

KENNETH SIDNEY COATES, 1930–2010

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Not all Russell scholars will know who Ken Coates was. Yet for those interested in Russell's post-Hiroshima–Nagasaki political ideas and the different organizations and protest movements that he initiated, particularly during his last ten years, Ken Coates is a well-known name. He became editor of *The Spokesman*.¹ He also became the chief director of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation (BRPF), and as such he carried on Russell's major concerns: nuclear disarmament, peace, human rights, and social justice (particularly for the voiceless). In the 1960s these concerns were manifested in the BRPF, the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (VSC), and the International War Crimes Tribunal (IWCT).

The latest issue of *The Spokesman* was prepared by Coates just before he died. A section, "Ken Coates—a Tribute", was added. His assistant editor, Tony Simpson, writes in it:

Forty years earlier, in 1970, writing the Editorial Notes for very first issue of *The Spokesman*,² Ken had remarked Russell's own anticipation of the new journal during what proved to be the last week of his own life: 'He had wanted the journal desperately in order to be able, the better, to organize support in all the various battles in which he was engaged'. As Ken then said of Russell, so we may now also say of him, *The Spokesman* is dedicated to carrying on that work.³

Here I will only give an overview of his relationship with Russell and his role in the BRPF. For those interested in Coates's background, political engagements, writings, etc., I refer the reader to the tributes and the many obituaries that have

¹ It was preceded by thirteen issues of the *London Bulletin*, which was then incorporated into *The Spokesman* from its first issue in March 1970. The four first issues of the *Bulletin* lack information about the editorship, but from the fifth issue Ken Coates's name appears as the editor.

² No. 1 (March 1970): 2.

³ No. 109 (2010): 2.

been published in the British press.⁴ Anyway, they have very little information on Coates's activities in the 1960s, and when they do, it is sometimes wrong.

I never met Coates. Now I regret that I didn't, considering the welcoming attitude he showed me in his responses to my inquiries regarding his part in the BRPF, VSC, IWCT and later Russell Tribunals. The e-mail correspondence was passed on by Tony Simpson as middle man, but I did receive one "snail mail" from Coates in which he answered a few specific questions, to which I will return. Before that I had been blessed with several e-mails. My last was never answered, doubtless due to ill health.

The Bertrand Russell Archives have many letters and other documents that are related to Ken Coates. In preparing this obituary I have researched BRACERS for letters that could shed light on Coates's first contacts with Russell and how he got involved in the BRPF, VSC, and IWCT. I haven't found any letters that reveal exactly when, why and how Coates became one of Russell's most competent and devoted co-workers, together with Christopher Farley, Ralph Schoenman, Russell Stetler, and some others. The earliest that Coates and Russell's names appear together is when the *International Bulletin* published "Greetings to Lord Russell on the Occasion of His 90th Birthday":

Dear Lord Russell,

We are a group of Labour Party members and supporters in Nottingham, who are pleased to greet you on the occasion of your 90th birthday. Your devotion to the cause of world disarmament provides an example to us all, of devotion, courage and self sacrifice, and contrasts most sharply with the actions of your denigrators in our own movement.⁵

The message was signed by a dozen members of the staff of Nottingham University, K. S. Coates, Noel Williams and Bob Quinn from the Workers' Educational Association, and some 50 other (unnamed) sponsors.

Ken Coates had personally been in contact with Russell at least since December 1963. In response to a request for a message (to be published in *The Week*) on the conflict in Vietnam and the dangers of confrontation with Indonesia (10 February 1965), Russell answered nine days later with a message⁶ and ended the

⁴ The second of the following three obituaries has links to several other obituaries of Ken Coates:

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/politics/2010/jun/29/ken-coates-obituary>

<http://tendancecoatesy.wordpress.com/2010/06/30/ken-coates-a-euology/>

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/politics-obituaries/7958792/Kenneth-Coates.html>

⁵ I, no. 22 (18 May 1962): [6].

⁶ "A Message to The Week", *The Week* 3 (4 March 1965): 106. [Not in the *Bibliography*.—Ed.]

letter: “Please keep us informed of your plans and we shall contact you about our own.” That sounds as if some members of the BRPF were interested in getting Coates aboard.

In a letter from Chris Farley (25 February 1965) to Ken Coates, he expresses hope that some form of cooperation between them will prove possible and fruitful. He goes on to talk about possible improvements of *The Week*, the first editors of which were Ken Coates and Robin Blackburn. At the time that *The Week* was resurrected (1964), Ken Coates was joint English editor of the *International Socialist Journal*.

Marxist journalist Claud Cockburn had launched the first British publication known as *The Week* as a newsletter in 1933, after he had returned from reporting on Germany. It focused on the rise of fascism, in a style that anticipated *Private Eye* and won a wide readership, according to Cockburn’s son, Alexander. Jessica Mitford attributed the journal’s influence to its use of undercover sources. It ceased publication in 1941. Ken Coates and Pat Jordan restarted *The Week* in January 1964. They were Marxist members of the British Labour Party connected to the *New Left Review*, to which Cockburn occasionally contributed. Their version of *The Week* provided a socialist critique of Harold Wilson’s government, notably over its failure to oppose the Vietnam War. Jordan edited the paper until 1968, when he cooperated with Tariq Ali in launching *The Black Dwarf*.⁷ At that time *The Week* became a monthly magazine called *International*, which was published by the International Marxist Group.⁸

At this point in time the BRPF had only its *Bulletin*, and it seems that Russell, Farley and Schoenman were thinking of starting something bigger and better. Farley emphasized that it was important to work fast to develop a publication that would sell on the newsstands. In another letter from Farley (1 April 1965) to Coates, he writes that they have now gone a long way with their plans for a regular publication. He continues with the problem of finding a full-time editor. In May Coates and Ken Bates (whom I’ve been unable to identify) met with Russell and Edith in Wales. A few days later Coates wrote a thank-you letter:

Perhaps you’ll understand if I say that I think that meeting you was one of the real highspots in my life, in which I’ve already met a lot of very good and very interesting people.

So I’m all the more unhappy that I couldn’t do exactly what you wanted me to do. What I will do is to promise to try to make up for my deficiency in this respect by doing all I possibly can to help the Foundation in other ways.⁹

⁷ This paper was later to publish Russell’s “Private Memorandum concerning Ralph Schoenman” (reprinted in Clark’s *Life*, appendix).

⁸ This paragraph derives from the *Wikipedia* entry on *The Week*.

⁹ 14 May 1965, RA 313, box 1.2.

The question is what exactly Russell had asked Coates to do. Was it to join the BRPF and become the main editor of a planned journal?

About a week later Russell issued a press statement regarding Coates's expulsion from the Labour Party in which he said:

The Labour Party Executive's confirmation of the expulsion from the Party of Mr. Ken Coates is far more than an example of vicious intolerance. Under the presidency of Mr. Coates, who is known to me personally, the Labour Party in Nottingham became a vital political force, instead of a vehicle for the petty ambitions of tired and conservative local hacks, or the dissemination of clichés passed down from Transport House.

The Party in Nottingham gave a series of leads to the country in attacking everything from slums at home to exploitation and murder abroad. In short, the Labour Party in Nottingham, in its vitality, its political honesty and its sense of radical purpose showed its national leaders a model which could attract and mobilize the vast number of socialists who, at present, have no political home. The Labour Party leadership took fright at such a possibility and, through a series of sordid intrigues, have made an example of Mr. Coates, whose views on American war crimes in Vietnam are those of all decent socialists.

This is a witch-hunt. We may expect the axe to fall on others who dare to challenge Tory rule under Harold Wilson. I urge all socialists to stop the rot at Transport House before this becomes a full-scale purge.¹⁰

Another question is when Coates left *The Week* and started to work for the BRPF. The connecting link seems to have been the vsc. Tariq Ali writes in his *Street Fighting Years* about the US organization, Students for a Democratic Society, and says:

In Britain we had decided to form the Vietnam Solidarity Campaign (vsc) in order to promote a public resistance to Wilson's policies and mobilize support for the Vietnamese struggle. The actual decision had been taken by a handful of Trotskyist-Marxists, who produced a tiny, duplicated magazine called *The Week*. This journal had a very broad list of sponsors, including leading trades unionists, a sprinkling of Left Labour MPs and other notables. The two guiding spirits behind the magazine were Ken Coates and Pat Jordan.¹¹

On the inside of the back cover of a pamphlet (which Coates sent to me), *The Dirty War in Mr. Wilson, Or How He Stopped Worrying about Vietnam and Learned to Love the Dollar*, written by Coates and published by the vsc, it says: "The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign brings together representatives of those in Britain who have consistently and energetically combatted successive govern-

¹⁰ 26 May 1965; reprinted as the Preface to Coates, *My Case against Expulsion* (Nottingham: The Week, 1966), where "the petty ambitions of tired and conservative local hacks" was toned down to "conservative ideas" (following Russell's revised statement, 27 May 1965, at RA2 320.181936).

¹¹ P. 118

ments' support of American aggression." Then he lists the main driving forces: the president was Bertrand Russell; chairman, Ralph Schoenman; members of the National Council, Coates, Farley, Quintin Hoare, David Horowitz, Jordan, Ted Knight, John La Rose, Ian Miller, John Palmer, Ralph Rosenbaum, Jim Scott, Ernie Tate, Tony Topham and Barbara Wilson.¹²

Coates's name starts to show up on the BRPF's letterhead as one of its fourteen directors in August 1966.¹³ He must have joined the BRPF sometime during the previous twelve months. In an e-mail to me he wrote:

The Vietnam Solidarity Campaign was established after a decision by the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, for which I was responsible. We wanted to create a solidarity movement, because opposition to the war did not seem to us to be enough. It is true that the war was becoming increasingly brutal, and you can get a picture of that side of things from Graham Greene's novel, *The Quiet American*. But the Vietnamese struggle linked with a wide variety of other colonial resistance movements. I wrote the first pamphlet of the VSC, which was a condemnation of the Labour Party's position in Britain on the war. If you can send us a postal address, we can mail you a copy.¹⁴

Tony Simpson sent me a copy.

In one of my e-mails I had asked Ken Coates, among other things, about his relationship with the IWCT. He sent me a two-page letter, saying in part:

My only role in relation to the Vietnam Tribunal was played out during the preparation. I was very actively engaged in the London Conference which launched the Tribunal, and carried through some of the diplomatic efforts, first with Sartre, and later with Danilo Dolci. Dolci had signed up for membership of the Tribunal but wished to withdraw without any public fuss. I also played a certain role after the fierce quarrels between the majority of the Brits (for these purposes Ralph Schoenman was an honorary Brit) and all the French, which burst into flames in Stockholm. I have already informed you that I was in Cuba during that session, so I was unable to mediate any earlier. But I did calm things down, and played my part in making sure that there was no public scandal.¹⁵

I treasure that letter. The spirit in which it was written reassures me that all the nice words said about Ken Coates in the obituaries are sincerely meant and true. Ken Coates was a man with a big heart, a lot of energy, and he was also a peacemaker, a quality that came in handy when he had to deal with Schoenman's departure from the BRPF at the same time as Coates was becoming its most important member.

Ken Coates was a prolific writer and editor. Here I shall only mention a few publications related to Russell. His pamphlet on Wilson was republished as part

¹² London: Vietnam Solidarity Campaign, [1966].

¹³ By late 1969 he was one of just two directors, the other being Farley.

¹⁴ 20 April 2010.

¹⁵ 23 April 2010.

of *Mr. Wilson Speaks 'Frankly and Fearlessly' on Vietnam to Bertrand Russell* (1968). He was the editor of *Czechoslovakia and Socialism*, to which he wrote an introduction. It was published by the BRPF in 1969. He co-edited *Prevent the Crime of Silence*,¹⁶ published by Allen Lane the Penguin Press in 1971. Finally he edited, wrote the introduction to and contributed an essay called "The Internationalism of Bertrand Russell" to *Essays on Socialist Humanism in Honour of the Centenary of Bertrand Russell* (1972). It was one of the first books to be published by Spokesman Books, which is part of the BRPF. He occasionally wrote again on Russell (see the appendix) and, with his wife, Tamara, came to McMaster in 1997 and delivered the Bertrand Russell Peace Lectures for that year. Under Coates, the BRPF kept in print nearly twenty other Russell titles.

Ken Coates died just as I started to realize what a unique source of information he was regarding the history of the BRPF, VSC, IWCT and later Russell Tribunals. I had told him about my research project, and he was very encouraging. Now I regret that my plan of visiting him and Tony Simpson and seeing the BRPF's office in Nottingham did not materialize soon enough.

APPENDIX: OTHER WRITINGS ON RUSSELL

Biographical essay on Russell. For *I Protagonisti*, an Italian encyclopedia. 1970s.
Foreword to Spokesman Books reprint of *The Problem of China* (1993).

Foreword to Spokesman Books reprint of *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1995).

Preface to Spokesman Books reprint of *German Social Democracy* (2000).

Foreword to Routledge's reprint of *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare* (2001).

"Bertrand Russell and Industrial Democracy", *The Spokesman*, no. 3 (May 1970): 17–18.

He discussed Russell's relationship with Schoenman in reviewing *The Pendulum Years* by Bernard Levin, *ibid.*, no. 8 (Dec. 1970): 46–7, and his relationship with Lawrence in reviewing *D. H. Lawrence's Nightmare* by Paul Delaney, *ibid.*, no. 37 (spring 1980): 149–50.

Review of Caroline Moorehead, *Bertrand Russell—a Life*, *ibid.*, no. 61 (winter 1992–93): 123–6.

Review of Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell* [Vol. 2]: *The Ghost of Madness (1921–70)*, *ibid.*, no. 70 (2001): 61–4 (where he again discussed the relationship with Schoenman).

Review of Routledge Classics edition of Russell, *What I Believe*, *ibid.*, no. 87 (2005): 78.

¹⁶ Subtitled *Reports from the Sessions of the International War Crimes Tribunal Founded by Bertrand Russell: London, Stockholm, Roskilde*.