

# Russell sold up

by Sheila Turcon

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[I]t is preoccupation with possessions, more than anything else, that prevents men from living fully and nobly.<sup>1</sup>

THESE WORDS OF Russell written in the last half of 1915 for his lecture series "Principles of Social Reconstruction" were put to the test in 1916 when his possessions were distrained and auctioned off at the Corn Exchange in Cambridge. A Chippendale settee headed the list of furniture, books, and plate offered for sale on the afternoon of Wednesday, 26 July.<sup>2</sup> His appeal against his conviction under the Defence of the Realm Act had failed on 29 June at the City Quarter Sessions, when Sir W. Treloar upheld the previously levied sentence of £100 plus £10 in costs to be paid within eight days. Since Russell refused to pay the fine, the forced sale was necessary. He originally opposed the attempt by friends to come to his rescue by buying his property and returning it to him. In the end he succumbed, and only those items which he no longer wanted were sold. As is usual with Russell, various cross-currents of emotion surrounded the events leading up to the dispersal of his furnishings on the auction-house floor.

Writing to Lady Ottoline Morrell shortly after the decision in the Guildhall, Russell noted that "I shall be very poor, having lost America and probably Trinity" (#1,388). Ottoline, always concerned about his welfare, no doubt conveyed Russell's dreary assessment of his future to her husband, Philip. For it was Philip Morrell who organized the appeal for funds, not to pay Russell's fine directly, but to buy his goods at the forced sale. Morrell was assisted in his self-appointed task by

<sup>1</sup> *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1916), p. 235.

<sup>2</sup> The auction announcement listing some of the items for sale is reproduced in Delany's article. The statement of account from the auctioneers is reproduced in the appendix to the present article.

H.T.J. Norton, a young Cambridge mathematician who acted as treasurer.

Ottoline presumably told Russell (her letters for this critical period are not extant) what Philip was doing. Russell now confounded her by waving away all financial difficulties. "My money problems are completely solved by Clifford Allen's scheme"<sup>3</sup>, he blithely wrote:

I don't want to bear the £100 myself. It is very good of P. to collect money for my fine. I did not know he was doing it. I think perhaps it would be best that my Cambridge furniture should actually be sold. And I do not wish to be relieved of the expense of the fine. But *I should like to have the money given to the N.C.F. [No-Conscription Fellowship] if the people subscribing it would not mind that.* I have really no need of charity; if I had, I should not scruple to accept this. (#1,391)

With these pronouncements, he created a complicated pattern of inter-connecting difficulties for his friends. First of all, there was far more in his rooms at Cambridge than furniture—his library, to name only the most striking exception. Secondly, there was the issue of charity. Russell would not pay the fine himself because of the moral necessity to make a protest, despite his earlier cry of poverty. His friends were trying to save his possessions, not provide him with charity. Thirdly, there was the problem of diverting the funds to the NCF.

Russell was allowed by the court to have the Trinity goods auctioned off rather than those in his London flat. In the same letter to Ottoline, he told her that he couldn't bear to think of the flat goods being put on the block. After all, the flat had been their trysting place, lovingly furnished by the two of them during their idyllic first months together.<sup>4</sup> And, of course, with Russell it is no surprise that there was a practical motive at work as well. He was leaving Trinity and the rooms would have to be emptied regardless.

Two days later Russell was again confiding in Ottoline. He believed that his persecution at the hands of the College Council was useful because it would make people realize how dreadful war could be. Driving his point home, he concluded, "I do hope [Roger] Casement will be reprieved—it will be horrible if he is really hanged" (#1,390).

<sup>3</sup> Clifford Allen's scheme was for Russell to deliver a series of lectures in the north of England and in Scotland. The lecture series, later published as *Political Ideals*, was met by stiff opposition from the War Office.

<sup>4</sup> According to Ronald Clark in *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Jonathan Cape and Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975), p. 162, the flat contained Lord John Russell's desk and the small Doomsday-oak table used for the writing of *Principia*.

And so a fourth element was added to the air of uncertainty surrounding the auction. How could any shreds of martyrdom cling to Russell if his fine were paid for him by well-meaning but insensitive friends who failed to realize the seriousness of the situation? Casement faced death. Could Russell allow himself to walk away from the conviction without suffering the fullest deprivation possible?

He was soon brought back to reality. In his *Autobiography* he recollected the event this way: "Kind friends ... bought [the goods] and gave them back to me, so that I felt my protest had been somewhat futile" (p. 33). He expanded on this version slightly in a note amended to a letter he received from Philip asking him to reconsider. "I felt this [their action] made my refusal to pay ridiculous and therefore at first refused, but Morrell's letter ..., with other communications, induced me to accept their offer" (21 July 1916).

What did his friends say to make him reconsider albeit reluctantly? In the same letter Morrell had pointed out to him it would be impossible to transfer the funds to the NCF. G.H. Hardy echoed those words and in a well-reasoned appeal set down a strong argument against refusing:

As regards the sale—I think you will be making a mistake if you don't let people who have promised have their way. It's not a question as to whether the loss of money is or is not a serious matter.... What is of importance is that it should not appear in the papers that you have been sold up without your friends doing what has been done a hundred times over for people of no distinction at all. It would look as if nobody cared about it at all.

Besides it would be practically embarrassing.... And I really don't see how the money could go to the N.C.F. Some of it at any rate would come from people whom one *could* not ask to subscribe directly to the N.C.F. (Donald Robertson<sup>5</sup>, e.g.). (N.d., RA REC. ACQ. 912)

Russell's resolve was obviously weakening. In a letter to Ottoline he admitted, "I should not like to lose my literature books, but I don't mind about philosophy and mathematics, except the complete sets of great philosophers, which belonged to my father—these I do wish to keep" (#1,403, [21 July]).

<sup>5</sup> Robertson was an assistant lecturer at Trinity College in 1916 and later was Regius Professor of Greek. He could not be asked to subscribe to the NCF because he was in the army. He wrote a strong letter of support from France when he heard of Russell's dismissal from Trinity (15 July 1916, RA).

It is curious that he would not have taken the precaution of removing from his Trinity rooms (or withholding from the sale) those possessions he did not wish to lose before deciding on Trinity as the location of the sale.<sup>6</sup> The pressures of his Welsh speaking-tour precluded a personal visit, but surely someone could have been deputized. (The contents of his rooms were not carried off until the morning of the sale but had been earlier impounded by the police.) But until his friends persuaded him otherwise, Russell probably felt the sale should proceed unimpeded.

What, in fact, did Russell part with at the sale? Very little of value, it appears. H.T.J. Norton provided him with a full report of the sale, which drew a large crowd of the curious:

The auctioneer announced at the beginning that he was going to put up the silver things and the gold medal as a single lot, and that he had been offered ... £125 for them ... the forced part of the sale came to an end, and the books, the silver, the watch and chain,<sup>7</sup> medal, your tea-table, and some small things were withdrawn. The remainder—that is to say, carpets, bookshelves, settee, writing table, linen and generally all the furniture, except the tea-table, were then ... sold. (N.d.)

The offer on the first lot must have been for more than it was worth as there was no bidding.<sup>8</sup> Russell's books<sup>9</sup> (the only possessions he

<sup>6</sup> Some provisions must have been made for those items of a purely personal nature, i.e. family photographs, clothes, letters, etc., as well as Russell's manuscripts which at the time were perceived to be of insufficient value to include in the sale.

<sup>7</sup> This could have been the watch previously owned by Lord John. The medal was the Butler gold medal from Columbia University.

<sup>8</sup> It is difficult to ascertain the value of the articles for sale, partly because of the confusion as to what the first lot contained. The value of silver in 1916 was US\$0.65 an ounce (*Silver: Historical Review and Statistical Tables*). The conversion rate was £1 = US\$4.70/80. The silver, however, had been fashioned into plate and plated articles, thus adding to its value. The report in the *Cambridge Daily News*, 27 July 1916, p. 4, indicates that keen bidding was expected. The fact that this did not occur supports the contention that the articles sold for an inflated price.

<sup>9</sup> Of the books listed for sale (see the illustration in Delany), only the works by Bentham, Berkeley, and Hobbes remained in the main body of Russell's library until his death. One volume of the *Revue de métaphysique et de morale* (Jan. 1900) is with the fragment of Russell's library housed at the European University Institute, Florence, Italy. Sydney Chapman, an astro-geophysicist, states in his recollections that he purchased some books from Russell during Russell's financial difficulties early in the First War (*Sydney Chapman, Eighty, from His Friends*, ed. Syun-Ichi Akasofu, Benson Fogle, Bernhard Haurwitz [n.p.: c. 1968], p. 188). He leaves the impression that he approached Russell privately, and thus it seems quite unlikely the books were purchased at the auction.

allowed he did not want to lose) were clearly never in danger. Yet a myth has grown up, in part fueled by Russell himself, that his books were auctioned off. Both the *Cambridge Daily News* and G.H. Hardy in his book *Bertrand Russell and Trinity*<sup>10</sup> indicate that the books were included in the first lot, although the *News* article is somewhat ambiguous. Russell, writing in 1937 to Emily Greene Balch, the American peace advocate, concurred. He added an amusing postscript to the incident.<sup>11</sup>

I possess a large old Bible which used to have a label "impounded by the Cambridge police", but to my great regret the label has come off. It seemed suitable that this, alone among my books, should be signalled out for this attention.

Russell had obviously left instructions that once the amount of the fine had been realized, certain possessions should be withdrawn from the sale. Only the most mundane of his furnishings remained to be sold. The Chippendale settee had headed the auction announcement and brought in £2.15.0. Mrs. Whitehead had written to him on 13 July that "the little sofa is a good one, do let it be sold if it is necessary to 'make up'." In fact, the entire lot of possessions fetched only £25.11.3 once commissions, etc. had been deducted. The low amount leads to the speculation that if the entire contents had been sold at regular auction prices, could there have been enough of value to realize the fine? Certainly there was no hint of this possibility when Russell was trying to dissuade his well-intentioned friends from interfering.

All that remained was for Morrell and Norton to settle accounts. Two letters survive in the Francis Cornford papers recently donated to the Archives (RA REC. ACQ. 912). In one Hardy writes to Cornford, "The original programme was to ask for £5 or £10. On that basis ... we have about £150-£160.... So we are proposing to scale down the £10 sub-

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Some of the Russell/Chapman books are now at the Geophysical Institute of the University of Alaska. For a description of Russell's library see Carl Spadoni and David Harley, "Bertrand Russell's Library", *The Journal of Library History*, 20 (winter 1985): 25-45.

<sup>10</sup> (Cambridge: University Press, printed for the author, 1942), p. 40. Hardy states that the first book offered fetched £100, which ended the forced sale. The *Cambridge Daily News* article is cited in n. 8. There are no accounts of the auction in *The Times* or *The Manchester Guardian*.

<sup>11</sup> Russell to Emily Green Balch, 27 May 1937 (Swarthmore College Peace Collection; photocopy in RA REC. ACQ. 716).

scriptions to £7.10.0." Obviously the campaign had been a success, with perhaps as many as twenty-five people subscribing. Morrell's letter of 8 August 1916 to Cornford confirms that this reduction in subscriptions did take place. It also confirms that Cornford subscribed, as did Hardy, Robertson and Norton. The identities of the others remain unknown, but some can be surmised from Paul Delany's article in this issue.

Having already let his flat, Russell set up housekeeping for the rest of the war in the attic of his brother's house in Gordon Square. Presumably his precious tea-table accompanied him there. Some of his possessions eventually found their way to McMaster where they are displayed in the Archives.<sup>12</sup> Although Carl Spadoni has called these pieces "an ugly shrine", his judgment seems unduly harsh.<sup>13</sup> Russell showed during this incident and generally throughout his life little evidence of an interest in possessions, but the surviving pieces are of fine quality and not unpleasing to the eye. The impression should not be left that Russell was *completely* indifferent to possessions. He returned to Cambridge at some time before April 1917 to deliver three lectures. Beside discovering that he minded "very much having ceased to have a footing there", he had an emotion-filled meeting with his bedmaker. "To my *intense* joy she produced my fur coat, which I thought was lost for ever" (#1,517 to Ottoline Morrell, n.d.).

### The Bertrand Russell Archives

<sup>12</sup> The pieces consist of a desk, chairs, and revolving bookcase.

<sup>13</sup> "Bertrand Russell on Aesthetics", *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 76. Spadoni is not alone in finding Russell's furniture unattractive. Gerald Brenan felt the same way about the furniture at Telegraph House (*Personal Record 1920-72* [London: Jonathan Cape, 1974], p. 261). In this instance, Wittgenstein's taste in furniture is also being called into question as much of it had formerly belonged to him! Russell took up the question of taste in "Furniture and the Ego", *New York American*, 20 April 1932, p. 13; reprinted in Harry Ruja, ed., *Mortals and Others*, Vol. 1 (London: Allen & Unwin, 1975), pp. 82-3.

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S. ST ANDREW'S STREET,  
CAMBRIDGE 26 July 1916

Statement of Lots sold by Auction in favour of  
The Hon. C. Russell  
of 11, Bedford Square, Cambridge

CATLING & SON,  
Auctioneers, Estate & House Agents, 25, Abchurch Lane, London E.C. 4  
ESTABLISHED 1871.

Lot	Description	Quantity	Unit
426	Blackening ink & black paper desk	2	b
427	Round Turkey ring	13	15
429	Large Turkey ring	1	15
430	Do do	1	12 6
431	Large Turkey ring		18
432	7' long steel bookcase	2	
433	6' stained bookcase		11
434	4' ditto		7 1/2
435	ditto		
436	2'9" ditto		2 6
437	2'6" wing ditto		9
438	elm study chair		11
439	4' 6" oak bookcase writing table	2	4
440	Mahogany folding top card table		6
441	Mahogany drawing table	1	5
442	1 chair on top	1	4
443	4' 6" mahogany Mahogany table	2	10
444	4' 6" wood and iron		11
445	Set of seven doge top		
446	1 oak footman, round top and iron		4
447	coffee pot, teapot & tray		3
448	2 to breakfast ware 19 pieces		5
449	tea jug, 2 tumblers, bread tray & knife		3 6
450	coffee mill, 2 canisters, jug & smoking case		2 6
451	4 Turkey & 8 Brunswick Towels		7 6
452	2 Pcs of velvet chairs		14
453	Seven chairs & cushions		7
454	5 P. also, 1 set iron etc.		
455	3 Danish table cloths		7 6
456	2 Pcs of iron curtain		1 6
457	Greenish Redwood suite		12
458	Spring bath, mat, 2 hot water, brass bucket		4
459	Iron bucket & stop & wash carpet		6
460	Antique Mahogany table		4
461	2 stained chairs on legs		5

Bertrand Russell 24 2 6

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 CAMBRIDGE 26 July 1986

Condition: Statement of Lots will be shown the property of  
*The Rev. B. Russell*  
 at their Auction Room, Long Exchange Street.

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Lot		29	5	6
443	1 Redwood	}		
444	2 Mahoe			
445	3 Pine & Laurel		5	6
446	Sold by and bid		1	6
		<i>70 5 6</i>		