

## 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 is 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 influence 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 stereotyped 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 understanding, 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 happiness.

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John Sutcliffe