Tea with Bertrand Russell in 1961

When I made plans to visit Europe in early 1961, I entertained the thought of a meeting with Bertrand Russell. As the grandson of a well known atheist and the son of a prominent civil libertarian, it was only natural that I should have an extremely high regard for Russell.

I consulted two prominent American humanists as to the propriety of such a visit; the one cautioned that it would be an imposition on the ailing philosopher, the other reassured and encouraged me by saying that Russell would be delighted to see me. With only two opinions, one of which coincided with my inclinations and one which did not, I had little choice but to give the former greater weight.

Bertrand Russell, at the time of my visit, resided on a farm in a rather remote district of northwest Wales. His address reached me belatedly in Edinburgh, Scotland. I immediately sent him a letter indicating that I was coming. I stated in the letter that I would certainly understand if he were indisposed. Unfortunately, my coming without his confirmation did place him in the difficult position of possibly having to turn me down only after I had come a considerable distance.

The trip from Edinburgh required four exhausting days because rides were hard to come by and I walked much of the way. On the evening of 2 June 1961, I arrived in the small Welsh village of Penrhyndeudraeth.

Early the next morning, I telephoned Lord Russell's home which was a mile or so distant in the country. A housekeeper answered and listened patiently to my story. She excused herself for a moment. Upon her return, she asked me if I could visit the farm at four o'clock that afternoon.

That day was not without its distractions as I anxiously awaited tea time and the interview with Bertrand Russell. My landlady knocked on my door to ask if I would meet with the town grocer, a gentleman by the name of Richards. In

burst an energetic man somewhat on the short side--almost a carbon copy of the actor Claude Rains. He introduced himself abruptly with the statement: "You Americans are war mongers!" I was startled but did manage to say: "Kind of looks that way, doesn't it?" The grocer's feelings, as well as my own, I am sure were due to the aggressive and confrontative manner of the late, but then recent, Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles.

The grocer was somewhat deflated at my unexpected agreement and resumed in a more subdued fashion: "I understand you are going to visit Lord Russell." After a thoughtful pause he continued: "Great man Lord Russell", rolling his r's extravagantly. It was clear from Grocer Richards' comments as well as those of the other Welsh villagers with whom I talked, that Russell was held in great respect, even awe, in Penrhyndeudraeth.

The way to the Russell home followed the main road west to Portmadoc and the sea. A narrow lane off to the left led up the side of a hill to the secluded country house. The view in the direction of Portmadoc afforded by the lane was most imposing on the warm clear afternoon when I made that walk. From where I stood, the land dropped away sharply towards a large inlet of the sea a score of miles distant. To the northwest, the beauty of this quiet location was framed by a series of misty hills.

Lord Russell's farmhouse was unobtrusive. In spite of the obvious contrast with the opulence of Voltaire's home at Fernay, both places left me with similar feelings upon my approach. This was due, I am sure, to the natural beauty of both locations, the deliberate seclusion and the similar natures of the two men who had chosen them.

I was admitted by the housekeeper who ushered me into a fairly large room which must have served both as a library and a study. She informed me that Lord Russell was taking a walk and would return shortly.

Russell's inner sanctum provided more than enough diversion during the short wait. Voltaire again came to mind when I noticed a bust of his withered, satirical face on a table in the corner. Bookshelves occupied most of the wall space. Two oriental scroll-paintings hung on the small wall surface which remained. On a table in the center of the room, I noticed the letter which I had mailed from Edinburgh. It rested on top of what appeared to be a handwritten manuscript entitled "Has Man A Future?" Small sandwiches and cakes on a platter along with two cups and saucers had been placed on a coffee table in anticipation of my arrival. An open window offered a wonderful view of the rolling Welsh landscape, especially the lovely valley which I had viewed from the lane.

I heard someone enter the rear of the house. Turning from the window, I faced the door just as it was being opened. In walked the hoary philosopher himself, briskly. He was a short, slight man with long, white hair topping a lean, friendly face. For all appearances, he

could have been cast perfectly as Sir Joseph KCB in H.M.S. Pinafore.

A brown tweed suit with a matching waistcoat covered his frail figure. He appeared considerably less than his eighty-nine years. "Have you been waiting long?" he asked. Without waiting for an answer he continued: "How nice of you to come." As he spoke, he indicated with his hand that I was to sit in a large heavily upholstered chair which faced a similar one into which he settled. Almost immeidately he took a pipe from his coat pocket and lighted it.

Russell was interested in knowing my reasons for coming. I explained that my mother, Vashti McCollum, was, at the time, president of the American Humanist Association. She had earlier prosecuted a well known legal battle in the United States to remove the teaching of sectarian religious classes from the public schools. I had read Russell's many writings on rationalism and was quite impressed with their unpretentious logic and simplicity. He was particularly interested in the church-state issue in the United States. His loss of a teaching position in New York City in 1940 due to religious bigotry must have been a contributing factor in his pursuance of the subject. The clear stand by the Supreme Court of the United States wth respect to church-state separation was a considerable comfort to both of us.

As a result of his questioning, I found myself occupying more of the conversation than I liked. I protested mildly, indicating that I had really come to hear what he had to say. "I really can't very well engage in a monologue", was Russell's quick, yet friendly, response.

I had become a great admirer of Russell's efforts on behalf of disarmament and peace. I asked him whether or not he believed his activities had produced tangible results. "The response has been far greater than I expected," he replied, "but still of very little practical significance." Concerning the possible effectiveness of his efforts in the future, I asked him if he thought it likely that substantial public opinion could be won over in the Western Nations to force their governments to adopt more conciliatory attitudes. "No, I do not think it is likely; there is a chance and it is to this end that we are devoting our energies", he responded without much optimism. It was clear, however, that he had no intention of abandoning political activism in spite of its limited efficacy.

In connection with these activities, I asked him what he felt had been accomplished through the civil disobedience demonstrations which had been held in London, and in which he had personally participated. "As far as the actual gain in popular support, I am not at all optimistic." On the brighter side, he added: "The press is most reluctant to print anything concerning the activities of the nuclear disarmament groups either pro or con,

but we did receive considerable attention in London." In probing his feelings on the international situation still further, I elicited a final note of pessimism. Russell tersely summed up his feelings with the observation: "I think that they are going to blow themselves up."

While in London, I had purchased a book written by Russell in 1936, entitled Which Way to Peace? In it he advocated pacifism in opposition to the rising militarism of Germany and Italy. Several years later he supported the war effort. I was interested in hearing him reconcile this apparent inconsistency. Russell indicated that it was not easy at the time he wrote the book to visualize just how far good fortune would carry Hitler. When in the late 'thirties it became apparent that it was impossible to deal with the "madness" of the Nazis in a peaceful manner, he had no other choice but to support the cause of the Allies. I had to admire the freedom and ease with which Russell altered his point of view when he felt that the evidence justified the change. (This open approach I have never felt to be the all-encompassing characteristic of the academic profession--and neither did Socrates.)

Russell referred to Hitler as "the most absolutely wicked man in history, simply without parallel, with the possible exception of Genghis Khan." Of Churchill, he said simply: "He saved us." From his pre-war pacifism and his post-war fear of the arms race, I concluded that Russell's admiration of Britain's wartime leader extended to little longer than Churchill's tenure as prime minister during the Second World War.

We talked at some length on the subject of the rise in world affairs of the Soviet Union. I was interested in whether or not he believed that the development of the new state would have been materially altered had Leon Trotsky succeeded Lenin instead of Stalin. Russell doubted it. "The magnitude of the forces unleashed dictated the course of events and there was little likelihood of a milder result." Commenting further: "The Russians, with even more success, were able to do what the Japanese had done at the turn of the century; they were able to utilize the scientific method for great technological advance but were unable to grasp its spirit."

Russell, reminiscing briefly about his visit to Russia in 1920, added a short anecdote concerning himself and Lenin. In conversation with Russell, Lenin glowingly described the revolution in the rural areas as "taking care of itself". "The peasants", Lenin noted with satisfaction, "were roaming about stringing up their former landlords to the nearest trees." Lenin then guffawed. After a thoughtful pause, Russell said to me quietly, "I didn't like that very much." It seemed to me that Bertrand Russell never recovered from the disillusionment with Bolshevism that he acquired on that trip.

Occasionally during the conversation he would drop

forward on one knee to place a piece of wood in the fireplace, keeping the small fire alive.

Only once during the visit did Russell seem disturbed concerning something I said. It arose when I mentioned that I was not an atheist. "My word, why not?" he inquired in astonishment. He seemed somewhat relieved when I said that I refused to elevate the dogmas of theistic religions to the dignity of denial.

As soon as he began to show signs of tiring, I arose thanking him for his time. "Not at all," he responded graciously while accompanying me to the door. As I paused momentarily in the doorway he asked me how I had managed to get to Penrhyndeudraeth. "Walking and hitch-hiking", I said. "I used to walk quite a bit when I was younger", and as an afterthought he continued: "Would you believe that I am eighty-nine years old." "No--walking is probably one reason why you have lived to be an old man", I replied in parting.

As soon as I got back to my room, I wrote down my impressions of the interview. I did not have a recording device; what I have quoted came directly from the notes that I made at the time.

In Russell's later years, his detractors were in the habit of portraying him as a once brilliant but senile old fool, totally under the influence of his American secretary, Ralph Schoenman. On the contrary, I found him to be extraordinarily consistent with the image I had formed of him after reading most of his published writings. He was urbane in the extreme and possessed an unusual wit and intelligence. His comments were always to the point; there was never a trace of pedantry. There seemed to be little question that his life-long belief in the ultimate rationality of the species still persisted, in spite of occasional evidence to the contrary.

The encounter was certainly one which I, then a twenty-four-year-old American, will remember to the end of my days. I felt it then and still do today, to be the generous act of a truly remarkable man.

Champaign, Illinois — Dannel Angus McCollum