

“The Sins of Civilization”: Bertrand Russell in Toronto

by Marilyn Mason*

Amusements

The Year's Greatest Cultural Event

Bertrand Russell

Earl of Russell

Scientist, Philosopher, Author

will lecture on

“The Sins of Civilization”

his first and only appearance in Toronto

Tickets 50¢, 75¢, \$1.00, \$1.50¹

THIS ADVERTISEMENT, FOUND in the entertainment section of the 5 December 1931 issue of the *Toronto Globe*, may have exaggerated the importance of this event. But the interest, even excitement, that surrounded Russell's appearance in Toronto was considerable. A week earlier the *Toronto Star* had heralded “The Year's Greatest Cultural Event” in similar fashion. The visit of the “World-Famed Philosopher” was declared with a flourish: “For the first time in his renowned career as mathematician, scientist, philosopher and author, Bertrand Russell Third Earl of Russell is

* I would like to thank James Greenlee, Department of History, Memorial University, for providing me with material for this article and generous advice which aided its completion.

¹ *The Globe*, Toronto, 5 Dec. 1931, p. 2.

to visit Toronto. He will lecture at Massey Hall on December 12 on 'The Sins of Civilization'.² In an attempt to draw large crowds, much of the publicity which surrounded the event was provocative. An advertisement in the *Star* provides an example: "Bertrand Russell is a modern prophet and it has been said that had he lived during the Middle Ages, he could have been burnt at the stake long before he could issue a volume of sceptical essays" (*ibid.*). The recurrent theme of the controversial nature of Russell's life and writings is found as well in a neighbouring city's newspaper, the *Hamilton Spectator*. Here Russell was characterized as "the radical of all radicals".³

Russell's remarks to the press during the lengthy tour of 1931, of which the Toronto booking marked the final stages, had succeeded in creating notoriety. Russell's lack of enthusiasm for Americans has frequently been noted. This dislike was reported by *The Nation*: "Americans are too hospitable ... they feted him to death, and ... urged on him too constantly indifferent liquor and dull sociability" (30 Dec. 1931).⁴ Later Russell apologized for this statement and excused his behaviour as the result of fatigue from a long and demanding tour.⁵ It is difficult to determine Russell's impressions of Canada. Did he distinguish between Americans and Canadians? An early impression of Montreal remains: "O God, O Montreal! (A Professor told me he went to the Museum there and asked to see the discobolus but was thrown out with ignominy by the curator)."⁶ It is impossible to establish Russell's perception of Canada from a single remark. But there is little

² *The Toronto Star*, 30 Nov. 1931, p. 3. It is difficult to determine if this appearance was in fact "the first time" Russell visited Toronto. Although Russell records a visit to Niagara Falls in 1929 in a letter to Lady Ottoline Morrell and Professor Ruja records a trip to Montreal in 1927 ("Russell's American Lecture Tours", *Russell*, no. 6 [Summer 1972]: 7), there is no evidence of an earlier Toronto speaking appearance.

³ *The Spectator*, Hamilton, 15 Dec. 1931, p. 13.

⁴ Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils, *Bertrand Russell's America: His Transatlantic Travels and Writings*, Vol. 1: 1896–1945; *A Documented Account* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1973), pp. 116–17.

⁵ "Friendly Words from Bertrand Russell", *Nation*, 134 (3 Feb. 1932): 144.

⁶ Russell to Lady Ottoline Morrell, 17 Dec. 1927. Morrell Papers, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

doubt that he expected some resistance to his views throughout his North American tour.

Despite the passage of years, Russell's support of pacifism during the First World War was an unforgivable sin in many quarters. Aware of this factor and the unconventional morality expounded in *Marriage and Morals*, Russell had speculated on the American reaction to the book during his United States tour of 1929: "while I am there a book of mine on marriage will be published which is likely to shock people" (Russell–O. Morrell, 21 Sept. 1929). Another remark to Lady Ottoline reveals one ultimate motivation of his trip: "So long as it [notoriety arising from the book] doesn't spoil my tour from a financial point of view, I don't mind" (*ibid.*).

The 1931 visit, like the tours of the late 1920s, was undertaken to support Russell's venture into education, Beacon Hill School. As the American economy was depressed, he concluded: "America is beastly and I am miserable here. Moreover it is less lucrative than it used to be. I won't ever come again" (Russell–Morrell, 11 Nov. 1931). In fact Russell did give several subsequent lecture courses⁷ at various American institutions and resided in the United States during the Second World War. But this disgust with America and the 1931 tour was reiterated in another letter to Lady Ottoline the following week from Cleveland: "Mercifully, I shall be sailing in a fortnight", he wrote (4 Dec. 1931).

It was in the final fortnight that Bertrand Russell visited Toronto to give his lecture "The Sins of Civilization" at Massey Hall. Russell's extant correspondence during these days is sparse. The constant change of venue and the fatigue of travelling and lecturing may explain the infrequency of letters and our difficulty in tracing his reaction to single performances. The sensational publicity surrounding these public appearances reflects a resistance to, or at least reticence about, Russell's challenging views. This is especially true of the Toronto lecture.

An editorial, "Intolerance as a Duty", in the *Globe* on 16 December 1931, shortly after Russell's visit, expressed some of this resistance. Ten days before the lecture, the Toronto Presby-

⁷ K. Blackwell, "Russell's American Lecture Courses", *Russell*, no. 6 (Summer 1972): 8–9.

tery had passed an unanimous resolution in support of peace, yet disassociated itself from other pacifist societies in the community. The Presbytery did not wish to be affiliated with groups whose members were “men who were not patriots in the Great War.”⁸ It was widely known that Russell had opposed the war, supported the Union of Democratic Control, worked with the No-Conscription Fellowship, been tried twice and jailed once for offences against the Defence of the Realm Act.⁹ Certainly the Toronto men who resented their pacifist neighbours must have had reservations about Russell’s appearance.

A matter as simple as securing a chairman for the event incurred some controversy. At length the Hon. Arthur Meighen—the former Prime Minister—agreed to perform the role. Forming a group of patrons also resulted in some difficulty. Meyer W. Weisgal, a promoter of the event and editor of *The Jewish Standard*,¹⁰ wrote a personal note to Sir Robert Falconer, President of the University of Toronto. Falconer’s strong affiliation with the United Church was well known; also a KCMG (Knight Commander of St. Michael and St. George) had been bestowed upon Falconer in 1917 as a result of his efforts in recruiting. Although Falconer was a supporter of the League of Nations and must have held some regard for Russell’s intellectual stature, as a pillar of the Christian community and an ardent defender of the Empire¹¹ Falconer responded to Weisgal thus: “I am sorry that I do not feel justified in allowing the name of myself and my wife to be placed among the patrons of the forthcoming lecture of Bertrand Russell at Massey Hall.”¹² This refusal became public knowledge when an article was published by the *Star* the following week. Entitled “Editor Says Russell is Snubbed Here”, Weisgal was quoted as saying that

a large number of Toronto citizens had refused to support the event. Weisgal was said to have told the *Star* that he had received letters from Sir Robert Falconer and Rev. H. J. Cody “refusing curtly to attend or act as patrons at the lecture.” Weisgal was quoted further as saying: “I can hardly believe the evidence of my own eyes, when I got the letters—you can read them for yourself. I was incredulous. For a time I refused to believe it.” The editor went even further in his condemnation: “Toronto will be a name of scorn for the rest of the civilized world.”¹³

This article sparked an exchange of letters between Weisgal and Falconer. Weisgal, writing several days later, expressed his mortification over the sensational publicity regarding the Russell lecture. In an attempt to clarify the turn of events, Weisgal went to Professor Alfred Tennyson DeLury, mathematician and Dean of Arts at the University of Toronto. Their conversation was repeated to Falconer by Weisgal in a letter. Weisgal claimed that when the *Star* reporter asked who refused to act as patrons for the Russell lecture, Falconer’s name was listed among others in a private way not meant for publication. The following morning, in a statement to the *Mail and Empire*, the *Star* was charged by Weisgal with “flagrant disregard of journalistic ethics” and “reckless behaviour”.¹⁴ In a letter responding to Weisgal’s explanation, Falconer expressed his “gladness” at seeing his explanation in the *Mail and Empire* and closed the incident, characterizing it as unfortunate and a result of the acts of an irresponsible reporter.¹⁵

The public enjoyed a flurry of explanations from Weisgal, Falconer and Cody concerning the *Star* “snubbery” article of 3 December. The following day, the *Mail and Empire* published an item, “Sir Robert Denies He Refused to Attend Russell Lecture.” Falconer stated that perhaps he would go to the event but declared: “I am surely at liberty not to be a patron if I do not care to be one and I should not want to be. I declined to act as a patron but I did not say that I refused to attend the lecture.” Falconer went on to credit Russell’s academic achievements. “I shouldn’t dream of saying anything against a man like Bertrand Russell. He is a man

⁸ *Globe*, 7 Dec. 1931.

⁹ Jo Vellacott, *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1980), p. vii.

¹⁰ *The Canadian Jewish Review*, purchased by a Zionist group in 1930, was renamed *The Jewish Standard*. The “eloquent New York Zionist editor Meyer Weisgal was imported to head the venture” (Stephen A. Speisman, *The Jews of Toronto, A History to 1937* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979], p. 117).

¹¹ “Sir Robert Falconer”, in Sir Charles G. D. Roberts and Arthur L. Tinnell, eds., *Canada’s Who’s Who* (Toronto: MacLellan Publishing, 1938), II: 35.

¹² Falconer to Weisgal, 30 Nov. 1931, University of Toronto Archives.

¹³ *Star*, 3 Dec. 1931.

¹⁴ Weisgal to Falconer, 9 Dec. 1931.

¹⁵ Falconer to Weisgal, 10 Dec. 1931.

of the highest intellectual order and I believe, a thoroughly sincere character" (4 Dec. 1931, p. 4).

Canon Cody took another approach in his refusal to act as a patron of the lecture. The Rector of St. Paul's stated that that he could not undertake support of a man with whom he did not "fully agree", but qualified his remark by saying that he "would like to attend if he could find the time" (*ibid.*). Cody also added that Lord Russell would probably be entertained at a luncheon at Hart House, University of Toronto, at the invitation of Professor De-Lury. (He was also a guest at tea at the University Women's Club, according to a report in the *Star* on 12 December.) Furthermore, Weisgal expressed deep regret that the *Star* had placed so much emphasis upon certain individuals' "inability" to serve as patrons.

Despite this atmosphere of suspicion, or at least guarded curiosity, and the individual resistance towards open support of the event, Russell's lecture "The Sins of Civilization" did take place in Massey Hall on 12 December. An early edition of the *Star* on the day of the engagement featured an interview with Russell by an enthusiastic reporter. Despite Russell's stated preference, the reporter continued to address him as Lord Russell. Russell once again reiterated: "I am a socialist and I don't believe in the title business." When the reporter asked Russell about his "immortal ancestor" Lord John Russell and his impact upon his own life, Russell commented on the link in this way: "Just this, I knew him quite well, lived in the same house with him, remember him as though it was yesterday. In fact it could have been yesterday." In the interview Russell, when asked to comment upon Gladstone, remarked that the politician had scared him as a child. The reporter's reading of Einstein's evaluation of Russell as one of the three best mathematicians brought from Russell the qualification that this estimation may have been true of his philosophy but not of his mathematics. This account of the interview, which took place at Union Station upon his arrival, must have been typical fare for Russell as he was met in each town.

The front-page account of the lecture in the *Globe* on 14 December reported a crowded auditorium of 2,500 people. A report in the *Spectator* estimated that the crowd exceeded 3,300 and described Massey Hall "as packed in every available inch of space" (14 Dec., p. 13). Arthur Meighen introduced Russell as

"one of the finest minds of our time". In his lengthy opening remarks, Meighen said that the audience's presence in no way implied an acceptance of the conclusions of the speaker. In many ways, he went on to say, numerous points made in the lecture by Russell might be the antithesis of the beliefs held by the audience. Meighen's concluding statement emphasized the merit of listening to opposing views: "We should study closely leaders in every sphere and enjoy the intellectual radiations of a brilliant mind." That Meighen felt the need to express this view and his implicit judgment that Russell's opinions were not those of Torontonians reveal the intellectual milieu of this city. In Glazebrook's history of Toronto, the city in the 1930s was described as "supporting the Conservative party and generally suspicious of anything unorthodox."¹⁶

Despite physical limitations such as a failing sound system and Russell's "none too robust" voice, the effectiveness of "The Sins of Civilization" is stressed in the report of the *Globe*.

It was interesting to see the way in which the speaker would occasionally glance toward the top galleries in a fractional pause as his mind ranged for a comparison between the Greek civilization and today's and then, with the concise power of an epigram, hand the laurels to the former in terms of quality, and the latter in terms of quantity and an ever-widening base of knowledge.

The major thrust of Russell's speech was his abhorrence of war, which he envisioned as "the greatest of the evils of our civilization—the darkest of its sins." The prevalence of the desire for this "sin" of war is balanced, in Russell's view, by the growth of a "social consciousness", the power of law which enunciates the "human capacity for social co-operation or community service." Despite this positive social development, Russell predicted that the next world clash will make the First World War seem like a "pleasant picnic". The near-inevitability of another international disturbance was not, at present, being prevented in any manner. Although Russell saw the League of Nations as doing an admira-

¹⁶ G. P. deT. Glazebrook, *The Story of Toronto* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), p. 47.

ble job, the absence of all important powers within its body limited its effectiveness in world clashes. Russell's concluding words envisioned a better society where constructive impulses would put to better use the power of man's intellect:

We must try to preserve the capacity for joy. Civilization today tends to kill the capacity for the simple joys of life. We tend to become incapable of happiness. It is the character of our civilization. We need to go back to the kind of happiness that simple people enjoy without their simplicity.... There is no real reason why civilized man cannot be as happy as the savage without having to be savage to do it.¹⁷

This call for a happier, more peaceful world in "The Sins of Civilization" on 12 December was characterized by the *Spectator* "as an academic and somewhat conservative essay on what is wrong with present day civilization." But the expectation of an examination of taboo topics was not realized. The *Spectator's* report exposed the conservatism of Toronto: Russell "... attracted one of the largest gatherings that has ever turned out in Toronto to hear a distinguished visitor, but the famous author was apparently not keen on shocking the susceptibilities of Toronto the good, for his lecture hinted only by subtle implication at the views which he has incorporated in numerous books." The shocking message expected of Russell was not delivered. Russell's plea for a better world was addressed to a large group, including many influential Canadians. These men feared Russell's social influence, yet respected his intellectual ability. Russell did not use this forum to discuss those topics which had received sensational publicity. But he discussed pacifism, another volatile issue, before an audience many of whom had supported the last war. The ends for which Russell pleaded—happiness and peace—could not be contested. But the means and the social order in which Russell would accomplish these ideals most certainly differed from those envisioned by the powerful elite present at Massey Hall on the evening of the twelfth of December.

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¹⁷ *Spectator*, 14 Dec. 1931, p. 13.

APPENDIX: Toronto *Globe* report, 14 December 1931

Russell Sees War as "Darkest Sin", He Tells Audience / "Greatest of Evils of Our Civilization," Noted Lecturer Declares / SPEAKS IN MASSEY HALL

Introduced by Right Hon. Arthur Meighen to the 2,500 people who packed Massey Hall to its capacity on Saturday night, as "one of the finest minds of our times," Bertrand Russell discoursed on the "The Sins of Civilization."

Mr. Russell inveighed powerfully against war, which he termed "the greatest of the evils of our civilization—the darkest of its sins." The speaker could not visualize how the "Golden Rule" could completely eliminate the sins of civilization, declaring in this connection: "Very good, so far as it goes, but I do not think it would tell you how to run the banking system."

The "loudspeaker" system was not in operation for some reason or other, and many must have followed the speaker's none too robust voice with difficulty. It was interesting to see the way in which the speaker would occasionally glance toward the top galleries in a fractional pause as his mind ranged for a comparison between the Greek civilization and today's and then, with the concise power of an epigram, hand the laurels to the former in terms of quality, and the latter in terms of quantity and an ever-widening base of knowledge.

Attainments Lauded

In a notable introduction, Mr. Meighen, as Chairman, concluded characteristically: "Our presence tonight carries with it no indication that we necessarily accept all the conclusions of the distinguished speaker. Indeed it is highly probable that on some, if not on many, grounds, we will hold views the very antithesis of his own. But we do believe it is good that we should study at close range the leaders in every sphere, and that we should watch and enjoy every phase of intellectual energy in the radiations from a brilliant mind."

Said Mr. Russell, at the outset: "There is a very general tendency to consider that 'civilization' means the use of a great many machines. That is the usual accentuation—that if you move along at 85 miles per hour in

an automobile you are a civilized person, and that if you move 250 miles per hour in an aeroplane, you are still more civilized. Be that as it may, perhaps there are other aspects of civilization which it may be worth while from time to time to consider."

The speaker referred to a year's stay in China in 1920, during which he found that "the Chinese of the cultured class were more civilized than any of us. They had a more subtle artistic perception than men of the European races. The whole artistic side of civilization does not receive the care which it needs." In terms of 'knowledge' Mr. Russell did not consider the present age inferior to any preceding, but criticized the widespread urge to "meet the needs of the industrial revolution by a postponement of the better and higher things in life."

The Change in Private Violence

Indicating the widespread growth of what he termed "the social consciousness," Mr. Russell pointed to the decay of "private violence, private wars, private pillage, which activities were much more popular in the early civilizations than they are now. The law was then not so powerful. Your small son at 10 years old feels the decadence of highwaymen, and deplors that they no longer exist in well-regulated countries. Take, for example, conditions in the streets. In ancient days they had to go about with their own lighted torches, because the streets were not lighted. They had their own attendants along, too, to save them from robbers. And, of course, the streets were filthy. Nobody in those days had the capacity for social co-operation or the vision of community service."

In an emphatic reference to "war," the speaker caused initial laughter by asserting: "Everybody can see that war is undesirable, and that it makes most of us unhappy, and that we would be better without it. The fact that we do not eliminate it, and do without it, simply proves that we are all lunatics." And then followed this unequivocal and forthright statement: "Our political life has to be more controlled than it is at present. We ought not to allow this anomalous institution, 'war', to continue. Our men are not in the army or navy for their health, but, rather, to ensure that a great many people are ready when war breaks out."

Dread of New War

Mr. Russell continued: "If another world clash takes place, the late war would seem, by comparison, like a pleasant picnic. It will be destructive to a degree that we have never dreamed of. I think in this hemisphere you will possibly escape the worst of it, but in Western

Europe I doubt if civilization will survive—if the next war comes within any measurable period. I think it is of the utmost importance to the history of mankind that it should not come; but I don't see how people are taking any steps to prevent it. The old system still exists. We have the League of Nations, it is true. The League, unfortunately, does not comprise all the important powers in the world. I wish it did. The League is not competent, therefore, to that extent to deal with world clashes. It does its best. It is having rather a test case in Manchuria. I think it has certainly done its best. In the present status, however, you cannot expect that the League will be adequate in the case of any fierce conflict of interests between two groups of first-rate powers. We should pray, perhaps, it will become so in time."

Very gradually but steadily the speaker's thought moved from the individual as the centre of the production circle to the possibilities of social control, and commented: "There cannot be a continuation without limit of industrial civilization, unless we have more organization, and the removal of a whole lot of things from the sphere of personal initiative to that of community needs. We will have to find a compensating balance somewhere. For my part, I think there are quite a number of directions in which we might have less personal liberty, without doing anybody any particular harm. We will have to examine our interests from a social point of view, and as society becomes more organic, so our personal rules must become more and more social. Of course, if we are not concerned with society, we are not concerned with its rules. But who is not?"

Cooperation Instead of Competition

Reference was made here to a tendency to "postpone life" for the achievement of some "future benefits"; but it was the speaker's view that "we should somehow try to get back to a capacity for the enjoyment that simple people have." Changes will not and cannot be brought about between dawn and sunset, but Mr. Russell won the plaudits of the audience by calling "for an economic system based on cooperation rather than on competition. Our present system makes a virtue of competition, but, to my mind, competition is not a thing anybody should be proud of, nor is it a thing that has done any good to a modern community. So far as the economic struggle in the business world is concerned, generally speaking it would be much more profitable to have cooperation than it is to have competition. For this, of course, you have to get an economic vision where a community cooperates, and not where everybody is out for himself, as it is under the system of competition. We have need of a new economic education." (Applause.)

In closing, Mr. Russell declared, with simple power: "I can see, in my

mind's eye, and I feel that we shall ultimately see a society vastly different from that now obtaining—a society where most of the individuals will be profoundly happy, and where, in alignment with their happiness, there will be no cruelty in their nature. In our present society the influence of character is in its infancy. In that society, with happy and constructive impulses, in which individuals will not want to harm others—because their desires are not in acquisitive directions—the world would be a place far more suited to the powers, the enormous powers, which we have acquired over Nature. Our increase of knowledge and science have enhanced human power, but they have not to anything like the same degree enhanced human wisdom. We are somewhat like a small boy with a dangerous weapon. To acquire that wisdom we must learn to have more social cooperation, more creative, more personal happiness, more contentment, more simple joy, more capacity for life and the enjoyment of simple things—in a word, a better and truer civilization which, for the first time in human history, will be enjoyed not only by the few, but by every human being alive.”