One hundred years of Bertrand Russell: an appraisal

It may seem late for centenary appraisals of Bertrand Russell, but an exception is warranted in the following case. John Slater has been considering a full appraisal of Russell and his work, in which he would expand upon the conclusions reached in the condensed study printed below. It shows, I think, a mastery of sources and freshness of approach that ought to be encouraged. The study was originally delivered as a public lecture at the University of Toronto on 23 March 1972, and has not previously been published. (Ed.)

One hundred years ago this spring Kate Amberley was pregnant for the third time. We do not have, among the Amberley papers, the very first reference to this unborn child, but if we did possess it, we can be sure it would be a definite description. Although every unborn child gets referred to by such definite descriptions as "the baby I am carrying", it seems especially fitting that Bertrand Russell, the most eminent logician the English-speaking peoples have produced, was so denoted the first time there was occasion to refer to him. It is especially fitting because, as we shall see, he gave a brilliant analysis of the logic of definite descriptions which he himself regarded as his greatest accomplishment, an opinion very widely shared in the philosophical world.

But the unborn cannot analyze definite descriptions. Logicians, like everyone else, must be born and named. So we must return to narrative. The surviving papers of the Amberleys are sparse for the spring of 1872, but they do contain a very vivid account of Bertrand Russell's birth written by his father, Lord Amberley. The Amberleys went walking in the early afternoon of May 18th, a cold day which threatened snow. During the walk, at 3:30 p.m. (Amberley is precise on the times), Kate felt her first labour pains. They slowly returned to the house and Amberley sent a servant to fetch the doctor, a certain Mr. Audland. Meanwhile, Amberley attended his wife, giving her small amounts of chloroform to ease her suffering. I will now allow Amberley to complete the story:

> [Mr. Audland] arrived at 5:30, and immediately after he sat down the water broke. Almost at once the head was born, and I heard the baby's first scream. She asked what sex--Audland and Lizzie (who was by him) said "We cannot tell yet." In a few minutes Audland said "It's a very fine boy." He was born at 5:45. The pains were awful. Audland remarked that not one child in 30 was as big and fat.[1]

Three days later Lady Amberley had this to say about her second son in a letter to her mother:

> The baby weighed 8 3/4 lb is 21 inches long and very fat and ugly very like [his brother] Frank everyone thinks--blue eyes far apart and not much chin--He is just like Frank was about nursing--I have lots of milk now but if he does not get it at once or has wind or anything he gets into such a rage and screams and kicks and trembles till he is soothed off, but now it does not make me hot and nervous as it did then--He is very vigorous and Mr. Audland says an out of the way strong muscular child which is a good thing. He lifts his head up and looks about in a very energetic way.... (*Amberley Papers*, II, 491-2)

How refreshing it would be if we had equally detailed accounts of the births of all the great philosophers and of the troubles their mothers experienced in nursing them. Discipleship might then have proved a rarer commodity in the history of philosophy.

Naming posed a family problem. The Earl Russell, earlier and better known as Lord John Russell, Amberley's father, proposed "William" to honour Lord William Russell who had had his head chopped off by Charles II. Lady Russell wrote Amberley with her proposals on June 4th:

> We thought of Bertrand for you as an uncommon name and yet one which had belonged to a *very* remote ancestor ... but did not give it because we didn't like it--and I wanted John--I am very glad you give William as a second name. The names I like best are those in which the sounds are clear and distinct--Hildebrand for instance, but parents have full right to please themselves in this matter. (*Ibid.*, 494)

A word of explanation helps here. In the early nineteenth century the Duke of Bedford, who was a Russell and the father of Lord John, engaged a man named Wiffen to care for his library. To please His Grace Wiffen undertook to write the history of the Russell family.[2] He fairly quickly exhausted the English history of the family, but, because he knew his patron had an eye to respectability, he invented the hypothesis that the Russells were really descendents of the French family, de Rosel, a member of which was supposed to have come to England with the Conqueror in 1066. So he pursued his researches on the Continent. There, unhampered by mere facts, he traced and identified the founder of the

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[1] Bertrand and Patricia Russell, eds., *The Amberley Papers: The Letters and Diaries of Lord and Lady Amberley* (London: Hogarth Press, 1937; New York: Norton, 1937), II, p. 490.

[2] J.H. Wiffen, *Historical Memoirs of the House of Russell; from the time of the Norman Conquest*, two vols. (London: Longman, Rees, Orme, Brown, Green, and Longman, 1833).

Russell family. Olaf the Sharp-eyed, he wrote, was not only the fountain from which sprang the Russells, but also various Scandanavian royal families. Olaf was supposed to have been sharp-eyed in the fifth century, so Wiffen had five centuries worth of ancestors to invent. He was equal to the task.

The name "Bertrand" became part of the history of the House of Russell when Wiffen wrote that "William, Baron of Briquebec, was the first that took the surname of Bertrand."[3] William Bertrand flourished in Normandy circa 1023. His son, Hugh Bertrand, and the only other member of this fictitious ancestry of interest to us, had, according to Wiffen, the distinction of introducing the Russell family to its own surname. Around 1045, Hugh Bertrand became, in some way that remained obscure even to Wiffen, Hugh Bertrand du Rozel. Bearing this name he sailed with William the Conqueror in 1066, fought in the battle of Hastings, and established the House of Russell in England. Not a bad man to name a boy for. Still Lady Russell did not like "Bertrand".

The name she did like was "Galahad". But Lady Stanley, Kate's mother, queered that suggestion on June 6th:

> My Dearest Kate
>
> ... Pray do not inflict such a punishment on your child as to call it Galahad. (*Amberley Papers*, II, 494)

By June 12th Lady Russell herself withdrew "Galahad". "I like it", she wrote her son, "but I do believe the child would be laughed at for it--and hope you will call him something as pretty or prettier and a little less fanciful" (*ibid.*, 495). And in a postscript proceeded to suggest five more possibilities: "Basil", "Ambrose", "Godfrey", "Leo", and "Lionel". With such a variety of extraordinary names in the pot one is tempted to speculate: Would Ambrose Russell have published *The Dictionary of Mind, Matter, and Morals*? Or Galahad Russell have written *Marriage and Morals*? Or, to keep the list brief, Hildebrand Russell have dared deliver a lecture called "Why I am Not a Christian"?

It is at least conceivable that the difficulty of arriving at a suitable name for him led to a fallout, as it were, for twentieth-century philosophy. During his philosophical career Russell devoted much attention to proper names and the philosophical problems associated with them, often with the intention of showing that they were dispensable. Perhaps some of the steam for this enterprise was supplied by his knowledge that he had come within an ace of being named "Galahad".

It was finally decided to name him "Bertrand Arthur William Russell" and Lord and Lady Amberley began planning the christening. By this time in their lives both had lost nearly all their religious beliefs,

[3] *Ibid.*, I, p. 1.

so it was natural for them to ask non-religious friends to serve as godparents. Lady Amberley wrote Helen Taylor, the step-daughter and companion of John Stuart Mill, inviting her to serve as godmother. Miss Taylor readily agreed, and in her letter to Lady Amberley, replied to a further request Lady Amberley had made: "Mr. Mill says if you wish it he does not think that it would conflict with his opinions to enter into that relation ..." (*ibid.*, 495).[4] There is something almost uncanny in this laying on of hands. John Stuart Mill, Bertrand Russell's godfather? Well he was, and one simply has to get used to it, and then the thought is delicious.

In September Russell's mother decided to wean him. She began to feed him on the milk of an ass, which, she wrote her mother, agreed with him (*ibid.*, 528). There are those who see here the remote, but nevertheless sufficient, cause of all of Russell's subsequent behaviour of which they disapprove.

Having now traced the future philosopher's emergence into the external world, we can skip most of the rest of his pre-philosophical career. He began to talk in March of 1874, and it is of some interest that heading the list of what he could say was the word "all" in the expression "all gone".

We owe the record of his first words to his sister, Rachel, then seven years old. Within four months she was dead of diphtheria. Lady Amberley caught the disease from her. Exhausted from her nursing duties, she died within three days after being stricken, five days before Rachel. Amberley undertook to rear his two sons in the way Kate and he had agreed they should be reared, but he had little taste left for life, and within eighteen months was dead of natural causes.

Orphaned before he was four, Russell and his brother Frank who was then eleven, were left, by Amberley's will, in the guardianship of two atheists. But Lady Russell moved with dispatch to have them declared wards of Chancery and put in her care. From the age of four until he went up to Cambridge at eighteen Russell lived in a house dominated by his grandmother.

His grandfather, a very old man when Bertrand Russell joined his household, died four years later. In her letter of condolence to Lady Russell, Queen Victoria wrote: "I trust your grandsons will grow up all that you could wish."[5] When one recalls that Frank, the second Earl, was tried by his peers in the House of Lords on a charge of bigamy,

[4] See Ann Robson, "Bertrand Russell and his godless Parents", *Russell*, no. 7 (autumn 1972), 3-9.

[5] Desmond MacCarthy and Agatha Russell, eds., *Lady John Russell: A Memoir with Selections from her Diaries and Correspondence* (London: Methuen, 1910), p. 253.

convicted and sentenced to prison, for which and other escapades he earned the title, "the wicked Earl"; and that Bertrand was twice sentenced to serve time in Her Majesty's prisons, it may be doubted whether this pious wish was fulfilled.

Until he went to an Army crammer's school at the age of sixteen to prepare for his entrance examination to Cambridge, Russell was educated at home by his relatives and a parade of governesses and tutors. He had no playmates his own age except such as were brought to the house by his grandmother and other relatives. By the time he was adolescent this atmosphere sometimes made him so melancholic that he contemplated suicide. But he never carried out the act, he tells us, because of a stronger desire to know more of mathematics.[6]

In closing this preliminary section on his early life brief tribute should be paid to the influence Lady Russell had in moulding his character. Three notable characteristics can be traced to her. No doubt the capacities for them were there from birth, but she encouraged and trained them. First, there is the enormous dedication to work. Not to be doing something was sinful. Indeed, Russell tells us that she would never sit in a comfortable chair until the evening on the ground that comfort encouraged sloth. Second, there is the almost fierce individualism. One must never hide in the crowd nor follow a multitude to do evil. She saw to it always that Russell was held accountable for what he did, and made to justify it. Finally, there is the aristocratic confidence in his own judgment. Clearly, this is closely related to the second but it contains a new dimension. The Russells had for a very long time belonged to the Whig Party. Members of the family had always provided leadership to that Party. New Russells must be trained to lead: it was simply expected of them. Lady Russell did her best to train Bertrand Russell for a life of politics. Public and international affairs were common topics of conversation, and public figures, from Queen Victoria and Gladstone on down, were frequent guests. In encouraging these traits in Russell Lady Russell played a very important role in his life, for along with an intellect of genius, an exquisite wit and a beautiful writing style, they were his most distinctive attributes.

In the course of a very long life Russell did many things and I have been rash enough to promise you an appraisal of his work. The time has come to scale that promise down to manageable size. I have chosen a trio of topics. Pride of place must go to his work in logic and philosophy, for some of it, at least, will be of importance as long as

[6] *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 43; (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1967), p. 50.

there are intelligent and educated human beings. I should caution, however, that I have not been able to do as much under this heading as I would have liked to so, largely because nearly all of his work in logic and philosophy is technical in the best sense of that word, and I can neither assume nor give the technical knowledge required in a public lecture. For my second topic I have decided to discuss his work on behalf of the career of philosophy and the academic profession generally. Finally, I shall take up his work as a political activist.

By 1903 when Russell published *The Principles of Mathematics* he and Alfred North Whitehead had realized that they were working in the same area. Both were engaged in the work of pulling together into a whole the various disparate advances that had been made in symbolic logic and the foundations of mathematics in the last fifty or so years. Whitehead had published in 1898 the first volume of a big work called *Universal Algebra*, which, as its title indicates, was his attempt to discover the common principles of the various algebras to be found in logic and mathematics. Russell in *The Principles of Mathematics* saw himself doing the philosophical spadework necessary to giving a rigorous proof that mathematics is a branch of logic. Both men published their books as first volumes of projected two-volume works. In his second volume Whitehead promised to give a detailed comparison of the symbolic structures of the algebras he had studied in a more general way in his first volume. Russell made a similar promise about his second volume. It would give the argument for his thesis that mathematics is a branch of logic wholly in symbolical form. In other words he promised a strict proof that all of mathematics followed from the logical principles revealed in his first volmme. When Whitehead read Russell's book just before its publication, he decided to abandon his own promised second volume, and join Russell in writing the second volume of *The Principles of Mathematics*. Russell announced this plan in the preface of his book. Thus was born a great collaboration. As the work progressed it became clear to both that they were creating a completely new work, and it was published as such. They chose to call it *Principia Mathematica*. Published in three large volumes with a fourth on geometry to be written by Whitehead alone, which, alas, never appeared, *Principia Mathematica* is a dazzling accomplishment. It is a great work of synthesis which closed one phase of the development of logic, but, as all great syntheses do, opened another.

In *Principia Mathematica* Whitehead and Russell brought together two important research frontiers and gave a brilliant argument designed to prove that the two frontiers had always been meant for one another.

The one frontier was on the border of mathematics. During the nineteenth century it became increasingly clear that the natural numbers, those we use for counting, and their arithmetic were the building blocks, as it were, out of which much of higher mathematics was constructed. So arithmetic, until then largely the province and scourge of schoolchildren, began to be carefully studied by mathematicians of the first rank. Their aim was to give a set of axioms for arithmetic which would order our arithmetical knowledge in the same way Euclid had ordered our geometrical knowledge. In 1889 this aim was realized when the Italian mathematician, Peano, published a set of five axioms from which all of the truths of ordinary arithmetic could, with the help of common logical principles, be deduced. In his axioms, however, three key terms of arithmetic were left undefined, namely, 'one', 'number', and 'successor'. This last term is used in such propositions as '2 is the successor of 1'. Peano intended that these terms be understood in their usual way, but he could offer no definition of them. With his work, mathematics seemed to have reached a limit, or what I called a frontier. It was clear that any definition of 'one' or 'number' or 'successor' would have to reach outside mathematics, but it was far from obvious that there was anywhere for the definitions to reach. And there the matter rested.

The other frontier was to be found in the new subject of symbolic logic. Logic, of course, has had a very long history, though for long periods it had been stagnant. Its life had quickened in the nineteenth century. Notable new discoveries had been made by Boole, De Morgan, Peirce, Schröder, and many others. Very gradually a new symbolism was developed which emphasized the kinship of symbolic logic to mathematics. The introduction of symbols, in turn, accelerated the development of the subject, for many could contribute to a common enterprise once a common language was agreed upon. When Russell and Whitehead began their work symbolic logic was well established but far from fully developed. They contributed greatly to its maturation. But it had been developed far enough by 1900 for Russell to see in it the best hope for developing definitions of the terms Peano had left undefined. Indeed by the time he published *The Principles of Mathematics*, he was fully convinced that the definitions could be given, and he provided the most important of them, namely, the definition of cardinal number, in a non-symbolic form in that book.

Principia Mathematica brought these two frontiers together and produced what its authors thought was a seamless whole. The fundamental concepts of arithmetic were given explicit definitions in the language of symbolic logic in such a way that the basic truths of arithmetic, such as that $2 + 2 = 4$, could be proved as theorems in a system with

axioms like 'If either p is true or p is true, then p is true'. Before this remarkable achievement was possible, Russell and Whitehead had to perform another almost equally remarkable: they had to pull together into a common language all of the research results in symbolic logic that had not already been synthesized, and then develop the rest of the subject in a systematic way. It is true that between the writing of *The Principles of Mathematics* and *Principia Mathematica*, Russell became acquainted with the pioneering work of Frege, a very remarkable German logician and philosopher. Frege's work offered solutions to some of the thorniest problems still outstanding in logic, and Whitehead and Russell made full use of his results. Still there was much that had to be developed and between them they were able to come up with solutions to all the problems standing in the way of the grander synthesis of arithmetic to logic.

It follows from what I have just said that *Principia Mathematica* is also a great work of analysis. Indeed the only way the synthesis could be carried out was by the method of analysis. The fit of arithmetic to logic had to be precise in all of its details and this required that the structure of the concepts of both subjects be given in the most minute detail. It was in the course of doing this necessary analysis that Russell discovered his theory of definite descriptions to which I referred in my introductory remarks. But before I turn to a discussion of it I should comment briefly on the roles of the co-authors in the writing of *Principia Mathematica*.

It seems generally agreed that the philosophical aspects of *Principia Mathematica* are in the main due to Russell and the mathematical ones to Whitehead. Whitehead has said that they were and Russell has come as close to saying it as his affection for Whitehead would allow.[7] If this is true, and it seems to be true, then the more original part of the work is due to Russell. Furthermore, all of the evidence seems to point to the conclusion that Russell did most of the actual work of writing the book. Their practice was for one of them to produce a first draft of a section and send it to the other who went over it and made changes. The original author then prepared the revised draft. Because Whitehead had a full-time teaching position throughout the period of writing and Russell had sufficient income to devote full time to the work, it was probably inevitable that Russell should prepare more of the book than Whitehead. Existing correspondence between them from

[7]Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (Cambridge: University Press, 1929), p. 10; (New York: Macmillan, 1929), p. 12; and Russell, *My Philosophical Development* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1959), p. 74; (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 74.

this period confirms this.[8] In parceling credit in this way I do not wish to imply that the book would have been written without Whitehead's help. It wouldn't have been. As Russell wrote at the time of Whitehead's death: "Neither of us alone could have written the book; even together, and with the alleviation brought by mutual discussion, the effort was so severe that at the end we both turned aside from mathematical logic with a kind of nausea."[9]

It is not possible in a lecture of this sort to present Russell's analysis of propositions containing definite descriptions in its subtlest form, for that requires use of the techniques of symbolic logic and a lot of time. But it is entirely possible to give the gist of the theory by using examples in English, and that is what I propose doing. I will begin with a distinction.

We are all very familiar with the denoting function of language, though perhaps not under that name. Words do have the function of picking out things in the world, and this philosophers call their denoting function. For instance, the word 'library' is sometimes used, as we all know, to talk about something in the world. In other contexts the connotation of the word would be of more interest, for example, if you were writing a dictionary, then you would give the connotation of 'library' in some such way as this: 'a storehouse for books'. The connotation of the term links it up with other terms of the language. I mention the connotation only to remind you that most common nouns, adjectives, and verbs have both connotation and denotation.

Proper names, on the other hand, have only denotation. They serve to pick certain things out. For example, the name 'Bertrand Russell' served for a very long time to pick out a certain animated physical object. But the name 'Bertrand Russell' has no connotation. There is no dictionary in which you could look up the name and find out what it meant. All of us learn as very young children that our names are not definable.

There is one further point to be noted before we turn to Russell's views on definite descriptions. All of us learn very early that we don't need to know the names of other people in order to talk about them. We quickly learn to refer to them by making up denoting phrases. We speak of 'the last man in line', or of 'the person sitting on my left', or of 'the next President of the University of Toronto', and so on. All of these phrases, which are called definite descriptions, serve to pick

[8]This conclusion is drawn in a study of "The Whitehead Correspondence" by Douglas P. Lackey, *Russell*, no. 5 (spring 1972), 14-16.

[9]"Whitehead and Principia Mathematica," *Mind*, 57 (April 1948), 138.

out people whose proper names we do not know at the time we use them. Common sense also seems to teach us that these descriptions are synonymous with proper names. But a little reflection reveals the flaw in this supposition. Russell gives as one of the examples which led him to distinguish definite descriptions and proper names the following. King George IV asked this question: "Is Scott the author of *Waverley*?" Clearly, Russell argued, we would not want to attribute to the first gentleman of Europe an interest in the law of identity, but that is what we would be doing if we supposed that 'the author of *Waverley*' and 'Scott' are synonyms. Under that interpretation we would have the king asking "Is Scott Scott?" which even his father could have answered.

Still the expression 'the auther of *Waverley*' is clearly a denoting expression. This is proved by the use people make of it. But how does it denote? We can't assume that it denotes in the same way as proper names, for, if we do, we get into the embarrassing position of not being able to deny the existence of certain fabulous entities. The expression 'the golden mountain' is meaningful, and we want to use it to deny that there is any such thing. We want to maintain that the proposition 'The golden mountain does not exist' is true. But if the expression 'the golden mountain' denotes in the way proper names denote, it seems that there must be something for it to denote, and if there is something for it to denote, then don't we contradict ourselves when we deny its existence? We seem to be in the absurd position of having to assume the existence of certain entities at the very moment when it is our intention to deny their existence.

This is the nest of problems to which Russell turned his formidable attention.[10] For him they had arisen in his work in mathematics. Definite descriptions are very essential to the mathematician; he wants to speak, for example, of the rational root of an equation, long before he knows whether there is one or not. The Russellian analysis runs as follows. Suppose we come upon the following sentence: 'The author of *The Principles of Mathematics* is erotomaniac'. Now, Russell argues, careful reflection on this sentence reveals that it is really three sentences rolled into one. The first of these claims that at least one man wrote *The Principles of Mathematics*, and this of course would be false if no one wrote the book. The second sentence asserts that at most one person wrote the book, and this would be false if more than one person wrote the book. Finally, there is a third sentence claiming that whoever wrote the book is erotomaniac, which is false if he fails

[10]The principal source is "On Denoting," in *Mind*, n.s. 14 (October 1905); reprinted in Russell's *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. Robert C. Marsh (London: Allen and Unwin, 1956).

to pass the tests, whatever they might be, to which persons suspected of erotomania are put. Most people, but not all as we shall see later, would claim it was false because the writer was not erotomaniac.

If we apply the analysis to 'The golden mountain is tall' it breaks into three sentences:

(1) There is at least one thing that is both golden and a mountain;

(2) There is at most one thing that is both golden and a mountain;

(3) Whatever is both golden and a mountain is tall.

Clearly, the first of these is false, there is nothing in the universe that is both golden and a mountain, so we are not left with the absurdity of supposing that it does exist in order to talk about it.

What Russell had done can be put in two different ways, each of which reveals something about the fundamental character of his work. He has provided us, first, with a way of, as it were, decomposing any definite description into talk about things with certain predicates. The phrase 'the golden mountain' when part of a sentence seems to name some one thing, and the seemingness is maintained when we break up the exression to read 'There is at least one thing that is both golden and a mountain'. It is still possible that there is a thing with both these characteristics, but the burden of proof is now on the man who claims there is. If he can produce something that is both golden and a mountain well and good, but until he does he cannot claim that there is such a thing solely because our language permits us to use the expression 'the golden mountain'.

The second way to characterize Russell's results is this: he was the first to offer an explanation of the meaning of the word 'the' when used in the singular. It is one of the most familiar words of the English language, yet it is one whose meaning is the most difficult of expression. Russell succeeded in offering an explanation of its meaning, because he was the first to see that any explanation of the meaning must be given in terms of the context in which the word 'the' occurs. Attempts to explain the meaning without reference to the context are doomed to failure, Russell argued, because the word is never used apart from a context, and it is its position in the context that determinesthe meaning of the whole context. The word 'the' has meaning only in use; it has no meaning in isolation.

The logical and philosophical contributions I have been discussing are truly of the first rank. They may be criticized or even replaced eventually by alternatives, but they cannot be ignored by anyone interested in the questions with which they deal. They constitute only a very limited sample of Russell's work, much of which shares, or comes

close to sharing, their exhalted status. And, of course, he worked in many other areas of philosophy besides those I have sampled, but it is not possible to go into these without making the whole lecture one in philosophy, and that seems the wrong thing to do with a man like Russell.

In an academic setting such as this one it is especially fitting to call attention to an aspect of Russell's career that is not often enough mentioned. I mean his contribution to the profession of philosophy and to the teaching of philosophy. In discussing this topic I want also to touch upon his contribution to the development of academic freedom during this century.

Probably his greatest contribution to the career of philosophy is the work his writings do in recruiting the intelligent young to the study of philosophy. As a teacher of philosophy I have had the privilege of teaching many students who were led to enroll in a philosophy course because they had read some of Russell's writings and been strongly enough moved by them to desire to learn more about what philosophy is. They have cited many of his works as arousing their interest, but his polemical essay, "Why I am Not a Christian", is the one most often mentioned. Those who know it will readily understand the provocative effect it has on those who read it because they have the question, 'Am I a Christian?, or a variant on it, very much in mind. It establishes for many readers the philosophical alternative for handling such questions. One must analyze and argue, Russell tells them, if he wants the best answers to such questions. When such advice hits philosophical talent, the youngster is apt to find himself hooked on philosophy. Whitehead neatly caught the spirit of the reaction of many young readers to Russell when he was heard to say, after chairing a Russell lecture at Harvard, "Bertie has made darkness visible."[11]

Willard van Orman Quine, a prominent American logician and philosopher, is one who got into philosophy from reading Russell. On Russell's ninetieth birthday Quine paid him the following tribute:

> A young man decides to be a philosopher, "How do you mean, 'philosopher'?" they ask him. "Well," the young man pursues, "take Bertrand Russell." I was one of the many who, down the years, answered thus. You have followers and followers' followers, apostates and apostates' apostates. For generations you have been head empiricist in a land celebrated for empiricism, and along the way you have sired the Vienna Circle and grandsired the Russell-baiting Oxford philosophy itself.
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> So I hail your ninetieth birthday as a momentous anniversary. I could have done so on the score of mathematical logic alone; for *Principia Mathematica* was what, of all books, has influenced me

[11] I owe this to Professor Gregory Vlastos who attended the lecture.

most.[12]

As Quine notes, many others who have devoted their lives to philosophy in this century received their first impulse for it from reading Russell.

He also actively recruited those whom he believed talented to the profession. Letters in the Russell Archives at McMaster University show that he spent a great deal of time corresponding with those who wrote him on philosophical topics. He frequently read the papers they sent him and wrote extensive comments. And always, if he saw evidence of talent, there was a note of encouragement. Often correspondence led to meetings where the person's work would be discussed face to face. I am acquainted with a man who first wrote Russell from South Africa on philosophical topics. Russell replied and a correspondence developed. When this man enrolled in Oxford University a few years later for advanced work in philosophy, he found no one willing to supervise his work--if it was to be on Russell's philosophy. Although this may surprise some of you, to those who have studied Oxford philosophy in the 1950s, when the incident took place, it is not at all unexpected. He took his problem up with Russell. Russell had an immediate solution: he would supervise the work himself, if Oxford would permit it. So Russell took on a pupil when he was in his late eighties.

It is not generally known outside the company of professional philosophers that Russell played an important and probably decisive role in deciding the careers of two of this century's most notable philosophers. Russell did his first recruiting for philosophy in his fourth year at Cambridge. The recruit was G.E. Moore. Here is how Moore tells the story:

> Among the young students with whom I began to make acquaintance at the end of my first year was Bertrand Russell; and it was mainly owing to his advice and encouragement that I began to study philosophy. Russell was two years my senior in academic standing; and hence, when I was in my second year (and it was only in that year that I began to know him at all well), he was already in his fourth year and completing his academic course by working for Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos: he left Cambridge at the end of that year. In the course of it he must have formed the opinion, from hearing me argue with himself or with friends of ours, that I had some aptitude for philosophy: at all events at the end of the year he urged me strongly to do what he had done and to take Part II of the Moral Sciences Tripos for my Second Part; and if he had not urged me, I doubt if I should have done so. Until that year I had in fact hardly known that there was such a subject as philosophy. I came up to Cambridge expecting to do nothing but Classics there, and expecting also that afterwards, all my life long, my work would consist in teaching Classics to the Sixth Form of some Public School--a prospect to which I looked forward with pleasure.[13]

The result of Russell's persuasion was, as is well known, to re-establish British philosophy in the empirical mode. When they began their philosophical work most professional philosophers in Britain were Hegelians of a sort called Absolute Idealists. Moore and Russell launched a campaign of argument against the central doctrines of this school. Their arguments seemed to students of philosophy to be much stronger than the ones the Absolute Idealists provided in their own defence, and so the kind of realism that Moore and Russell advocated gradually came to dominate philosophy in the whole English-speaking world.

Russell's other recruit was Wittgenstein. Wittgenstein had enrolled in Manchester to study engineering. In the course of reading mathematics for his degree he had become interested in the philosophy of mathematics. He inquired at Manchester if there was anyone who worked in the philosophy of mathematics and was told to go to Trinity College, Cambridge, and contact Russell. Russell saw a great deal of him during his first term, though he was unsure for some time whether Wittgenstein was a man of genius or a crank. Russell gives this account of the way Wittgenstein got into philosophy:

> At the end of his first term at Trinity, he came to me and said: 'Do you think I am an absolute idiot?' I said: 'Why do you want to know?' He replied: 'Because if I am I shall become an aeronaut, but if I am not I shall become a philosopher.' I said to him: 'My dear fellow, I don't know whether you are an absolute idiot or not, but if you will write me an essay during the vacation upon any philosophical topic that interests you, I will read it and tell you.' He did so, and brought it to me at the beginning of the next term. As soon as I read the first sentence, I became persuaded that he was a man of genius, and assured him that he should on no account become an aeronaut.[14]

It may be that Russell's patience saved Wittgenstein's life, for Wittgenstein was frequently suicidal during his days as Russell's pupil, and Russell sometimes sat up with him very late at night until the threat of it had passed for another day.

To have brought both Moore and Wittgenstein into philosophy is surely eloquent testimony to the high place Russell occupies in the history of twentieth-century philosophy. And if you count the large number of lesser names who came into the subject wholly or partly due to the influence of his writings, one cannot avoid the conclusion that the profession and subject have been greatly strengthened by the example he has set.

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[12]Printed in *Into the Tenth Decade; Tribute to Bertrand Russell*, the programme for a musical tribute to Russell on his ninetieth birthday.

[13]Paul Arthur Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of G.E. Moore* (Evanston and Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1942), p. 13.

[14]*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-1944* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), p. 99; (Boston: Atlantic-Little, Brown, 1968), p. 137.

On two important occasions Russell showed the academic world the way a man who really believes in academic freedom behaves when the chips are down. During the First World War the establishment at Trinity College brought great pressure to bear on him to get him to leave off his anti-war work. He refused to bow to their pressure. He had, he argued, the right to make up his own mind about what was the most important task at hand. But the Society of Fellows, their ranks depleted of the young who were in war service, thought otherwise and voted to expel him from his lectureship when he was convicted of interfering with the recruitment of soldiers. His refusal to bow to the timidity of others set an example which has been often referred to and often emulated by those who, as teachers, have found themselves in official disfavour.

The first time he was denied his academic freedom it was a gentlemanly affair, done quietly and *in camera*. After all, he was a son of Trinity and it was painful to turn him out, especially since he was one of his College's greatest adornments, but he had gone astray and it must be done. By contrast the second time was a three-ring circus, and I wish to spend a bit more time on it if only for the reason that I do not wish to leave the impression in this lecture that Bertrand Russell was uncontroversial.

In 1940 the Board of the College of the City of New York appointed Russell Professor of Philosophy, thus setting off one of the most famous controversies over academic freedom that the United States has had. Bishop Manning of the Protestant Episcopal Church began the attack. Despite the fact that Russell was to teach only logic, the philosophy of mathematics, and the philosophy of science, horror was expressed at the use he might make of the classroom. Once Manning got the fire started, it swept through the greater part of the religious community. Russell was denounced both in editorials and in letters to the editor. Those who hated him, or only had hate in their hearts, had a field-day. As a sample of the letters consider this one:

> Quicksands threaten! The snake is in the grass! The worm is busy in the mind! Were Bertrand Russell honest even with himself, he would declare, as did Rousseau: "I cannot look at any of my books without shuddering; instead of instructing, I corrupt; instead of nourishing, I poison. But passion blinds me, and with all my fine discourses, I am nothing but a scoundrel."[15]

One might be inclined to dismiss this as the ravings of a lunatic were

[15]Paul Edwards, "How Bertrand Russell was Prevented from Teaching at The College of the City of New York," in Russell's *Why I am Not a Christian*, ed. Edwards (London: Allen and Unwin, 1957), p. 183; (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 210. Edwards' essay is an excellent account of this case.

it not for the fact that the same level of hysteria was to manifest itself in a lawyer and a judge.

I shall give only a sketch of the rest of the controversy. A court case was started by a woman who asked that Russell's appointment be rescinded on the rather surprising ground that her daughter, who couldn't attend day classes at the College because it was then all-male, would be corrupted by Russell. Other charges such that he was an alien and had not been given a competitive examination to determine his fitness for the post were added but they served as handmaidens to the main one that Russell advocated sexual immorality. It is impossible to exaggerate the carnival aspects of the trial. In his brief, mind you, not in the heat of oral argument, but in his brief, the attorney for the woman bringing the suit described Russell's writings as "lecherous, salacious, libidinous, lustful, venerous, erotomaniac, aphrodisiac, atheistic, irreverent, narrow-minded, untruthful, and bereft of moral fibre".[16] Without giving any indication that he had ever read any of Russell's books, he concluded his brief in this way:

> He is not a philosopher in the accepted meaning of the word; not a lover of wisdom; not a searcher after wisdom; not an explorer of that universal science which aims at the explanation of all phenomena of the universe by ultimate causes; that in the opinion of your deponent and multitudes of other persons he is a sophist; practices sophism; that by cunning contrivances, tricks and devices and by mere quibbling, he puts forth fallacious arguments and arguments that are not supported by sound reasoning; and he draws inferences which are not justly deduced from a sound premise; that all his alleged doctrines which he calls philosophy are just cheap, tawdry, worn out, patched up fetishes and propositions, devised for the purpose of misleading the people.[17]

His brief set the tone of the trial and the judge never rose above it. He found against Russell's appointment in record time, writing a long opinion that is shocking in its lack of rigour and restraint. It is enough to mention here that he spoke of "the filth contained in Russell's books" without citing a single instance, and that he contended that Russell's appointment would create "a chair of indecency". Indeed, his logic is so contorted that at one point he seems to be saying that a person lecturing on logic and the philosophy of mathematics can cause "sexual intercourse between students, where the female is under the age of eighteen years". This doctrine of "indirect influence", as he called it, suggests new scope for interdisciplinary studies.[18]

[16]John Dewey and Horace M. Kallen, eds., *The Bertrand Russell Case* (New York: Viking, 1941), p. 20. This book contains essays on all the facets of the case.

[17]*Ibid.*, pp. 20-1.

[18]*Ibid.* Justice McGeehan's decision is printed in full on pp. 213-25.

On the day following his decision Russell's lawyer requested that Russell himself be made a party to the dispute in order to answer the charges made against him. This petition was denied by the judge on the ground that Russell had no legal interest in the proceedings. There are many more horrors to this case, but it is not necessary to give them in order to make the point I wish to make. However, it is essential to notice that at this point the *New York Times* published an editorial in which it rebuked Russell for defending himself. He should, the editorial said, "have had the wisdom to retire from the appointment as soon as its harmful effects became evident." In a letter to the newspaper Russell disputed this point:

> In one sense this would have been the wisest course; it would certainly have been more prudent as far as my personal interests are concerned, and a great deal pleasanter. If I had considered only my own interests and inclinations I should have retired at once. But however wise such action might had been from a personal point of view, it would also, in my judgment, have been cowardly and selfish. A great many people who realized that their own interests and principles of toleration and free speech were at stake were anxious from the first to continue the controversy. If I had retired I should have robbed them of their *casus belli* and tacitly assented to the proposition that substantial groups shall be allowed to drive out of public office individuals whose opinions, race or nationality they find repugnant. This would appear to me immoral.[19]

The academic profession owes Russell a clear debt of gratitude for the stand he takes in this letter. By letting himself be the target of the darker forces in New York society, he helped focus attention on the need for guarantees of academic freedom, especially in publicly supported institutions. The principles of academic freedom stand a little more firmly entrenched in the United States, and everywhere else for that matter, because of his courage.

I come now to Russell's career as a political activist. For over half his life he was a conspicuous member of what Rose Macaulay, herself a prominent member of it, has called "the stage army of the good".[20] He joined it first to work for women's suffrage. On behalf of their cause he stood for Parliament but was soundly defeated. He continued to support their demands until the vote was given them. But before that happened the First World War broke out. Russell opposed it from the start. He threw himself into anti-war work. According to those who worked with him in it, there was no task too menial for him. His skills as a writer and speaker were most in demand and he gave of them freely.

[19]The editorial appeared on 20 April 1940 on p. 16; Russell's letter was published on 26 April 1940 on p. 20.

[20]Quoted in *Left, Left, Left: A Personal Account of Six Protest Campaigns, 1945-65*, by Peggy Duff (London: Allison & Busby, 1971), p. 14.

His first brush with the law and the courts occurred when he announced in a letter to the London *Times* that he was the author of an anonymous leaflet for distributing which several men had been prosecuted and sentenced to jail. The authorities had to move against him when his letter appeared. He was tried and sentenced to pay a fine of £100 and £10 costs "or in default of distress 61 days". He wished to make the authorities jail him, so that his message would get greater attention, but they were not ready for this step, and, when he failed to pay the fine, they seized his possessions, mostly books, and put them up for auction. Russell's friends, led by Lytton Strachey and Lady Ottoline Morrell, took up a collection and bought the first book sold for £110, giving it back to Russell as a gift. That action settled the case and, the authorities hoped, Russell's anti-war agitation.
giving it back to Russell as a gift. That action settled the case and, the authorities hoped, Russell's anti-war agitation.

But they were wrong. If anything, it caused him to spend even more time on it. He took more and more of the work of the No-Conscription Fellowship on himself. Throughout 1917 he acted as Chairman of the Fellowship as well as an editor of its weekly journal, writing 47 articles for it in that year alone. And, of course, he wrote much else besides for whoever would publish his arguments against conscription and the war. Early in 1918 he was charged a second time: this time for insulting an ally of Britain, namely, the United States of America. He had written that the American Army would likely be used in England and France to intimidate strikers, an occupation it was accustomed to performing at home. This time there was no option of a fine. He was sentenced to six months imprisonment, but on appeal was permitted to spend it in the First Division where he could furnish his own cell and have his books by him. While imprisoned he wrote one of his finest books, *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*, so he spent his time profitably. Shortly after his release the armistice was signed, and he returned to work in philosophy.

Did his anti-war work accomplish anything worthwhile? Or was it, as he himself sometimes thought when doing it, completely futile? Only careful historical research can really answer this question, but it is possible to suggest that there was one positive outcome of the work done by that little band to which Russell belonged. It is very likely that had they not raised a continual fuss, the treatment of conscientious objectors would have been even harsher than it was. For instance, at one point the military authorities devised the plan of transporting these men to France, taking them into the war zone, giving them orders, and shooting them when they failed to obey. One group was taken to France,

but Russell and his friends got wind of it and had Philip Morrell and other members of Parliament ask the Prime Minister about it during question period. The result was, of course, that once it was brought to his attention, the plan had to be scrapped. By their vigilance they provided sympathetic members of Parliament with information which kept the question of the conscientious objectors and their plight constantly before the country. It seems very likely that had the conscientious objectors had no famous friends many of them would have been shot as traitors in order to scare those remaining into the army. If Russell's anti-war work did substantially contribute to less harsh treatment of those opposed to service in the war on grounds of conscience, as I have been suggesting it did, then it would seem to have been clearly worthwhile.

Between protesting the First World War and protesting the Vietnam War Russell was active in a large number of campaigns, from freedom for India to birth control. In that broad spectrum of political opinion known as the anti-Communist left he could nearly always be depended upon to support public campaigns which advanced progressive principles. It is the leaders of this group, especially the intellectuals, that Rose Macaulay had in mind with her phrase, "the stage army of the good". And one has to admit that Russell was a very prominent member of it. But it is nearly impossible to assess the effectiveness of his activity on behalf of this or that cause. He was usually one among many, and there were always large historical forces at work at the same time. It will be a long time before scholars have sorted these matters out.

In his last years Russell became more and more of a lone protestor. I do not wish to imply that he did not also join groups to protest something or other, nor that he sometimes took the initiative in forming the groups. What I do want to suggest is that in the 1960s, with the formation of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, he seemed to issue statements on nearly everything that happened in the world. One got the impression that he thought of himself as the conscience of the world, obliged to comment upon all its imperfections. This is partly due to the fact that, for the first time in his life, he had a staff of young men who served as additional eyes and ears, and brought many things to his attention that he would have otherwise missed. But I think that is only part of the explanation. He became convinced, I believe, that nuclear war was so horrible it had to be avoided at all costs. History, he argued, has shown us that great wars can get triggered by virtually any dispute getting out of hand; therefore, we must always be alert to what is happening in the world and try, as best we can, to prevent it developing in such a way as to start a nuclear war. In short, he became something of a fanatic on the point. I have a phonograph record[21] of an interview with him in which he admits that he finds it hard not to be fanatical on the subject of nuclear war. And many who interviewed him during his last years found themselves being asked how they could possibly be concerned with anything but nuclear war when their lives were so clearly in danger. Those who are inclined to blame persons around him for the seemingly endless flow of statements from his home have to explain away this sort of evidence. It seems more likely that he gave his assistants orders to watch the state of the world and to prepare drafts of statements for him to issue when it appeared that a statement from him might render nuclear war (or other man-made disasters) less probable.

What appraisal are we to make of his work against nuclear war and the war in Vietnam? I think it is incontestable that his efforts helped make both issues much more public. He provided large groups of people with a set of values for which to agitate. The danger of nuclear war between Russia and the West does seem much remoter now than it did ten years ago. How much this is due to the work of various organizations with which Russell was associated I do not know, though it does seem reasonable to give them some of the credit. With regard to the war in Vietnam his most controversial action was suggesting, and then setting up, the International War Crimes Tribunal. Again, it is still too soon to tell what effect, if any, it had in helping wind down the war. But it is worth noting that when it was going on, it was widely disparaged in the press, but after the Calley case, there were a lot of second thoughts. Perhaps, some columnists mused, Russell had been right all along, and the *New York Times*, in its Sunday book review section, gave a front page review to a group of books on the topic, including the one containing the transcript of the Stockholm trial.[22] Russell's action, however erratic it might have appeared at the time, may have helped fix important opinion, with the consequence that the end of the war was more actively sought then hitherto. But history will decide.

When Russell's grandfather died in 1878, the *Times* of London, toward the end of a long obituary, had this to say of Lord John's last years:

> Earl Russell, however, during the last ten years has seldom been silent about public affairs, though often silence would have

[21] *Speaking Personally Bertrand Russell* (Riverside RLP 7014/7015, four sides), now out of print.

[22] John Duffett, ed., *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal* (New York: Simon and Schuster, A Clarion book, 1970).

been better for his fame. There is hardly a topic in politics on which he has not bestowed a Letter, a Speech, or a Pamphlet, and a collection of the political utterances of his retirement would be not only curious, but eminently illustrative of his merits and his defects. The rigidity of intellect which applied to all persons and circumstances the same standards, and those standards the few and rather bald principles adopted by the Whig party within the last century, was to the last preserved. His "Letters to Mr. Chichester Fortescue on the State of Ireland" might, setting aside personal references, have been written in 1835, instead of 1869. His writings and speeches on the Education difficulty reveal his firm faith that the problems of the present day might all be solved by expedients which he approved 40 years ago. Not long since we published a statement from him in which the complexities of the Eastern Question were disposed of with a confident belief in the potency of a few sonorous generalities. Nor was his criticism of other problems of domestic policy after his active responsibility had ceased as fruitful and rich as might have been expected from his unequalled experience of affairs. His faith in his own political creed was intolerant as well as unbending. Yet these are the accidents and lumber of a great mind, of a great character; we must be forgiven our impatience at feeling that they mar the symmetry and dignity of a grand career. The integrity, the courage, the steadiness of Earl Russell's convictions and actions are an honour to the political life of his country, in which such qualities are not only respected, but triumphant.[23]

Many people said the same, necessary changes being made, of his grandson when he died in 1970. Some of Bertrand Russell's later pronouncements were "the accidents and lumber of a great mind, of a great character", there can be no denying that. And his later life displayed again the pair of opinions that John Maynard Keynes had noticed in the First World War:

> Bertie in particular sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that in fact human affairs were carried on after a most irrational fashion, but that the remedy was quite simple and easy; since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally.[24]

We glimpse here a dominant theme of a great life. Keynes tries to leave the impression that these opinions are irreconcilable (and he is probably right), but Russell would not have agreed, for he had a passionate faith in the efficacy of reason. Men, he believed, had within themselves all that was needed to create a virtual paradise on earth. They need only assemble the facts and reason dispassionately about them. Solutions could and would be found to all human problems. No faith in anything supernatural was required, indeed it was actively to be eradicated, for it interfered with the unbiassed use of reason. Man, if

[23] *Eminent Persons: Biographies Reprinted from the Times, 1870-1879* (London: printed and published at the Times Office by F. Goodlake, 1880), p. 202.

[24] Keynes, *Two Memoirs: Dr Melchior: A Defeated Enemy and My Early Beliefs*, introduced by David Garnett (London: Rupert Hart-Davis, 1949), p. 102.

only he would learn to stand alone and use his sense and reasoning faculties fully, could truly grace the Universe.

This lofty faith in man is nicely brought out in his answer to an interviewer's question with which I will conclude this lecture. He was asked whether he had missed anything by not being religious, and he replied in this way:

> I don't feel I've missed anything through not believing in religion. I think on the contrary that the religious people have missed a very great deal indeed; they've missed the kind of pride that stands upright and looks at the world and says, "Well, you can kill me, but anyway here I am, I stand firm"; and they've missed that and I think that's a very, very valuable thing that a person should have.
>
> I shouldn't like, I shouldn't like at all to go through life in a sort of creepy-crawly way, full of terror, and being bolstered up all the time as if I were a fainting lady being kept from sprawling on the ground. Because no human being whom I can respect needs the consolation of things that are untrue. He can face the truth....[25]

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[25] From the phonograph record cited in fn. 21.