

Reviews

RUSSELL NEEDED TO WRITE

PETER STONE

Political Science / Trinity College

Dublin 2, Ireland

PSTONE@TCD.IE

Nicholas Griffin, ed. *A Pacifist at War: Letters and Writings of Bertrand Russell, 1914–1918*. Nottingham: Spokesman, 2014. Pp. 218. ISBN: 978 0 85124 837 0. £9.99 (pb).

If there was one thing that Bertrand Russell knew, it was how to write letters. Over the course of his long life, he produced tens of thousands of letters. Many of those are lost forever, but a huge number of them have survived. These letters make good reading, at least for Russell scholars, and so it is not surprising that there are many anthologies of these letters out there. These include the two-volume *Selected Letters*, edited by Nicholas Griffin (1992–2001), which covers the whole of Russell’s life and thought, as well as more focused collections, such as *Dear Russell—Dear Jourdain*, edited by Ivor Grat-tan-Guinness (1977), and Russell’s *Correspondance ... avec Louis Couturat (1897–1913)*, edited by A.-F. Schmid (2 vols., 2001). There is even a collection of Russell’s correspondence with the press—*Yours Faithfully, Bertrand Russell*, ably edited by Ray Perkins, Jr. (2001)—and one of his correspondence with the general public—*Dear Bertrand Russell*, edited by Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils (1969). Indeed, at this point there are so many anthologies of Russell correspondence that whenever a new one appears, even the hardcore Russellian must ask, why another one?

I found myself asking this question while reading *A Pacifist at War*, the latest anthology of Russell letters. This volume (also edited by Nicholas Griffin) collects highlights from Russell’s correspondence in the period 1914–18. I enjoyed reading the collection immensely, and yet the question whether the collection was needed nagged at my mind the entire time.

To be sure, the volume contains no surprises in terms of content. All of the letters it contains were first published in Volume 2 of Griffin’s *Selected Letters*. In re-editing the collection for publication here, Griffin took the opportunity to correct some small errors and supply additional information about the letters (p. 4). He also provides a very well written and readable introduction,

marred only by a rather abrupt ending (p. 12). And he appends to the letters a half-dozen short anti-war pieces by Russell, including his appeal to Woodrow Wilson and the article that earned him a six-month prison sentence. (While these articles form a separate section of the book, the section is effectively an appendix to the letters.)

Griffin's excellent introduction is badly needed. The letters are certainly not self-explanatory. They require a lot of context to appreciate properly. Griffin supplies much of the context, through both the introduction and the extensive explanatory notes embedded in the text (notes that sometimes run longer than the letters they explain). This makes the letters much better reading; still, one frequently gets the feeling that something is missing. Perhaps this is unavoidable given the absence of letters from Russell's correspondents. Moreover, there are gaps with respect even to Russell's own letters. These gaps are not Griffin's fault; there are many letters that a Russell scholar would love to read but that are almost certainly lost and gone forever. This is particularly true of Russell's letters to D. H. Lawrence during their brief and disastrous political collaboration; not a single one of these letters survives (p. 45 n.1).

As the book's title implies, the most important topic covered by the letters is Russell's crusade against World War I. But the letters do not focus upon this topic, nor indeed upon any topic; they simply chronicle Russell's life during the period in which World War I takes place. Obviously, such a chronicle will wind up spending much time on Russell's anti-war activism, but it will also wander into many other areas as well. And so any reader approaching the book out of an interest in Russell the anti-war activist will have to wade through a great deal of material irrelevant to him or her. The letters early in the book, for example, have less to say about the war than they do about the complicated love triangle that briefly flared up between Russell, Lady Ottoline Morrell (his longtime muse), and Helen Dudley (a young and naïve American lady whom Russell foolishly invited to join him in England just before the war broke out). The book contains much material on both Morrell and Dudley, as well as Russell's other lovers of the period, including Irene Cooper-Willis, Vivienne Eliot (newly married to T. S. Eliot at the time), and Lady Constance Malleon (Colette). Understanding the ins and outs of these relationships is critical to understanding Russell the man, but they shed little light on Russell the pacifist at war. (Given the diversity of topics covered in *A Pacifist at War*, it is unfortunate that the book lacks an index.)

Can one, then, draw any grand lessons from *A Pacifist at War* about Russell the man? One such lesson helps to explain why he was able to write so very much during his lifetime. Russell didn't just love to write; he *needed* to write. As Griffin points out, "Bertie's inability to refrain from putting his thoughts in writing was almost pathological" (p. 134). (This is not always a good thing when it comes to relationships, as the book ably documents.) Somehow, this

makes it easier to understand how Russell could write, on New Year's Day 1918, that 1917 was the first year "since I grew up during which I have written nothing to speak of." This despite the fact (noted by Griffin) that "He had, in fact, published one book ... and seventy-four articles that year" (p. 145).

Aside from this, the book offers a number of small and interesting facts about Russell. I, for example, was unaware that Russell became godfather to the child of an American friend around 1914 (p. 36 n.3). I was also unaware that he appeared as the character Melian Stokes in three novels by Gilbert Cannan, a friend of D. H. Lawrence (p. 53 n.5). These facts have little to do with war or pacifism, but they are entertaining glimpses into Russell's life.

Overall, I enjoyed reading *A Pacifist at War*, just as I did the letters contained therein the first time they appeared, in the *Selected Letters*. The letters themselves, plus the critical commentary provided by Griffin, are enough to ensure that every dedicated Russellian should add this book to her collection. But I found it hard to identify the target audience for this collection. This is certainly not a book I would recommend to someone completely new to Russell. Nor is it the best introduction to his crusade against World War I; that honour still belongs to Jo Vellacott's masterful study *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War* (first edition 1980, republished in 2015 by Spokesman with a new preface and main title, *Conscientious Objection*). This book might be good for someone who already knows something about Russell and his anti-war activism, and wants to delve deeper into the topic from an unusual angle. The Russell completist will want to have this book. This is not the strongest recommendation I can give to a book, but given the number of collections of Russell's letters, it would be difficult for a new collection to do better.
