

A conversation with Bertrand Russell

by Martin Jones and Clive Wood

MINFFORDD IS THE name of a strip of road on a hill, fifteen miles from Snowdon. It has two cafes (one open on Sundays), two pubs (both closed on Sundays, alas!), a toll-gate, and the remains of the old Festinniogg railway. It has one other claim to fame: at the top of the hill, overlooking the surrounding country, is a two-storey house which is the home of perhaps the greatest of contemporary philosophers, Bertrand, Earl Russell. It was there that we spoke to him late one Sunday afternoon at the end of April.

Any trepidation that we had felt about meeting so distinguished a figure was dispelled as soon as he opened the door to us. “Good afternoon, excuse the dog” (a small, brown, extremely energetic terrier; “Please come in”). He showed us into his study, a large, high room with half the walls covered by bookshelves. Three copies of his *Principia Mathematica* were placed, unobtrusively, on the floor. We had both been uneasy about the formalized interviewing procedure—the prepared question leading to an uncommunicative, monosyllabic answer, and on to another stereotyped, formal question, but here again our fears were dispelled at the outset.

“We’ll talk generally first”, he said, “while we have our tea. It’s China tea, not as weak as it looks.” We were given cake and a box of cigarettes with an injunction to smoke as many as we wished. We told him that neither of us belonged to C.N.D. but were interested in the idea of nuclear disarmament, and would like to

hear his views on it.

“The situation today, as I see it,” he said, “is that Russia and America are threatening each other in a way that can only lead to war, and the only way to prevent war is for the West to stop threatening. But neither Russian nor American politicians want the threat to be removed. This has been proved many times, like the last time the Russians proposed a workable disarmament agreement and America rejected it completely. I have been called pro-communist; it is not true, but I do support Russian policy when it goes some way towards removing the threat of nuclear war. Britain’s role in this is quite clear. We have been told by American defence experts that Britain’s contribution to the nuclear strategy of NATO is completely negligible. We should therefore relinquish our nuclear weapons and lead a neutralist block in the UN. We could take control of the UN and so influence public opinion, that the threat of war could be eliminated.”

“Do you think that nationalism is the cause of international tension?”

“Yes, to a very large extent. All countries are nationalistic, even Switzerland.”

“Do you think that the rift between Russia and China will bring Russia and the West closer together?”

“I don’t think the argument between Russia and China is nearly as serious as our politicians would have us believe, but in any case, a war between Russia and China, whoever was victorious, would hardly improve our own situation in the West.”

We asked him what he thought about the means employed by organizations like C.N.D. and the Committee of 100 to achieve their aims, and whether he thought that activities like the Aldermaston march were regarded by some participants merely as an opportunity for irresponsible behaviour.

“No one,” he said, “who goes on the Aldermaston march is one-tenth as irresponsible as Kennedy or Macmillan. As for the means adopted, of course, they are ridiculous but one has to use outrageous means when it is necessary to influence public opinion rapidly, before it is too late. If I could influence opinion deeply by being martyred for the idea of nuclear disarmament, rather than just giving speeches about it in Trafalgar Square, I would be quite prepared to do so—anyone should. There is a lot of nonsense

talked about the ‘Supreme Sacrifice’. Many more people die for their ideals than you would suspect.”

We asked him if his position as a pacifist and advocate of nuclear disarmament was a result of his philosophical investigations and conclusions.

“Certainly not,” he said, “it is much more immediate. If you see a child drowning, you don’t construct a philosophical system to decide what to do—there isn’t time. You do what you can immediately.”

“Would you rather be remembered, Sir, for your contributions to philosophy and mathematics, or your contributions to, what shall we say, nuclear sanity?” The reply was immediate.

“For the latter certainly. The reason is very simple; there is no point in constructing a philosophy or painting a picture or writing a symphony if no one is to be left alive to enjoy it.” At this we both laughed. “Yes”, he said, “I’ve noticed people always laugh when they hear the truth, they are so used to having it hidden from them.”

Since we were talking about philosophy we asked him what he thought about contemporary philosophy, Existentialism in particular.

“Well”, he said, “there used to be some good philosophy in France and Germany before the War, but there isn’t much now. The Americans are all pragmatists—they say they are not, but they are, and Oxford philosophy these days is only play-acting.”

We talked about the justification for studying philosophy and those branches of science without immediate application. He thought that the use to which a discovery is put is not the responsibility of the scientist who discovers it, except in the case of those scientists who sell themselves to governments and tell high-sounding lies when they are told to.

We talked of many things in the hour and a half we were with him, some perhaps best left unrecorded; of Korea and Cuba, of birth control, and the demolition of creeds and bias, and on his views of certain of his contemporaries. He was always frank, perfectly lucid and completely logical, yet above all this we carried away with us the impression of his warmth and human sympathy.

“I would have liked to have persuaded you two”, he said as we were leaving, “of the rightness of our cause.” We told him that he

had influenced us, perhaps more than he knew.

We left, again avoiding the dog, which was still as active as ever, and as we drove back to Liverpool we both knew that it would be a long time before we met anyone who would leave so lasting an impression on us as the tall, white-haired, old man whom we had just left.