

“WELL WIDE OF THE MARK”:
RESPONSE TO STONE’S REVIEW OF
THE ABC OF ARMAGEDDON

PETER H. DENTON

History, Philosophy and Religious Studies / U. of Winnipeg
Winnipeg, MB, Canada R3B 2E9
P.DENTON@UWINNIPEG.CA

Whether or not it is wise to defend one’s first book against the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, Bertrand Russell was never one to let indignities pass without response, and I will take my example from him. Peter Stone’s review of my *The ABC of Armageddon: Bertrand Russell on Science, Religion and the Next War, 1919–1938* is so irretrievably muddled that when he concludes “a thoroughly confused book ends on a thoroughly confused note”,¹ this state of confusion most accurately represents the condition of the reviewer.

The problem here is not an author and his book “adrift at Armageddon”, as the title of Stone’s review maintains, but a reviewer rowing furiously with one oar. Whatever inadequacies there are in *The ABC of Armageddon*, they are not those Stone so enthusiastically catalogues in his series of speculations as to what I might have done, but didn’t.

In awaiting this review in *Russell*, I worried about how my various suggestions about Russell’s writing in the interwar period—even my definition of what the interwar period was—would be received. To list a few: the idea that the Great War constituted a dividing line in his work, and why; that his work in the interwar period should be judged as a whole; that his work in the interwar period was worth evaluating, not simply being dismissed as evidence of early philosophical dotage; the way Russell’s published ideas were entwined with those of his Anglo-American contemporaries; the theme of the “old savage in the new civilization” in Russell’s work, and in that of his contemporaries; the dimension of “rhetorical performance” and Russell’s deliberate stance as a

¹ *Russell*, n.s. 21 (2001): 181–5 (at 185).

preacher; the differences between *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* and *The Scientific Outlook*, on the one hand, and *Religion and Science* and *Power: a New Social Analysis*, on the other; the possible influence of Albert Schweitzer on the value of “an operational metaphysic” that allowed an older Russell to act as though ideas like “reverence for life” were true, even if they could not be proven. The list could continue.

Stone overlooks all of these ideas, preferring instead to demonstrate my inability to hit targets at which he feels I should have aimed, characterizing my approach and my intentions in some unhelpful ways that are well wide of the mark.

I was astounded to learn, for example, that I “assume the role of a political theorist towards Russell’s work”, and thus I “attempt to lay out an argument by Russell and critique it, so as to leave behind a stronger argument in its wake” (p. 182).

Because I am a political theorist, Stone concludes, “this book is simply a failure as a work of history” (p. 182). Instead, being an historian he says, would have involved “situating Russell’s views in the personal and social context in which they emerged.”

Writing as a “political theorist” himself (out of the Political Science department at Rochester University, where he is adjunct faculty), Stone’s defence of the historical approach is no doubt well intentioned. Had he followed his own prescription, however, he would have found this book to be substantially the same text as my dissertation (“The Old Savage and the Scientific Outlook: Science, Religion and Social Ethics in the Writings of Bertrand Russell, 1919–1938” [McMaster, 1997]). In the prefatory material appropriate to dissertations in Religious Studies (but not to books intended to sell) Stone would have found some of the acknowledgements and explanations whose absence he found the most irksome.²

Having dubbed me a political theorist, he excoriates me for an inadequate understanding of utilitarianism, instrumentalism, pragmatism and so on, utterly

² In an editorial note discouraged by my editors at SUNY Press but still permitted here, I cannot resist responding to Stone’s editorial notes disparaging the “highly inadequate” citations of Russell studies literature. I am well aware of Philip Ironside’s book, for example, but it appeared after mine was essentially written, and dealt with Russell’s thought from a different perspective, and so I left it out. (Were I a political theorist, of course, this would have been an egregious error.) To sooth any feelings wounded by my failing to include Ironside or anyone else in the “Selected Bibliography”, I also failed to include my own dissertation. *Mea culpa*. As for Alan Ryan’s book, it was his work outside the disciplinary boundaries of existing Russell scholarship on the interwar period that piqued my curiosity and encouraged me to take a closer look at Russell’s writings after the Great War—that and some interesting conversation after a lecture he gave at McMaster at the start of my graduate studies there. I do appreciate Stone’s backhanded compliment, however, in describing me as “a theorist with a completely original constructive project involving Russell” (p. 182 n.1).

misconstruing a significant portion of what I said.

Continuing to evaluate my book in terms of what he thinks it should be about, Stone's pronouncement "whatever merit this book possesses, it possesses due to the strength of Denton's critique of Russell's 'ABC of Armageddon'" (p. 182) founders on the obvious point that I intended no such critique. If Stone were to read his initial quotation from my introduction more carefully, and in the context of the paragraph in which it occurs, I did not say Russell ever wrote an "ABC of Armageddon". As part of his "retreat from Pythagoras" after the Great War (a crucial theme throughout the book that Stone does not even mention in his review):

Russell undertook the task of analyzing and writing about what had happened, and what science and technology meant for post-War industrial civilization, in the hope that a popular primer of impending disaster—an ABC of Armageddon—might forestall what seemed, at times, to be an inexorable outcome. (P. xiii)

The rest of the book unpacks Russell's struggles and his eventual inability to arrive at such a definitive understanding, and why his efforts did not bear the kind of fruit reflected in the other "ABC"s he did complete.

Instead of a "critique" of Russell's "argument" offered "so as to leave behind a stronger argument in its wake", I explored the wealth of ideas and possibilities in Russell's writings during the interwar period, characterizing themes that linked them to some perspective larger than the subject of each published work and yet was reflected in all of them. I also placed Russell's ideas within the context provided by the ideas of his contemporaries, instead of considering them apart from the circumstances in which they found public performance—this is at least something of the task of an intellectual historian, even by Stone's definition.

Russell was a participant in a group whose spirited and intentionally public conversation was focused and guided by the terrible events they had witnessed, and which they feared they would witness again, if no way were found to redirect the new powers provided to the same old savage by science and technology in the modern age. Moral development had not kept pace with technological development, and that spelled disaster if "the scientific outlook" did not in some way come to encompass a different morality than the one the old savage had demonstrated in the Great War.

Recognizing that *The ABC of Armageddon* is a different kind of book, I anticipated as inevitable the slings and arrows that result from such a difference, and looked forward to some heated conversation about Russell's work in the interwar period. Stone's review disappoints me, not because he failed to say nice things, but because his review—despite its length—failed to engage what I wrote in a substantial way.
