

PARALLEL LIVES FOR PEACE

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Martin Ceadel. *Living the Great Illusion: Sir Norman Angell, 1872–1967*. Oxford and New York: Oxford U. P., 2009. Pp. xv, 438. ISBN 978-0199571161 (hb). £68; US\$99.

“If there is to be an Anti-War League,” Russell wrote Lady Ottoline on 17 September 1914, “[Norman Angell] must be its Cobden” (p. 169).¹ That Angell ultimately failed to provide such a lead is one of the most interesting episodes of a fascinating political life expertly pieced together by Martin Ceadel. That Russell ranked him as heir apparent to the celebrated Victorian free trader and critic of the Crimean War provides a measure of the reputation Angell had built in preceding years as a publicist for peace. With his best-selling book *The Great Illusion* (1910), he had supposedly inaugurated a “new pacifism” grounded in realism not sentiment. Its central argument was that the financial and commercial interdependence of modern industrialized states made armed conflict between them futile, for the victors in any war of conquest would be harmed as much as the vanquished. Although developed with the verve of a born propagandist, this alluring thesis was, according to Ceadel, “overstated in certain respects and under-explained in others” (p. 87)—adaptable to both a pacifist position and one of military preparedness. Dogged by these apparent contradictions, Angell would spend much of his later career trying unsuccessfully to reconcile them. He was prone to internal inconsistency in his writings because of a habit of “arriving at their themes inductively and experientially more than through academic cerebration or *a priori* inference” (p. 5). In a sense he literally “lived” *The Great Illusion*, an approach to politics utterly different from Russell’s (as Ceadel acknowledges in the same passage).

Angell’s intellectual limitations did not prevent his signature work from becoming a runaway success. It sold over two million copies, was translated into twenty-five languages and stimulated the formation of numerous “Angellite” study-groups, leagues and societies, together with the journal *War and Peace*. His devotees included successful industrialists and Tory politicians, as well as Quaker pacifists, Liberal disarmers and anti-militarists inside the Independent Labour Party. This breadth of appeal is quite astonishing, not least, for example,

¹ Ceadel, in the work under review, is quoting from *Papers* 13: 529.

because orthodox socialists *should* have been condemning capitalism as the primary agent of war, not embracing it as an instrument for its prevention. “Angellism” was also at odds theoretically with that radical strain exemplified by J. A. Hobson and H. N. Brailsford (the latter of whom penned a critical review of *The Great Illusion*) and which emphasized how certain vested interests—in international finance, the armaments and allied industries and the “yellow” press—*did* profit from war or threats of war.

The Edwardian Russell was something of an “Angellite” in his robust defence of free trade on internationalist as much as economic grounds. Or perhaps it was more the case that he and Angell were “Cobdenites”. Although both men’s dissenting radicalism owed something to the inspirational tribune of the Anti-Corn Law League, Russell and Angell were also interested in the psychology as well as the economics of war and peace. The most persistent criticism faced by Angell after August 1914 was the least fair; he had only ever suggested that war was *irrational*, not that it was impossible. In fact, war would remain highly likely, he thought, so long as its irrationality was not much more widely appreciated. He had tackled this issue in his first book and returned to it with the rather desultory (for Ceadel) discussion of human nature comprising the second part of *The Great Illusion*. Angell also acquired, as a result, a lifelong commitment to mass education for peace, although he repeatedly failed to develop a coherent programme for this. In *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) and other wartime writings, Russell too probed the psychological mainsprings of war. But his reflections on violent impulses owed nothing to Angell’s amateurish discussions of “emotionalism”; Russell’s principal debts in this regard were to the political scientist Graham Wallas and his concept of “balked disposition”.² Russell continued, however, to assert the validity of Angell’s economic argument even as the very fact of the war appeared to many to have shattered its foundations.³

Ultimately, it was Russell rather than Angell who accepted the mantle of anti-war leadership after August 1914. Having failed to persuade Angell to publish an indictment of Britain’s pre-war diplomacy, Russell assumed this responsibility himself and produced *The Policy of the Entente* (1915). Angell was evidently no Cobden in waiting. His hesitancy is to be explained in part by a preference for reaching mainstream political opinion—however assiduously he sometimes courted left-wing support. It is revealing that the nucleus of “Angellism” in its heyday was not a radical peace society but a foundation set up by a wealthy manufacturer, which boasted as its two other trustees the impeccably establishment figures of Arthur Balfour, Conservative Party leader, and Viscount Esher, chairman of the Committee of Imperial Defence.

After energetically leading a neutrality campaign in the very last days of peace

² See *Papers* 13: xxxii.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 66 and 148.

and becoming a co-founder of the Union of Democratic Control, Angell gradually distanced himself from the new organization and still further from the more determined opposition to a war of which he had publicly stated by the end of 1914 that British intervention was just. It was almost a relief to him, therefore, when he departed in May 1915 for a year-long sojourn in the United States, where he would become a vocal lobbyist against the American neutrality that Russell regarded as a prerequisite for any negotiated peace. Angell's confusing wartime odyssey "sent him spinning along multiple ideological trajectories", writes Ceadel. The reader sees him veering from liberal internationalism to isolationism and back again and awkwardly fusing pro-war and pacifist perspectives (the latter shaped in part by an expressed admiration for Russell's 1915 essay "War and Non-Resistance").

After the war the two men found themselves on much more clearly demarcated common ground as critics of the Versailles Treaty. They would have met occasionally as fellow members of the Labour Party Advisory Committee on International Questions. Their views were not identical; Angell was far less stern a critic of French policy towards Germany than either Russell or the majority of other British leftists in the 1920s. Britain's post-war economic woes restored some of the sheen to Angell's badly tarnished "illusion" thesis, and the revival in its reputation was sustained as the world economy turned to ruin by the decade's end. Angell also benefitted from the fact that his ideological inconsistencies were less noticeable during a decade when the peace movement—confronted by no serious external challenges or internal strife—remained a church broad enough to accommodate pacifists and internationalists, disarmers and upholders of international law.⁴ He was knighted at the behest of Ramsay MacDonald in 1929 and received in 1934 the much greater distinction of a Nobel peace prize—thanks in part to the support of his nomination by Russell.

By this later date Russell and Angell were already moving towards opposite poles of an unbridgeable peace movement divide as its latent ideological tensions surfaced with a vengeance following Hitler's rise to power. As is well known, and to his subsequent regret, Russell would sign Dick Sheppard's peace pledge and opt in *Which Way to Peace?* for a policy of national and individual pacifism. Angell, meanwhile, decided that Europe's revisionist dictatorships should be deterred by collective security backed by military muscle. In so doing he challenged the pacifist assumptions of erstwhile supporters, not to mention his own writings, and threw in his lot with Churchill and other anti-appeasement politicians. As an author whose "illusion" thesis could be interpreted as questioning the

⁴ Ceadel has written extensively about this: see, for example, "The Peace Movement between the Wars: Problems of Definition", in *Campaigns for Peace: British Peace Movements in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Richard Taylor and Nigel Young (Manchester: Manchester U. P., 1987), pp. 73–99.

rationality even of self-defence, Angell remained, not unexpectedly, ambivalent about his political shift. Russell, by contrast, calculated that *pacifism* had become the only rational policy choice, although Ceadel has argued suggestively elsewhere that the utilitarian façade of *Which Way to Peace?* concealed a more emotive, essentially humanitarian motivation.⁵

As Ceadel notes (pp. 302–3), Angell was like many critics of appeasement on the anti-war left who arrived at this position only slowly, having at first seen collective security, not as the polar opposite of rearmament and contingency planning for war, but as a third way between such “defencism” and full-blown pacifism. By June 1937, however, when he and Russell disputed the merits of pacifism before the Oxford Liberal Club, Angell seems to have accepted that collective security must rely on armed force in the last resort. In this forum he contended, somewhat bizarrely, that democratic states must eschew a pacifist approach to defence primarily in order to protect themselves from fascism at home (pp. 333–4; see also *Papers* 21: lxiii). Russell tended to argue precisely the opposite—namely, that the exigencies of war would promote domestic dictatorship.⁶ Angell may not have carried the day against a formidable adversary in Oxford, but even Russell would have agreed retrospectively that his rival prevailed in the broader debate. Indeed, one almost wishes that Russell could have mustered the same clarity and common sense exhibited by Angell in one of the latter’s anti-appeasement polemics. Here, he identified Germany as the principal source of international danger and “that we can only be reasonably secure from it if we are heavily armed and if France is secure and our ally; and that if our arms and alliances are to prevent war the aggressor must know beforehand at what point, and to resist what policy, they will be brought into action” (p. 338).

Angell spent much of the Second World War as he had the First, in the United States. Here, he engaged in the sort of pro-Allied propaganda that Russell too might have willingly supplied if he had been less mistrusted by the British diplomatic corps in America. Angell emerged from this conflict as a committed cold warrior and remained entrenched in that position for the rest of his life. Indeed, in foreign and imperial matters he increasingly assumed the air of a Tory diehard—hostile to national liberation struggles and extending uncritical support to the British government over Suez. His stock had fallen dramatically by the time of his death aged 94 in 1967, although he had begun to attract attention as a contemporary historical figure—from Ball State University, which purchased his papers, and a cohort of historians of slightly older vintage than his biographer Ceadel.

Students of the British peace movement in the twentieth century are already

⁵ See *Pacifism in Britain 1914–1945: the Defining of a Faith* (Oxford: Clarendon P., 1980), pp. 215–20.

⁶ See, for example, *Papers* 21: 39, 253.

in Ceadel's debt for his authoritative chronicles of both its pacifist and "pacifistic" wings.⁷ He has now turned his hand to the biography of an important figure, now largely forgotten, who features intermittently in some of this earlier work. There is much to admire in this portrait, not least the skill with which Ceadel has navigated through his subject's often unreliable testimony. *The Great Illusion* is a classic example of a work more frequently cited than read, so we can be grateful for Ceadel's careful parsing of its numerous revisions after its initial publication as *Europe's Optical Illusion* in 1909 until the appearance of an "anti-appeasement" edition in 1938. Angell's 40 other books and voluminous journalistic output are now all but unknown. Yet his legacy is not entirely barren; he has lately been credited as a pioneer in the discipline of international relations (or "international polity" in Angell's terminology) and even as a proto-globalization theorist. Ceadel's book is richer and more intimate than this review has credited; there is a marvellous recreation from fragmentary source material of the young Angell (or Ralph Lane as he then was) as a man-on-the-make in the United States. Considerable pathos is brought to the portrayal of his declining years as a virtual recluse in his Surrey cottage—worried about posterity's judgment and frustrated by his inability to complete a final political testament. Whatever one's judgment of Russell's "Guevarist Years",⁸ clearly they were not spent in lonely and unproductive isolation from the public gaze, but with family, friends and acolytes at the court of Plas Penrhyn, from where his many and sometimes controversial pronouncements were scrutinized even more intensely than 50 years previously.

⁷ In, respectively, *Pacifism in Britain* and *Semi-Detached Idealists: the British Peace Movement and International Relations* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 2000).

⁸ See Monk 2: Chap. 13.
