

RUSSELL AT MCMASTER TODAY

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McMaster University acquired the Russell collection in 1968. Since that time hundreds of researchers have come from every corner of the world and have collectively revealed a treasure of the intellectual and political life of the twentieth century. Russell's name is not on everyone's lips today, but the archive still contains material vital to our own concerns: to our concern about what has gone wrong in the twentieth century, to the status of science as a paradigm of knowledge, to the rise and fall of communism, and to the prospects of world order. The archive contains wonderful material on all these subjects.

In purchasing the Bertrand Russell Archives in the mid-'60s, McMaster University brought an incomparable record of the intellectual development and political ideals of the English-speaking world to Canada. Russell was Isaiah Berlin's fox—a creature that seeks many things: for philosophers the archives contains ample material on the development of British philosophy from its late nineteenth-century infatuation with Hegel to the renewal of empiricism and the current controversies, initiated by Russell's student Wittgenstein, and which threatened to marginalize Russell, on what (if anything) constitutes objectivity; for political theorists there is ample material on the efforts of British liberalism to absorb, reject and define itself in relationship to communism and modern industrialism; for historians there is ample material on the struggle between nationalism and globalization and on the history of pacifism in the twentieth century. After a few hours in the archives visitors will question Russell's modest statement that his pen was neither mightier nor busier than other people's swords.¹

¹ Preface to Feinberg, p. 7.

The collection can be found in the catacombs of Mills Library. From the main floor you descend a staircase to the Research/Rare Books Collection until you arrive at rooms that contain a bust of Russell, his desk and his personal library. One room houses hundreds of his articles and all of his books in numerous translations, another room his manuscripts and some 100,000 letters including correspondence with figures such as T. S. Eliot and Einstein, not to mention political leaders such as President Kennedy, David Ben-Gurion and Abdul Nasser. The uninformed novice will think of him as a high-class Forrest Gump. It is no wonder that one of McMaster's presidents told me that in her travels she had found that McMaster is best known for its medical school and for the Russell collection.

But many of you will politely ask, Bertrand Who? I can recall images of Russell as an iconic figure for different periods and different fields. For indeed this man who, from the 1920s to the 1970s, dominated the intellectual scene and at times the political scene, has fallen off the radar screen of those who influence our world. Today he has a loyal and distinguished following in philosophy, but, in my lifetime, I can easily recall different, even contradictory, images of Russell the icon. In the 1940s and early '50s he was one of the great cold warriors, an implacable enemy of Bolshevik philosophy; in the 1960s he seemed to reinvent himself as a revolutionary, a leading opponent of nuclear proliferation and a leading opponent of American military adventurism in Vietnam. It was chastening to find that a whole generation of student revolutionaries, who bore the logo "Don't trust anyone over thirty", treated a 97-year-old relic of Victorian radicalism as a Pied Piper. Those who came before my generation (there are still some left) remember Russell as the great innovator in philosophy, one of the few founders of what we now call analytic philosophy.

When I was working at the archives, first as a researcher, then as director of the Russell Editorial Project, my most common FAQ was "How in the hell did McMaster get this archive?" The colourful story of our acquisition of this golden grail is told by our equally colourful former head librarian, William Ready, in his memoir *Files on Parade*. The most knowledgeable person connected to the archives is Kenneth Blackwell, who like me is semi-retired but always around and can be consulted on this history. For my part the years that I worked there have provided great anecdotes about the collection itself. For example, once I discovered a letter to Russell apologizing for a critical article about him by his

brother-in-law George Grant, who was chairman of our department. There are many more, but in the short space that I have I will forego these stories and instead sketch some topics in Russell's work that remain of great interest to your generation, including Russell's overview of the twentieth century, his response to the scientific revolution in the early decades of the century, his life-long experience with communism and his views on nationalism. There is much more, available from my colleagues Richard Rempel, Nick Griffin, Blackwell, Andy Bone and others still mining this incomparable collection.

Bertrand Russell, the godson of John Stuart Mill and grandson of British prime minister Lord John Russell, came to maturity in the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decade of the twentieth century, the Victorian and the Edwardian eras. However much he satirized the stuffy, high-minded rationalism of these years, he always identified them as at the apex of the age of progress. For him the twentieth century began in 1914 when the leading powers of Europe plunged into the First World War—a senseless orgy of self-destruction which, however complex the economic and political causes, he, like Freud, perceived as the wild manifestation of a death wish. When it ended in 1918 Russell was a different man. He was convinced that modern civilization contained a will to self-destruction at least as powerful as the will to progress. He never changed his mind. Throughout his life he argued that fascism, economic chaos, the Second World War (during which he supported Britain), Stalinism and the terror of the cold war were spin-offs of that initial catastrophe. At times Russell's frenzy of activities made me think that he was obsessed by the metaphor of western civilization as a Humpty Dumpty that had destroyed itself and that he was desperately trying to put together again. This was the starting-point of Russell's approach to a social and political theory which can be described as a project designed to give psychological depth to the ideals of John Stuart Mill and propose a society that encouraged and embodied a will to live.

Another issue that is fully engaged in Russell's writings is the scientific revolution of the twentieth century. This began before the war, its great moment being the publication of Einstein's papers on relativity in 1905, and refers to the discoveries in microphysics which undermined the original discovery by Galileo and Newton of the universe as a predictable machine. The new discoveries, which some physicists tried to conceal, suggested that in this world of microphysics there was no reliable reign of causality, that the position of the observer affected the results of the

observation, that matter was chaotic. Heisenberg's uncertainty principle defined this revolution, which many felt brought the universe into a dark chaos. Others were delighted. Eddington and Jeans wrote books announcing that physics had brought back free will and God's agency, and that theology could once again come back from the closet. Some scientists, including Robert Oppenheimer, the builder of the atom bomb, adopted the *Bhagavad Gita* and its portrayal of the visible universe as a realm of darkness, as the best imaginative account of the universe.

Russell as well as Einstein fought a fierce rearguard battle on behalf of the traditional account of a universe structured by determinism. His volumes argued for the continued validity of the reign of causality and the relevance of scientific objectivity. The struggle still goes on, and Russell is still a player. Even his celebrated *History of Western Philosophy* (still the philosophy book most likely to be found in airport bookstores) should be read mainly in the light of these issues.

As this is the season of the commemoration of the fall of the Berlin Wall, we cannot ignore Russell's relation to Marxism as a theory and a political movement. It began early and seemed to go through many transmutations, but on this issue, Russell, who was notorious for changing his mind and who seemed to be taking a different stand on communism every few years, remained remarkably consistent.

Russell's first book, *German Social Democracy*, was a study of the German SPD, the first Marxist political party in the West. He argued that it provided many lessons for progressive Britons and that Marx's *Communist Manifesto* was the best political tract ever written. But he also criticized the party's "fatalism" in adopting the thesis that class war leading to the dictatorship of the proletariat was inevitable. Blinded by this doctrine, Marxism first continued to underestimate the power of capitalism to integrate and benefit the working class, and secondly it called for unending violence. In 1920 Russell was one of the first to visit the Soviet Union after it was founded and became a pariah on the Left for making these same points in his celebrated *Practice and Theory of Bolshevism*. In the '30s and '40s Russell was both celebrated and reviled as communism's worst enemy, but in the '60s, when he became a critic of nuclear proliferation and America's war in Vietnam, he was praised and reviled as a fellow traveller and communist dupe. Despite these zig-zags he never believed that the future belonged to Marx. He always argued that communism would bring itself down because of its economic naïveté, rather than by war. The results of 1989 certainly corroborated these views.

Finally Russell argued that the most powerful and most sinister force to emerge from industrial civilization was nationalism. In the articles he wrote at the end of WWI he assumed that the pre-war global economy had brought nationalism to an end—that the First World War might be redeemed as a lesson in the destructiveness of nationalism (as indeed the Second World War was in Europe), that the war had shown how destructive nationalism was. By 1923, when he published *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization*, he was appalled and alarmed at the continuing strength of nationalism, especially when it became so incendiary in the rise of fascist Europe in the '20s and '30s. Early on he called for world government, and, always the odd man out, he shocked his pacifist associates by arguing that the post-WWI League of Nations would be futile. World government, he argued, could only be established by force, and the most likely instrument was the United States of America.

In the years after the Second World War he maintained this view while remaining a bitter critic of America's resort to force in Vietnam and elsewhere. At the end of his life he was caught in this dilemma. I have argued elsewhere² that he probably would have liked to go to sleep and wake up with America having conquered the world, so that he could continue to issue his denunciations.

The student who studies these issues as they are presented in the archives may not find solutions to these problems but will at least find herself struggling with them as issues that affect our own time.

² "Bertrand Russell and the End of Nationalism", *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 26 (1996): 348–68.