem of why he uses one "e" or two in certain words, have added to the beauty of his writing, or to the meaning he expressed? The same threat of intellectual aridity could surround Russell's work once we forget its meaning and the object to which it is directed—truth and the liberation of the human creative impulse.

It is in the attempt to realize this meaning and object that the aim of our society lies. The Society is founded neither on sentimentality towards a dead leader, nor on the pretentious but studious sterility of a dusty intellectual system now gone from the world. To me, and I think for the other members of the Bertrand Russell Society, Russell's work is an appeal to life, both the joy of living it and the intellectual pleasure of trying to understand it. His work is not the final answer; it contains no unquestionable and eternal truths. But it does try, and in varying degrees both succeeds and fails, to put what the egoistic desire of man would like to believe, into a rational perspective of what in fact he may believe, or what on a balance of probabilities is likely to be the case. In this lies, for me and many others, the value of Bertrand Russell and the tremendous intellectual and humane achievement.
which is his legacy. It is a legacy that is not beyond question, or one
to which its author would demand our conformity, but I believe a most
important starting point.

It is also put to me, that while Russell's opinion mattered to
those he sought to influence, little influence could be exercised by
those who now see value in his work. If this means the immediate in-
fluence of governments by a relatively small group of interested people,
then this opinion is probably correct. But if by this is meant general
opinion, then all those unique individuals, like Russell, who have
struggled and suffered to offer some hope of human liberation, have
done so in vain. I cannot accept this. It would be a pleasant thought
that we could immediately affect the questionable policies of governments,
but our aim is to undermine their influence in the long term. The world
in which we live is one consumed and divided by ideological dogmatism,
a dogmatism which rates its own narrow assumptions very highly, but which
is blind to whatever value any other opinion might have. It is this
narrow form of prejudice that is at the base of all governmental and
institutional oppression and violence. It is this, with hope, that we
seek to oppose and eventually prevent. I say with hope, because as
Russell once expressed it, without hope we are nothing. Hope is my last
irrational conviction: by means of it one can contribute to a positive
universal end which lies outside personal or self-interest, but which is
intrinsic to that much maligned nature we know as "human".

The Bertrand Russell Society is not a group of holders of stereo-
typed opinions. Some members lay more stress on one aspect of Russell's
philosophy than on others. What we try to engender is an environment of
free debate, to encourage individuals to "remember their humanity" and
what might be achieved if those principles of tolerance, rational under-
standing, and humane compassion which Russell stood for were allowed to
govern human action.

In about two years the Society has grown from an initial group of
twelve to one of almost 200 members in Canada, Denmark, West Germany,
Colombia, Japan, and Britain, in addition to the United States—a success
far greater, perhaps, than that anticipated by the original Twelve. It
is to be hoped that an equal success can be made of the Society in
Britain. It is often said that a man's genius is rarely appreciated in
his own land, especially where that genius has not only contributed to
civilization in the past, but where its greatest value is in what it
still has to add to that civilization and in consequence to human hap-
iness.

Manchester  
John Sutcliffe