

Profile—Bertrand Russell¹

by Rupert Crawshay-Williams

THE TITLE-PAGE of a recent book by Bertrand Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, carries beneath his name a list of his many academic honours and awards: then a space: and then the words “Judicially pronounced unworthy to be Professor of Philosophy at the College of the City of New York (1940).”

It was no wish for revenge, but his naughty, disturbing wit that prompted him, like a Shakespearean jester, thus solemnly to mention this amongst his scholastic distinctions. Rancour is quite foreign to the grandson of Lord John Russell, the reforming Prime Minister, who is also the godson of John Stuart Mill, the philosopher of liberty.

Bertrand Russell’s real contribution has been to improve philosophy as an instrument of knowledge. His interest, therefore, has not been to pronounce upon the workings of the universe, but to inquire into the bases from which any pronouncements may be made, and into the meaning of those pronouncements which have already been made. To this he has brought

¹ First published (anonymously) in *The Observer*, London, 30 Jan. 1949. Reprinted with permission. The Crawshay-Williams papers include a draft of the article, with numerous variants between it and the published version. One such difference concerns Russell’s mountaineering exploits. In the draft he is said to “walk up and down 2,000 feet of mountain before lunch.”

immense scepticism and immense vitality.

He has lived his social life with this same combination of unsettling doubt and abundant vigour. But, socially, the effect has sometimes been more explosive. You can undermine philosophies with a fair impunity, but if you tickle the ribs of society it is inclined to slap back.

Russell has lived long enough to become respectable—so very respectable that he is about to broadcast the last of a series of Sunday evening lectures named in honour of Lord Reith. In the House of Lords today, Bishops listen to his rare pronouncements with awe, and Trinity College, which once expelled him, now reverently welcomes him back. Yet his deliberate reminder of the New York court's verdict suggests that the advocate of greater freedom in education, thought, and love does not wish to be considered wholly respectable. He enjoys remembering that it was in an English prison cell, which he had exchanged for his Fellow's rooms at Cambridge because of his uncompromising opposition to the first World War, that he wrote the *Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy*.

If society has sometimes treated Russell to a reproof, he can certainly not be said to have approached it with solemnity. There has always been something of snook-cocking in the presentation of his philosophy. His strongest convictions are tempered by humour, the play of reason, and a love of paradox. He is a man of powerful emotions who believes that it is a human weakness to rely upon emotion as a guide to truth. By temperament he is probably an anarchist, but he has always shown that he accepts organization—within limits—as a pre-requisite of civilized society.

Physically, the Earl Russell is a strange phenomenon. At seventy-six, he still prefers climbing the mountains round his home in North Wales to his constitutional round Regent's Park near his London flat. No amount of advice will stop his incessant pipe-smoking.

Bertrand Arthur William Russell was brought up by his grandmother, widow of the Lord John Russell, who made his name with the Reform Bill of 1832—five years before Victoria came to the throne. The old countess was a woman of strong puritanical ideas. The remains of her profound influence still

appear in his pre-Victorian delight in elaborating some very obscure point of theological doctrine.

Bertrand was prepared by a careful private education for a political career. But after surveying a dozen close relatives who were at various times Cabinet Ministers, he decided that to be Prime Minister would be a bore. He formed his own ambition. It was to rival the exploits of the great revolutionary nineteenth-century scientists, such as Darwin and Huxley, by analyzing the processes of Thought as they had of Nature. It was a fantastic ambition, but since he happened to be a genius he may well feel that in large part his ambition has been achieved.

In his long career he has touched little which he has not upset. In conjunction with A. N. Whitehead, he turned mathematics upside-down and logic inside-out. But he could not resist exerting this extraordinary faculty in many other directions, with varying degrees of success. He has given a good shaking to the modern theories of man's duty to the State, of education (he ran a highly "progressive" school for a time), and of personal or family relations (he has twice been divorced). Most recently, he has given the concept of national sovereignty a thorough drubbing and militantly advocated world government.

In other ways he fits the popular conception of a great philosopher very well. He has extremely good, old-fashioned manners, and but little interest in small-talk, so that, if a conversation fails to find its subject, the formalities of politeness are there but Russell is not. He appears withdrawn from the material bothers of everyday life. His clothes, in contrast to his magnificent head of white hair (of which he is justly vain), are drably undistinguished concessions to warmth and convention. And he cultivates that incompetence over things like electricity, ration-books and car driving of the favoured man who knows that if he cannot do something it will be done for him.

He has plenty of charm—a precise eighteenth-century voice, and a devilish loud turn of laughter. Yet the great pleasure of talking to him is that, while he will entertain casual visitors with a pyrotechnical display of wit and anecdote, his real purpose in discussion is always to seek out the truth. That, and his abundant emotions, make his greatness; no one who has seen his passion roused by cruelty or intolerance will wish to offend his sense of

what is inexcusable. It is, indeed, this vigorous responsiveness of feeling, stabilized by immense learning, ultimately controlled by reason, and always expressed with lucidity and humour, which explains both Russell's public reputation, and why his friends find his company so uniquely satisfying.