

RUSSELL AND THE NOBEL PRIZE

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Russell's receipt of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1950 is one of the best known facts about him. What is less appreciated is the political and intellectual context of that award. This essay examines that context and the evolution of Russell's public and intellectual reputation in the immediate post-war period.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the yearly announcement of the recipients of the Nobel Prizes has acquired both a ritualistic quality and a distinct celebrity. Beginning on a mid-October Monday and stretching every day through the week, the Royal Swedish Academy of Sciences announces its prizes for Medicine or Physiology, Physics, Chemistry, Literature, and Economics.¹ Sleeping honorees are roused from their slumbers by early morning phone calls from Stockholm and told of their selection, occasionally provoking incredulity but more often confirming the odds-makers' projections, their colleagues' wagers, and their own guilty imaginings. Photographs are taken, corks popped, champagne swizzled, front-pages filled, unworthiness proclaimed, careers gilded or made, and arcane scientific research and literary merit explained to the laity.

As with so many cultural practices in our current media- and celebrity-saturated world, these apparently historically venerable procedures are in fact of very recent vintage, dating from the international media explosion of the early 1980s and from the Swedish Academy's

¹ The Nobel Prize for Peace is awarded by the Norwegian Nobel Institute in Oslo. The prize for Economics is administered by Sveriges Riksbank.

alert seizure of the publicity opportunities presented thereby. The Nobel Prize has as a consequence become as much a brand as an award, as much an ornament as a recognition of a lifetime of achievement. Such publicity, moreover, has served only to increase the acclaim and prestige of the award and to elevate the status of earlier recipients. Not merely can no Nobel honouree die without garnering lengthy and respectful death notices, but the notices themselves unfailingly give pride of place to the Prize itself among the late individual's accomplishments and honours. As one recent commentator observed without fear of contradiction, the Prize has come to stand as "the world's highest intellectual honour".²

Such was certainly the case with Bertrand Russell. Upon his death in February 1970, obituarists from Madras to Montreal struggled to sum up his uncommonly long, disparate, and contentious life and to give a clear sense of both his cultural standing and his intellectual legacy.³ To British commentators—presumably at least superficially familiar with their own nation's convoluted aristocracy and honours system—it was easy to follow the august *Times* and its studiously austere headline: "Earl Russell, OM FRS".⁴ To foreign writers lacking the blessings of a Fleet Street apprenticeship and thus not knowing either the Order of Merit or the Royal Society from a barge pole, however, the internationally recognizable Nobel Prize could be neither muddled nor misvalued. "Bertrand Russell is Dead at 97 | He Won the Nobel Prize for Literature", proclaimed Turin's *La Stampa*.⁵ "Mort de Bertrand Russell | Mathématicien et prix Nobel de littérature", announced the Parisian *Le Figaro*, and papers in places as distant as St. Louis—"British philosopher, pacifist and Nobel Prize winner"—and Portland—"Philosopher Spent Life Fighting 'Old Ideas' | Won Nobel in '50"—gave pride of place to Russell's receipt of the Nobel Prize in the list of his accomplishments.⁶ Indeed, by the end of his long life,

² This characterization was offered in a recent obituary of the Italian biologist Rita Levi-Montalcini, herself the recipient of the Prize for Physiology of Medicine in 1986 (*The Economist*, 5 Jan. 2013, p. 74).

³ For a discussion of Russell's obituaries see KIRK WILLIS, "Russell and His Obituarists" (2006).

⁴ *The Times*, 3 Feb. 1970, p. 11.

⁵ *La Stampa*, 3 Feb. 1970, p. 3.

⁶ *Le Figaro*, 3 Feb. 1970, p. 1; *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 3 Feb. 1970, p. 30; *The Oregonian*, 3 Feb. 1970, p. 2.

Russell's Nobel was one of the best known facts about him, universally acknowledged in his death notices and widely seen as confirmation of his versatility, acclaim, and respectability.

I

Russell was in Princeton, New Jersey—more specifically was seated at the luncheon table of the Director of the Institute for Advanced Study, Robert Oppenheimer—when the call came to inform him that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature for 1950. Although his hosts were presumably as startled as they were pleased, Russell himself had been tipped the wink a month earlier by his Swedish translator, Anders Byttner. Visiting London the first week of October, Byttner had asked Russell's publisher, Stanley Unwin, to arrange a meeting with Russell, a session at which the well-connected Byttner violated every protocol and passed along the news of Russell's imminent selection—presumably swearing Russell to a secrecy which he himself could not match.⁷ With uncharacteristic coyness, Unwin followed up a few days later:

I thought that you would find the Swede's visit acceptable. If the news is in any way concerned with a certain successful manufacturer of dynamite I may say that I have heard rumours which rejoiced me greatly, and upon which, when I heard it other than secretly, I was looking forward to the pleasure of congratulating you.⁸

It must therefore have been with a distinct twinkle in his eye that Russell left London in the first days of November for a month-long lecture tour in the eastern United States—a series of engagements that would stretch from Mount Holyoake College to Yale to Princeton to Columbia and beyond. An experienced and accomplished performer with a wide American readership, Russell had already filled auditoriums and packed lecture halls, but the announcement of the Nobel

⁷ Stanley Unwin had written to Russell on 6 October asking him to find the time to meet with Byttner. After that conversation Russell passed along the good news: "The Swede whom you sent to me brought some very pleasant news. I imagine you know it, but as he said it was secret I shall not mention it until I know you have been informed" (Russell to Unwin, 12 Oct. 1950, Russell Archives).

⁸ Unwin to Russell, 13 Oct. 1950, Russell Archives.

Prize only heightened public curiosity and was a gift from the publicity gods. Speaking in Princeton's McCosh Hall the night of the announcement, Russell met not just a standing-room-only audience, but also, as the *New York Times* reported wonderingly, "an overflow crowd of 750 persons" to hear his lecture on "Mind and Matter".⁹ Four days later in New York City, where Russell had travelled to deliver the prestigious three-day Matchette Lectures at Columbia University on "The Impact of Science on Society", the celebrated American correspondent of the *Manchester Guardian*, Alistair Cooke, reported that Russell encountered "a crowd of World Series proportions".¹⁰ As Russell's American minder noted with open-mouthed amazement:

People were lined up 3 and 4 deep all the way around two blocks in the hope of getting in by some miracle, or at least hearing the piped voice, or catching a glimpse of Lord Russell in person. This crowd roundly cheered as we drove up.... A reporter viewed the assemblage with considerable astonishment, "Good Lord, Lord Russell, anybody would think it was JANE Russell they were here to see instead of just a philosopher".¹¹

Not even the requisitioning of the additional lecture theatres could satisfy demand. As Cooke struggled to explain, "for the rest of this visit whatever Lord Russell cares to say, about anything from the hydrogen bomb to the vegetable diet, will be headline news."¹²

In the judgment of the Swedish authorities, it had been neither Russell's views on thermonuclear weapons nor his musings concerning vegetarianism but rather his "many-sided writings, in which he appears as a champion of humanity and freedom of thought", that had merited the award.¹³ To some American commentators, the selection

⁹ *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 2.

¹⁰ *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Nov. 1950, p. 8.

¹¹ Quoted in CLARK, p. 511.

¹² *Manchester Guardian*, 16 Nov. 1950, p. 8. COOKE's own conversation with Russell appeared under the heading "Fists for Russia and a Smile for Peking; Earl Russell's Hope for after the War", and formed the basis for the relationship described by COOKE in his *Six Men* (New York: Knopf, 1977), pp. 153–80.

¹³ Quoted in *New York Times*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 2. Unaccountably, Russell claimed in his *Autobiography* (3: 30) that the prize had been awarded to him for his book *Marriage and Morals*. The Swedish Academy's citation made no mention of this work and it is unclear why Russell made the claim.

of a writer with no pretensions to such conventional literary forms as poetry, fiction, or drama seemed, if not misguided, then at least to need some explaining, especially as Russell had—almost unprecedentedly—received the Prize for 1950 simultaneously with William Faulkner who, after a year's dispute amount the Swedish worthies, had been awarded the 1949 Prize. To the *New York Times*, for example, the double award—although on its face representing the linking together of two “strange bedfellows”—was in fact an imaginative and inspired pairing. Of Faulkner's credentials—“he is a great artist and deserves this award”—there was no question. Nor, argued the editorialist, should “one question [Russell's] right to the prize for 1950.” Not merely had his “abiding” early technical philosophical writings—as diverse as *The Problems of Philosophy* and *Principia Mathematica*—proven to be deeply influential among specialist practitioners and general readers alike, but his “provocative and daring social ideas” and, especially, his “fascinating” *History of Western Philosophy* confirmed that he was “certainly a literary genius”. Above all, enthused the leader writer in the bleak autumn of Alger Hiss, Joseph McCarthy, and the deepening of the conflict in Korea, “it is good to see a true liberal get his reward in these partially totalitarian and reactionary days.”¹⁴

The hugely influential *Saturday Review* also endorsed Russell's literary worthiness. Recognizing both that Russell had “now almost a generation ago made a contribution of historic importance to mathematical logic” and that “there is no Nobel Prize for philosophy”, the eminent Columbia philosopher Irwin Edman insisted that Russell fully merited the award as “a great humanist” and man of letters. Such “handsome recognition” was “proper and fitting” on two grounds. In the first place, Russell's luminous literary style—“so unfailingly lucid that, even when one disagrees with him, one knows exactly what it is with which one is disagreeing”—was as distinct as it was worthy of emulation. In the second place, Russell was a fully paid-up member of the venerable empiricist, liberal tradition of philosophy—a tradition “that has been a part and a phase of literature” from Locke to Berkeley to Hume to Mill and which represented “the steadfast and consistent attitude of a free mind exemplifying as well as defending freedom”. Russell's writings, in sum, represented “that fusion of thought and

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 14.

imagination which appears very rarely in the history of philosophy or the history of letters”, and in honouring them, Edman concluded, the Nobel Committee “honours itself in selecting so distinguished a union of philosophy and literature.”¹⁵

To be sure, an occasional eyebrow was raised and, as expected, William Faulkner’s selection won the palm of attention among American commentators. *The New Yorker*, for example, opened its “Talk of the Town” for the week of 25 November with a characteristically witty ode to Faulkner but made no mention of Russell.¹⁶ For its part, Henry Luce’s *Time*—a journal much given to ideological pot-shots and whose relations with Russell ran hot and cold over the decades—could not restrain itself from sniffing both that Russell’s “most important work, in mathematics and logic, was finished 40 years ago” and that his subsequent literary output—“on morals, politics, China, marriage, atoms, bolshevism, and world government”—was somehow and simply “too much”. Nor could the great and good at *Time* resist the dig that Russell had been “thrice married” and the reminder that he had been hounded from CCNY in 1940 “because he advocated trial marriage for students”.¹⁷

More balanced—or at least more forgiving—was the *New York Herald Tribune*, which praised Russell as “an apostle of freedom and philosopher in the modern sense [who] is one of Britain’s most brilliant thinkers”. Unlike Faulkner’s “murky” and “dark” Mississippi, Russell’s world was one in which “modern man is master of his fate” and in which human suffering is the result only of mankind’s “own stupidity and wickedness”. Together, the *Herald Tribune* observed, Faulkner and Russell’s selection represented an admirable “attempt at balance” on the part of the Swedish Academy, and their dual award merited “all men’s approval”.¹⁸

II

Russell returned to Britain the third week of November 1950. Word of his award had of course preceded him, as had reports of his

¹⁵ EDMAN, “The Nobel Winners”, *Saturday Review* 33 (25 Nov. 1950): 20.

¹⁶ *The New Yorker* 26 (25 Nov. 1950): 29.

¹⁷ *Time* 56 (20 Nov. 1950): 29.

¹⁸ *New York Herald Tribune*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 8.

admission that the Nobel was “one of the greatest honors I have received, the other being the British Order of Merit” (in 1949).¹⁹ Prophetically, the *Daily Telegraph* columnist Peterborough—perhaps after a conversation of his own with Herr Byttner—had breasted the tape for prescience by predicting on 6 November that both Faulkner and Russell would win and that their dual recognition would thus mark, in an admittedly novel context, yet another triumph for Oxford and Cambridge.²⁰ Most British press reaction to the announcement itself made a great deal of the simultaneous award of the Physics prize to the Bristol University cosmic-ray specialist Cecil Powell and of Russell’s own worthiness for the Literature award. Unlike in America, there was no questioning of Russell’s literary standing and no need to recapitulate his qualifications. Instead, it was Faulkner, whose Yoknapatawpha County was a world away from post-war Britain, who needed the introduction. But if Russell was identified, as the *Daily Telegraph* put it, simply as the “the philosopher”, it was also clear to his British contemporaries that he was neither a desk-bound stylist nor a conventional man of letters whose political opinions and cultural views could perhaps be mined from his diverse writings. Rather, Russell’s writings embodied his social and political engagement, and it is no surprise that in acknowledging his Prize they also assessed his opinions and, in many cases, found much to approve as well as to dislike.²¹

Virtually every British paper quoted from the Swedish Academy’s citation in some form or other, agreed that Russell’s literary credentials were indisputable, and then hurried on to make other points. To the *News Chronicle*, for example, the medal count took precedence and the paper exulted that Russell was the fifth Briton to receive the Literature prize and the 39th British laureate overall. Unusually, the paper pointed out, Russell was also an earl and a member of one of Britain’s most distinguished aristocratic families. Declining to name any of Russell’s actual writings, the paper did mention that his “long list of works on philosophy, science, mathematics and other subjects goes back to 1896” and that he had long been and remained (as did Powell) a man of the advanced political left. “One of his most recent suggestions”, reported the *Chronicle* doubtless behind a smile, “was that all

¹⁹ Quoted in *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 6 Nov. 1950, p. 4.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6 Nov. 1950, p. 1.

the poets and composers of the world should compete in writing an international anthem to replace individuals anthems, with schoolchildren judging the winner.”²²

For its part, *The Times* held true to its role as both Britain’s paper of record and the spokesman of the established order. Not merely did it identify the new recipient as the third Earl Russell and as the grandson of both Lord John Russell and Lord Stanley of Alderley, but it also provided a brief account of his Cambridge education and early philosophical writings and offered a substantial list of his best-known works from *A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz* to the *Principia* to *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* to the *History of Western Philosophy*.²³ Never knowingly approving of Russell, *The Times*’ leader writer chose to remain silent concerning Russell’s selection. The *Manchester Guardian*, by contrast, offered a snappy and admiring account of Russell’s background, education, and career and distinguished itself by presenting substantial discussions not just of Russell’s writings but also of Faulkner’s work—“the southern United States have been his own only subject, but he eschews the ‘moonlight and magnolias’ school”—and of Powell’s research achievements and strident political views.²⁴ And while the *Daily Express*, never a paper to give Russell a word of praise in any time or circumstance, contented itself with a seven-line column under the terse headline “Prize for Russell”, the equally unsympathetic *Daily Mail* presented an attack—“Britons Win Nobel Prizes | Earl Russell and ‘Peace’ Professor”—that devoted most of its attention to Powell and Russell’s political views rather than to their scientific and literary achievements. As for Powell, “he denies he is a Communist but says, ‘it is quite impossible to have a peace movement without Communist support.’ ” And in regards to Russell, the *Mail* quoted from the Swedish Academy’s citation but mentioned not a single one of his books or essays. Instead, it offered the politically charged observation that Russell had “joined the British Labour Party in 1945, [also] believes Russian Imperialism, not Communism, to be the greatest enemy. A year ago he said he would prefer an atomic war

²² *News Chronicle*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 3. The suggestion was made in a speech to UNESCO, reported over Russell’s byline as “We Must Tear Up History and Start Again”, *ibid.*, 29 Sept. 1949, p. 2.

²³ *The Times*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 6.

²⁴ *Manchester Guardian*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 7.

to Russian domination.”²⁵

Much more sympathetic was Kingsley Martin, the long-time editor of *The New Statesman* and a past as well as future ally of Russell’s in many political campaigns. Judging that Russell was “one of the half-dozen men who have most profoundly influenced the humanistic thought of the last forty years”, Martin praised the range of Russell’s writings, noted their “exquisitely limpid prose”, and endorsed their evolution and near-constant revision—“he has never claimed the dubious virtue of consistency.” Testimony to the latter trait, Martin noted, was Russell’s recent advocacy of what Martin took to be a preventive war against the Soviet Union:

After the last war, even more deeply troubled by the spread of Communism than he was by the power of Rome which he had often denounced, he decided that it would be both good morals and good politics to start dropping bombs on Moscow.

Such an attitude, Martin remarked wryly, presumably ruled Russell out of consideration for the Peace Prize—“no one would have been surprised if at any time between the two world wars he had been awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.” By now, “at this climax of his career”, it was “therefore surprising but suitable” that he should be granted the prize “for services to Literature. I am delighted at this recognition of the wittiest and most pure of English stylists.”²⁶

III

Russell travelled to Stockholm to accept his prize the second week of December 1950. Always a glittering occasion, that year’s spectacle acquired an extra sparkle from two unprecedented ingredients: not merely did it mark the 50th anniversary of the prizes (and thus welcome a large turnout of former laureates) but it was the first acceptance ceremony to be televised. Following custom, each recipient—the males smartly turned out in unfamiliar white tie, the females in evening gowns—offered an address aimed at a lay audience and not

²⁵ *Daily Express*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 1; *Daily Mail*, 11 Nov. 1950, p. 3.

²⁶ *New Statesman and Nation*, n.s. 40 (18 Nov. 1950): 449. Never one to take such criticism lying down, RUSSELL offered a lengthy and spirited reply to MARTIN: “Lord Russell and the Atom Bomb”, *ibid.* n.s. 41 (21 April 1951): 448, 450.

expected to be either politically controversial or technically demanding.²⁷ For his part, Russell offered his reflections on “What Desires Are Politically Important”, a reprise of themes he had been developing since the Great War and reshaping in the aftermath of a new conflict with its superpower rivalry, nuclear proliferation, and ideological confrontation. Indeed, he had given versions of the paper during his American tour in places as far afield as South Hadley, Massachusetts, and it was much in the spirit of the occasion in Stockholm.²⁸ Witty, lucid, and timely, it was more a meditation of human psychology than a tract of contemporary politics and courted (and provoked) little controversy.

Not surprisingly, therefore, Russell’s remarks stirred little press attention on either side of the Atlantic. To be sure, the major British and American dailies and newsmagazines acknowledged the ceremony and offered the occasional photograph of the gala, but usually did so in only one hurried paragraph that lumped together all the recipients and served only to remind readers of the names of the winners and the bare facts of their achievements.²⁹

The only exception to this practice, and it was a striking one, was a lengthy spread—five full pages—in the British photomagazine *Picture Post*. A direct imitation of the hugely successful American publications *Look* and *Life*, the weekly *Post* had been an expected success from the moment of its launch in 1938, selling nearly two million copies an issue by its third month and had even managed to increase its circulation during the war (albeit in a much pared-down rationing-truncated version). Edited by the veteran left-wing journalist Tom Hopkinson, the *Post* was staunchly pro-Labour in its sympathies and always on the lookout for splashy photogenic events, ranging—in 1950, for example—from the Chelsea Flower Show to the conflict in Korea to the

²⁷ For an amusing account of William Faulkner’s protocol near misses—the American ambassador’s butler “retrieved Faulkner’s speech and an invitation from the King of Sweden from a wastepaper basket” and his laureate’s medal “from the soil of a pot-tered palm”—see *TLS*, 21 June 2013, p. 30.

²⁸ The publishing history of this paper is well traced in B&R B100, C50.39 and C50.03. Most accessible is its inclusion in *Human Society in Ethics and Politics* (1954). Footage of Russell receiving the prize can be seen at <http://www.nobelprize.org/mediaplayer/?id634&view=2>.

²⁹ See, for example, *Daily Telegraph*, 11 Dec. 1950, p. 5; *New York Times*, 11 Dec. 1950, p. 10; *Time*, 18 Dec. 1950, p. 38.

Nobel Prizes' 50th anniversary.³⁰ Resolutely aimed at a middle-brow, progressive readership, the *Post's* coverage of the Stockholm festivities presented not just handsome photographs of well-dressed honorees and their hosts but also provided an organizing theme: "Have They a Message for Us?" Explaining that this golden anniversary of the Nobel Prizes was host to 900 guests, 140 servants, and 34 prize-winners past and present in all their finery, the *Post* seized the opportunity to interview as well as to photograph many of the worthies. Remarking on the circumstance that the funding for the prizes had come from a Swedish explosive manufacturer, that the conflict in Korea was escalating, and that a nuclear arms race was well underway, the magazine focused its attention on matters of immediate war and peace. "There is only one question", William Faulkner had provocatively asked in his own acceptance remarks, "when will I be blown up?" And the *Post*, observing that the former Mississippi farmer's question "is now asked, spoken and unspoken, every day in every home in almost every country in the world", took the chance to quiz the assembled great and good for their views.³¹

The *Picture Post's* interlocutor was the youthful Robert Kee, then at the beginning of a long and distinguished career as journalist, broadcaster and historian.³² To his evident dismay, the members of the world's intellectual elite gathered in Stockholm had no answer to give either to Faulkner's question or to Kee's own variant: "How do we avoid being blown up?" Indeed, the variety of opinion verged almost on intellectual parody. To some, such as the discoverer of penicillin Alexander Fleming, scientists had no responsibility for or expertise in questions of nuclear policy: "The dropping of the atom bomb is somebody else's business." To others, such as the British neurologist and former President of the Royal Society Henry Dale, the current military and diplomatic confrontation between East and West was something western scientists should do their best to endorse: "You have a world situation with the fault overwhelmingly on one side. A scientist must work for his country, and though I've often said that secrecy is a curse

³⁰ A good sense of the publishing history of the *Picture Post* can be found in TOM HOPKINSON, ed., *The Picture Post* (1970) and the CHARLES WINTOUR's entry of Hopkinson himself in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.

³¹ ROBERT KEE, "The Nobel Prize-Winners: Have They a Message for Us?" (1951).

³² There is a handsome tribute to Kee in a recent obituary of him in *The Guardian*, 11 Jan. 2013.

for the scientist, I'm afraid I can't see how it can be avoided in the present situation." The American pharmacologist Herbert Gasser simply wrung his hands: "Western ideals are worth saving and must be saved.... I don't know if we're in danger of losing them by dropping atom bombs—I just don't know." And his countryman Philip Hench, who had been awarded the 1950 Prize in Medicine or Physiology for his discovery of cortisone, was an unapologetic Cold Warrior: "We must have no compromise for expediency's sake, no appeasement like we were afraid your Mr. What's-His-Name—your Prime Minister—was up to. I'm an out and out anti-communist and you've got to stand up to them."³³

To Kee's mind, only one figure at the Stockholm assembly could be said to "see the present situation clearly"—the 1950 recipient of the Prize for Literature. Kee therefore presented a lengthy extract from his interview with Russell:

You mustn't mind too much what the scientists say, they only believe in being clever. Whether they're medical men or atomic physicists they feel it doesn't matter what you do so long as you do it cleverly. I remember a famous brain specialist who said to me once, "The trouble is you can't get bullets in the brain in peace-time." ... Our chief consideration must be to see that we don't get involved in war through American hysteria.... There are all sorts of issues on which I'd be prepared to go to war with Russia but I'm not prepared to go war for Chiang Kai-shek. Americans, unfortunately, consider Western Europe expendable, but when you're part of it you tend not to take that view.... There is a perfectly possible peaceful solution to the present situation on the basis of two worlds—like the Christian and Mahomedan worlds. We could have two worlds like that indefinitely.... Western Europe and particularly Britain have a tremendous role to play at the present time. We must and can control the Americans through UNO. They'll always want to save their moral face (they're descendants of the Pilgrim Fathers after all).... But if Russia attacks in the West I'd be in favour of war. Of course I would. If we merely allowed ourselves to be overrun by Russia it would be the end of Western civilization. We'd get all the bad efforts of a war without one. Whereas, if we resisted, Western Europe would be destroyed of course, but at least there would be an outer perimeter of civilization in places like America and Australia. And though America would

³³ KEE, "The Nobel Prize-Winners", pp. 28–33. Ellipses in original.

have been morally degraded by the process of winning a war, she would recover. You have a parallel in America in 1920. You can have no idea how quite horribly degraded America was then, but then you see by 1933 you had Roosevelt. So that though our civilization would become extremely degraded, certainly it would recover—there would be a revulsion.... However I repeat that our present task must be to see that the Americans don't drive themselves or anyone else into war on a hysterical issue. In the present circumstances we must find a peaceful solution, and keep the Americans in check through UNO.³⁴

Such views, far sharper than those expressed in his acceptance remarks and far more combative than any offered by his fellow laureates, made it plain that Russell was no ordinary Literature Prize-winner. Willing to think aloud, fully engaged with the myriad of contemporary diplomatic and military twists and turns, and ready to speak his mind in person and on the page, Russell did not confine himself to the usual literary practice of producing a novel or play or book of poetry once or twice a decade. Rather, he spoke and wrote urgently, incessantly, and always tried to keep his views absolutely contemporaneous with the morning's headlines. Such an approach of course had its costs—too often did he shoot from the hip, lapse into self-contradiction, and confuse his readers by constantly shading his opinions and adopting conditional proposals for a bewildering and ever-changing number of hypothetical possibilities—“if the Soviets do *X* and the Americans do *Y*, then....” Convinced that the stakes were of the highest order and determined to stay relevant to the on-going Cold War, Russell therefore often changed his mind and tone and, in the process, bewildered his audience. When ideological allies as intelligent, forgiving, and scrupulous as Kingsley Martin, Eric Hobsbawm, and Denis Healey all remembered confidently that Russell had, most notoriously, advocated a preemptive nuclear strike on the Soviet Union, it is clear that it was not just Russell's political enemies who found his maneuverings and qualifications hard to track.³⁵ But as a snapshot of the four weeks

³⁴ *Ibid.* Ellipses in original.

³⁵ Russell's alleged advocacy of a “preventive war” against the Soviet Union has been much discussed, most usefully by RAY PERKINS, JR., “Bertrand Russell and Preventive War” (1994), and DAVID BLITZ, “Did Russell Advocate Preventive Atomic War against the USSR?” (2002). As has been seen, KINGSLEY MARTIN had no doubt as to the answer to this question. Nor did ERIC HOBSBAWM: “Shortly after the dropping

between mid-November and mid-December 1950 illustrates, Russell, like millions of his contemporaries, struggled desperately to follow events, to anticipate results, and to seek ways of avoiding nuclear cataclysm. And as students of Russell's life well know, his views would continue to evolve and contradict in the two tumultuous decades remaining to him.

IV

Tomas Tranströmer (2011)
Henry Martinson (1974)
Ivo Andrić (1961)
Fabian Lagerkvist (1951)
Sigurd Undset (1928)
Henry Suenkiewion (1905)

For over 100 years, literary trivia buffs world-wide have made a parlour game of learning the names of these and other “unknown” winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature.³⁶ The pleasures of such pub-quiz competitions are rivalled only by their reverse—the head-shaking composition of lists of worthy non-winners: Auden, Borges, Chekhov, Ibsen, Joyce, Nabokov, Proust, Roth, Twain, and Williams. As such harmless sport makes plain, the Nobel Prize for Literature has become

of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki bombs, Russell concluded that the American monopoly of nuclear arms would be only temporary. While it was, the USA should exploit it, if need be by a pre-emptive nuclear attack against Moscow. This would present the USSR launching on the course of imminent world conquest to which he believed it to be committed, and would it was hoped destroy a regime which he regarded as utterly appalling” (*Interesting Times* [2002], p. 194). Nor did the senior Labour politician Denis Healey, who reminded readers in his autobiography that Russell “had once recommended the West to use its nuclear weapons against the Russians while it still had a monopoly” (*The Time of My Life* [1989], p. 240). Confusion about Russell's advocacy of an unconditional preventative strike against the Soviet Union remains to this day and is attributable to Russell's own tortured language and rationale building. He seems in fact not to have advocated such an attack while the US possessed a nuclear weapons monopoly.

³⁶ There is, inevitably, a scholarly study of the selection process: KJEL ESPMARK, *The Nobel Prize in Literature* (1991). For a recent sample of yearly handicapping see ALISON FLOOD, “Which Five Authors Are in Running for the 2013 Nobel Prize?” (2013), and TIM PARKS and PER WÄSTBERG, “Do We Need the Nobel?” (2013), p. 98.

at once a singular honour—one much prized by the honourees themselves and the world at large—and nearly incalculable crapshoot much influenced by ideology, fashion and geopolitics. Combined with the other prizes in science, economics and peace, it has become as well a vehicle for pitching otherwise reticent men and women into the public world. Countless appeals and petitions cross the desks of laureates new and old begging for their signatures, and international conferences of the Nobel great and good on such matters as climate change, nuclear proliferation, and genetic engineering show no sign of abating.³⁷

As has been seen, Bertrand Russell was an exception to this pattern. Already a public man before his selection, his name and qualifications went unquestioned and the Prize provided a kind of intellectual validation and popular acclaim which never really left him. Not yet a writer of imaginative literature, he was awarded the prize for half a century of astonishingly versatile writings stretching from mathematical logic and philosophy, to history and social commentary, to popular science and politics.³⁸ To his mid-twentieth-century contemporaries, many of whom had come of age in the twilight of Victorian Britain, Russell seemed a recognizable and estimable type—the Victorian sage, able to write with authority and power on a full range of topics past and present and to speak directly to a wide and ever-changing audience. To readers a full six decades later, by contrast, Russell appears to be in many ways an intellectual and cultural relic—unable and unwilling to be pigeonholed, determined on maintaining his contemporary political and cultural relevance, and convinced that this words, arguments, and books could move the world.³⁹

³⁷ Russell himself was not above playing the Nobel card when recruiting the initial signatories of the Russell–Einstein Manifesto in 1955. I owe this observation to Andrew Bone.

³⁸ Russell would of course make an ill-judged attempt at imaginative literature late in his life: *Satan in the Suburbs* (1953). Is it fanciful to wonder whether his receipt of the Literature prize prompted this excursion?

³⁹ I am grateful to Andrew Bone and Guy Ortolano for their careful readings of the manuscript, to the two referees for their improvements, to the elves of the Russell Archives for providing copies of the Unwin–Russell correspondence, and to the Editor for his suggestions, corrections, and encouragement.

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