

“THE FRUIT OF MANY YEARS”: BERTRAND RUSSELL AND VERA BRITTAIN

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In her dedicated promotion of feminism and pacifism, especially during the 1930s, Vera Brittain (1893–1970) was strongly influenced by Bertrand Russell’s writings, especially *Marriage and Morals* (1929) and *Which Way to Peace?* (1936). Both were members of the Peace Pledge Union, and she continued as a sponsor after Russell abandoned his pacifism soon after the beginning of the Second World War. She admired his political and social activism in the aftermath of that war, endorsing it as much as her family situation allowed; and, as chairman of the *Peace News* board, Brittain intervened in Russell’s support when a dispute broke out between him and the editor. Although their relationship was personally limited, Russell’s influence on her opinions and actions was profound.

I. INTRODUCTION

When in May 1962 Bertrand Russell reached the age of 90, contributions to a tribute were invited in connection with an elaborate public birthday celebration, organized by Ralph Schoenman. Among the 75 contributors to the tribute were eminent contemporaries like Albert Schweitzer, Henry Moore, Arthur Miller, Martin Luther King, Leonard Bernstein—and Vera Brittain, then in her late 60s and internationally prominent as a pacifist, feminist, novelist, journalist and lecturer. This is her contribution:

I welcome the opportunity of sending a birthday greeting to an old friend for whom my respect is the fruit of many years. I honour him for his undaunted support of unpopular causes which has often given me

much-needed courage in bearing witness to minority convictions, but above all I am grateful for his books, which I have read for inspiration from my college days onwards.

There is especially one passage in *The Conquest of Happiness* which has helped me to face bereavements and setbacks with at least some measure of resolution which I might otherwise not have achieved at all. Those great individuals who give us the desire to become more worthwhile persons ourselves can never be adequately thanked, and I can only hope that the testimony of many will enable Bertrand Russell to realize how profound is the debt of each.¹

Although two decades younger than Russell, and despite other obvious and significant differences (such as gender and class), Vera Brittain had in common with him left-wing social and political ideals, and the promotion of these through popular journalism and other writings—especially, during the 1920s and '30s, ideals related to feminism and pacifism. Only during the Second World War, when he recanted his pacifism while she became even more deeply committed to hers, did they find themselves in separate camps. But Brittain's respect for Russell never wavered, as implied in her contribution to the Tribute on his ninetieth birthday. They were both of them in the final decade of their lives, dying in 1970.

Their relationship does not seem to have been, at any point, a close one; although Brittain called it a friendship, it seems to have been more like informal mentoring, mostly from a distance. Russell probably considered Brittain to be no more than an acquaintance, supporter and fellow-worker for peace; but for her he was clearly a significant exemplar and influence, both intellectually through his popular polemics and as an eminent social and political activist. Two of his books were especially significant to Brittain, each in one of the two movements that, through most of her life, dominated her thought and action: feminism and pacifism. These two books were *Marriage and Morals* and *Which Way to Peace?*

II. "MARRIAGE AND MORALS"

Marriage and Morals was published in October 1929. It was written, Russell's most recent biographer Ray Monk states, at a time when his

¹ *Into the Tenth Decade* (1962), p. [24].

marriage to his second wife, Dora, was “in very grave danger of collapse”,² and, largely for that reason, Monk surmises, Russell’s book was not composed as “a tract on sexual liberty”: but instead, as its title suggests, offers a firmly moralistic defence of marriage as a beneficent social institution. Monk may be over-severe in his assessment of the book, but he does draw attention to some of its more egregious defects—such as the gratuitous presence of a chapter on eugenics, a topic which has at best a tangential relation to the book’s main subject, and which spawned some authorial generalizations so objectionable as to weaken one’s respect for Russell as a careful and progressive thinker. Some passages make one wince: “Feeble-minded women, as everyone knows, are apt to have enormous numbers of illegitimate children, all, as a rule, wholly worthless to the community. These women would themselves be happier if they were sterilized”—and sterilization, he comments ominously, and thoughtlessly one hopes, “is within the scope of immediate practical politics in England.”³ (This when much of his overarching moral case attacks abuses of power by church and state!) Monk also points to instances of “casual racism and sexism” (Monk, p. 104), such as the assertion that “women are, on the average, stupider than men”—a statement which it would be easier to judge as merely regrettable carelessness if Russell had not refused to remove it when requested to, for the book’s first edition, remarking that “The habit of flattering women does a lot of harm” (quoted by Monk, p. 105). (Russell’s insistence on retaining the passage suggests a personal animus, presumably directed, consciously or subconsciously, at Dora.)

It is, of course, possible that some of Russell’s objectionable statements in *Marriage and Morals* are intended to be humorous; if so, the uncertain and variable tone of the book undercuts his intention, and may indicate an underlying nervousness as he entered a domain dominated by feminists—including Dora, who had recently published, to acclaim, a short feminist book entitled *Hypatia*.

One is surprised that Vera Brittain, well established by 1929 as a leading English feminist, ignored Russell’s negative comments on women. By the time she reviewed *Marriage and Morals* in the *Yorkshire*

² MONK, *Bertrand Russell: the Ghost of Madness* (2000), p. 102.

³ *Marriage and Morals* (1920), p. 203.

Post,⁴ soon after Russell's book was published, she had worked intensively in support of feminist causes, in England and internationally, for some eight years. She had published two novels and a book about *Women's Work in Modern England* (1928), based on a series of investigative newspaper articles which publicized the fact that, despite the 1919 Sex Disqualification (Removal) Act, employment opportunities for women were limited, and in some professions denied to married women. At the same time as Russell was writing *Marriage and Morals*, Brittain was writing a book entitled *Halcyon, or the Future of Monogamy* (1929), which, like Dora Russell's *Hypatia*, was a spirited and witty attack on the traditional view of marriage. In fact, Dora's book, from which Brittain quoted, was a clear influence, whereas Russell's may have had some effect on her later feminist thought and activism, which increasingly in the 1930s centred on the well-being of children within the family.

Vera Brittain's recognition of Russell's book as an influential endorsement of "new feminist" demands for social reform was surely the main reason for her enthusiastic and mostly uncritical appreciation. *Marriage and Morals*, she wrote in her review, was "a brilliant book", but she also went on to add that "the new system which it proposes" could have only "limited applicability"—because, in English society at that time,

... lifelong marriage rooted in the family circle but enlivened by extra-marital experiments must remain socially practicable only within comparatively narrow limits. For the wage-earner and his wife, the complications of external amorous adventures would—apart from any other drawbacks—interfere too seriously with the struggles for a livelihood.⁵

Otherwise Brittain did not demur. She applauded Russell's "new ethic", with its "stress on the importance [of] marriage [to] children", which obliged both partners to respect and defend it strongly. And she applauded his corollary belief that "any form of sex relationship, either within or apart from marriage, which does not involve children, should be a private matter between the individuals concerned." Perhaps most strongly, she praised Russell's "analysis of the part played

⁴ BRITAIN, "A Philosopher on Marriage" (1929).

⁵ *Ibid.*

by love in human life”, referring to the chapter which is one of the impressive cluster composing the core of his book and which makes it still worth reading and pondering. Some of Russell’s predictions, like that of the virtual disappearance of the father’s role and its absorption by the State, may seem prescient: and the book, as a whole, remains notably “modern”, since the values it endorsed and the changes it advocated have generally prevailed in Western society. Russell, Brittain concluded, had in *Marriage and Morals* very admirably “urged us ... to deal honestly with a situation hitherto concealed behind veils of sanctity and sentiment.”⁶

When, in 1950, Russell was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, he apparently believed that it was specifically for *Marriage and Morals* (*Auto.* 3: 30). I hope he was wrong. The actual citation referred to Russell’s “varied and significant writings in which he champions humanitarian ideals and freedom of thought” (quoted in Monk, p. 332).

III. “WHICH WAY TO PEACE?”

If Russell’s influence on Brittain’s feminism was largely tangential, the effect of *Which Way to Peace?* on her pacifism was immediate and profound. In a diary entry, on 5 January 1937, she stated unequivocally that she had decided to join Dick Sheppard’s Peace Pledge Union (PPU) after reading Russell’s book, which had been published some three months earlier.⁷

Russell and Brittain had both become, through the mid-1930s, increasingly critical of the League of Nations Union, and especially of its commitment to the policy of “collective security”. However, it was only when she met Canon Dick Sheppard in the summer of 1936, learned of his newly established Peace Pledge Union and fell under the spell of his charismatic personality, that another way of working for peace opened for her. Nevertheless she characteristically considered her position very carefully before deciding to declare herself a pacifist and join the PPU; and once she had come to that conclusion, she never wavered in her commitment to it. For her the term “pacifism”, firmly differentiated from the term “peace-lover”, represented what is often called “absolute” or “pure” pacifism, and what Russell

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ BRITTAİN, diary, 5 Jan. 1937; *Chronicle of Friendship* (1986), p. 303.

called “complete” or “out and out” pacifism.

On 20 June 1936, Brittain had been one of the major platform speakers at a large open-air peace rally in Dorchester, not far from Oxford. “We had a perfect afternoon,” she enthused in writing to her husband next day. “15,000 people came.... [Afterwards] I travelled back to [London] in a first-class dining car ... with George Lansbury, Dick Sheppard and Donald Soper [three prominent English pacifists].” Their conversation, and learning from them about “Dick Sheppard’s ‘Peace Pledge’ movement”, intensified her growing attraction to “the complete pacifist outlook”, and she agreed “to speak once or twice for Dick Sheppard in an intensive 3 weeks peace campaign which he is holding in the chief cities of England and Scotland during the autumn.” She listed among her reasons for wanting to join the PPU a recognition that “scientific inventions have made warfare ... a barbarity incompatible with a civilized world.”⁸ This opinion, and some of her other anti-war comments, then and earlier, indicate how close she was to the arguments Russell advanced in *Which Way to Peace?*—which she could not yet have read as it was published some four months later, in October 1936; though it is possible she had read some of his earlier anti-war writings, like the article “Keep Out of War!”.⁹ However, such opinions were commonly held on the Left in the mid-1930s: Alan Ryan has judged that Russell was “in the mainstream thinking that all-out attacks on civilian targets would smash the physical and organizational basis of all civilized life.”¹⁰

Brittain would certainly have agreed unreservedly with statements in *Which Way to Peace?* that “War is not a convulsion of nature, like an earthquake; it is a result of human volition, and human volition can prevent it” through resolute anti-war action, which “must be individual, not merely governmental” (pp. 13–14); that the “prolonged and odious injustice towards Germany [on the part of Great Britain and especially France, after the Treaty of Versailles in 1919] produced its natural result” in Nazi belligerence (p. 13); that “The aeroplane ... has altered completely the strategy and even the politics of war” (p. 18), so any future war “will be directed primarily against civilians” in the bombing of “the centres of population and industry” (p. 28), causing

⁸ Vera Brittain to George Catlin, 21 June 1936, box 235, Brittain papers, McMaster.

⁹ *Sunday Referee*, 1 Sept. 1935, p. 10; **II** in *Papers* 21.

¹⁰ Quoted from *Bertrand Russell: a Political Life* (1988), in Introduction, *Papers* 21: xxvi.

“appalling destruction, not only of life and property, but of civilized traditions and social institutions” (p. 50).

Of course, some of Russell’s predictions were proven wrong or excessive, but in making them he was in good military-expert, not merely Leftist, company. Other predictions in the book were, as in *Marriage and Morals*, prescient. But there are also damagingly contradictory opinions, justifying to some extent Monk’s general opinion of *Which Way to Peace?* as “a curious mixture of startling naivety and cold-blooded *realpolitik*” (Monk, p. 183). Perhaps most notable among these contradictions was, on one hand, his realistic assessment of the German threat, and the nature of Hitler and Nazism—“The Nazis, whose whole philosophy is warlike, wish to wipe out what they consider the disgrace of Germany’s defeat in the last war” (p. 9) with their “terrifying war machine, which is evidently intended to be used when the suitable moment arrives” (p. 88)—while, on the other hand, he advocated a policy of unilateral disarmament, arguing, with astonishing optimism, that this would bring about “a complete change in the character of the German government” (p. 143); for, “having no longer any reason to fear you, [they] will cease to hate you, and will lose all incentive to attack you” (p. 140). This latter opinion was prominent in Brittain’s writing, too. But she dissented, significantly, from Russell’s repudiation of the possibility of “humanizing war”, and in fact wrote a letter to the editor of the *Tribune* in 1944 in response to criticism of her pacifism by George Orwell, insisting that warfare had been moderated in the past and could be moderated in the present and future, by moral and legal prohibition.¹¹

When Russell’s argument in *Which Way to Peace?*, having dismissed the efficacy of all other means of anti-war action, arrived at pacifism as the only appropriate and timely policy, he divided it into two types—“complete”, “religious” pacifism, “deduced from Christ’s teaching or from the categorical imperative”, asserting that “in no imaginable circumstances will we go to war with another civilized State” (p. 134); and “partial”, “rational” pacifism, which implies a “refusal to fight on some occasions when there is considerable provocation,

¹¹ “Humanizing War?”, *Tribune*, 23 June 1944. ORWELL’s piece was in his weekly column, “As I See It”, *ibid.*, 19 May 1944. BRITTAİN wrote as a member of the Bombing Restriction Committee (for which see OVERY, “Constructing Space for Dissent in War” [2016]).

but not on all such occasions” (p. 134). Having mentioned earlier his opinion that “There have been wars that have done good—for example, the American War of Independence” (p. 51), and otherwise defined himself as a “rational” pacifist, he yet paradoxically leaps, as *Which Way to Peace?* nears its climax, to a categorical assertion that “partial pacifism” always “breaks down” and only “the complete form” can be effective (p. 134). Vera Brittain would have been strongly affected by the surging rhetoric of the book’s concluding pages, and especially the insistent capitalized peroration that promoted a set of actions suggestive of Sheppard’s Peace Pledge: “To abstain from fighting, and from all voluntary participation in wars between civilized states; to use every effort to persuade others to do likewise; to bring all possible influence to bear to prevent the participation of his country in war; and, within the limits of his capacity, to aim at similar results in other countries also” (p. 223).

In her busy personal and professional life, Vera Brittain was, in the summer of 1936, still haunted by the suicide of her father and the illness and death of her close friend Winifred Holtby the preceding year. She was also recovering from her long struggle to complete *Testament of Youth* (1933), her now-famous memoir of the First World War (in which she had served as a Voluntary Aid Detachment nurse), and her long feminist novel *Honourable Estate* (about to be published). She had to cope with her husband George Catlin’s adamant rejection of her reasons for wishing to join the PPU and of her “absolute pacifism” generally. She also felt obliged to fulfill lecture engagements she had promised in support of the League of Nations—an experience that, ironically, as she tried to answer urgent questions from her audiences, drove her ever closer to the very position her husband, a professor of politics and aspiring Labour politician, had rejected. Russell, too, was in some personal turmoil when, in a truly astonishing three weeks during August and September 1936, he composed *Which Way to Peace?* His divorce from Dora, finalized in July 1935, had been wrenching, and now relations with his third wife, Peter, were deteriorating; while the tension and conflict within the Parliamentary Labour Party, which had forced George Lansbury’s resignation as leader just before the General Election of November 1935, troubled him—especially since he had supported Lansbury, an absolute pacifist (whose personality and ideals may well have influenced Russell when he was writing *Which Way to Peace?*).

Although it has literary and logical flaws, as pointed out by Monk and others, *Which Way to Peace?* is much more controlled and better unified than *Marriage and Morals*, no doubt largely due to the urgency of its topic and the intensity of Russell’s engagement with it. The book begins strongly by referring to clear signs that “a new Great War is imminent”:

[E]very great country in Europe is piling up armaments ... the apprehension of war is continually heightened; and the universal apprehension is itself a most potent cause of war. Fear of war is used to justify armaments; armaments increase the fear of war; and the fear of war increases the likelihood of war. (WWP, p. 7)

Russell achieves impressive immediacy, and a momentum that rarely slackens throughout the book, sweeping the reader towards acceptance of his thesis (or theses)—surely any critic must recognize that the book is brilliant polemical propaganda. And much of its power derives from Russell’s ability to write in a style whose simplicity, directness, and apparent lack of artifice suggest honest conviction, while holding emotion subject to intellectual argument—and quite seamlessly rising to a climax of persuasive rhetorical intensity. Ironically, it was Vera Brittain, rather than Russell, who was lastingly affected by his book. Both of them, once war seemed inevitable, were dedicated to British victory on patriotic as well as intellectual grounds—that sentiment finally provoking Russell’s recantation. As late as May 1939 he wrote in a letter “I still believe that war would be worse than Hitler”, but then in August 1939 “If there is war, I shall of course vehemently desire our victory”, and in September 1939 “I cannot maintain the pacifist position in this war”;¹² but it did not deflect Brittain from maintaining *her* pacifism, with hard-working membership of the PPU throughout the War, and campaigns against the food blockade and area bombing.

In May 1940 Russell went public with his changed position, informing Kingsley Martin, the editor of the *New Statesman*, that he was no longer a pacifist and suggesting that the fact be publicized.¹³ The editors of *How to Keep the Peace*¹⁴ have outlined in their Introduction, not

¹² Quoted in *Papers* 21: lxiv, lxv.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. lxv.

¹⁴ Volume 21 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*.

only the critical and political reception of Russell's book at the time of publication and later, but also the stages and extent of Russell's retreat from it. Most sadly, in my view, as he reconsidered the book for the second volume of his *Autobiography* (published in 1968), he claimed that he had been "unconsciously insincere" in writing it. Apart from this being a "problematic concept" (Monk, p. 183), it de-means not only his motivation in writing the book, but also the positive contemporary response to it by Brittain and others. Yes, it could be described, rather dismissively, in his own words, as "a purely patriotic book, addressed to the momentary situation in England";¹⁵ and I think its argument was severely compromised by his own unperceived confusion in representing himself as a "rational" pacifist, apparently a higher type in his unstated opinion than the "complete" pacifist that, however briefly, he clearly became as he responded "emotionally to the expected catastrophe of war".¹⁶

Yes, *Which Way to Peace?* is compromised in its argument, but it was also an effective and well-written contribution to the debate in 1930s England about how to try to prevent the outbreak of a second world war.

IV. LATER YEARS

In a diary entry dated 9 February 1940, George Catlin, Vera Brittain's husband, wrote that "On the basis of a *Los Angeles Times* review of my work, Peter Russell rang me up and we had dinner with her and Bertrand. Vera went to sleep during part of it (effect of [flu] I suspect) ... Bertrand 'discussed shop' with me ... and doubted whether he was any longer a pacifist."¹⁷ At that time, Catlin was lecturing in the United States on the importance of Anglo-American cooperation, while Brittain was in the midst of a very tiring lecture tour of her own; they were able to meet and spend time together only occasionally. During her lecture tour, she not only suffered a bad attack of 'flu that she couldn't shake off, but was continually worried about having left behind in England her two young children and her mother in potential danger from German attack. Catlin was anxious not only about his

¹⁵ Russell in a letter of October 1936, quoted in Introduction, *Papers* 21: lix.

¹⁶ Introduction, *Papers* 21: lxvi.

¹⁷ Catlin, diary, box 3, Catlin papers, McMaster.

wife’s physical and psychological well-being but also about the possible political effects of her giving voice in speeches and question-periods to her pacifism; on 17 February he heard her “speak at Pasadena on pacifism” and recorded that it “went off very successfully”, although he “was not so pleased with the comment that I heard behind me, ‘Very unfair to England and her policy’.”¹⁸ In fact, after her return to England later that year, she learned that a question about her activities in the United States had been asked in the House of Commons during her absence, and towards the end of 1940, after her two children had been evacuated to America, her application for an exit permit to visit them and her husband was repeatedly refused—leaving her alone and distressed in London during the Battle of Britain. Russell, too, was suffering from ill fortune: a few weeks after her unsatisfactory evening with him and Peter in Los Angeles, and before her return to England at the end of her lecture tour, Brittain learned from newspaper reports about the withdrawal of his CCNY professorship. On 2 April she wrote him a letter of support from Winston-Salem, North Carolina:

Dear Lord Russell,

I do want to send you a brief note of sympathy on the abominable attacks that have been made on you here....

You may like to know that even in a quite miscellaneous New York audience you have many sympathizers. Last week I lectured on “Autobiography in Literature” at the Town Hall. This lecture contains—has contained for five years—a quotation from your small book *What I Believe*. The paragraph quoted seems to me one of the noblest and most courageous passages in English Literature; it is the one that contains the sentence: “Happiness is nonetheless happiness because it must come to an end, nor do thought and love lose their value because they are not everlasting.” (I quote from memory—I hope correctly.) ... At the end of the lecture I was asked to quote the passage again. I did so, and it produced a tremendous burst of applause.

I thought you might like to know this.

My husband and I sail for England on Saturday; he will be back in a few weeks, I probably not for some time....

We did so enjoy the evening we spent with you in Los Angeles; I only wish the after-effects of influenza had not made me so stupid.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

You know you have my deepest admiration, and this sends my good wishes as well.¹⁹

In the aftermath of the war, as new threats to peace emerged with the atom bomb, Brittain continued her commitment to the PPU, becoming its chairman—a position she resigned in 1950 to give more of her time and energy to her writing, always her primary vocation. Nevertheless she was persuaded to accept the chairmanship of the PPU's *Peace News* advisory board in the late 1950s, at a turbulent time when, under the editorship of Hugh Brock, the newspaper was emerging from its original role of official mouthpiece of the PPU and attempting to broaden its range, in part to attract a new readership after a long decline and in part to adjust to the changes in the peace movement. In this period, Brittain wrote many articles for *Peace News* supporting such causes as the anti-apartheid struggle in South Africa, as well as the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, with whose aims she and Brock agreed profoundly. However, her husband objected to her "Ban the Bomb" activities; he had long blamed common knowledge of Brittain's pacifism, during and after the War, for his failures to achieve election as a Labour MP and gain influence in the party.

By 1960, when Russell invited her to become a member of the Committee of 100, there was also her daughter Shirley's nascent political career to consider. Brittain did not shrink from supporting the objectives and methods of the Committee, joining the massive Trafalgar Square demonstration of September 1961, and arguing in a letter to *The Times* that, as with "the Suffragette movement" and "Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedience campaign in India", "[t]he sacrificial fervour of great idealistic crusades begins to capture public imagination and achieve its ends when it takes an active and 'dangerous' form."²⁰ But in 1960 she had replied to Russell's invitation "I am very sorry that I shall not be able to join your Committee, as this would inevitably mean that other members of my family, who are doing important political work and are not pacifists, would be penalized for opinions that they do not share."²¹

When Russell wrote again, on 1 August 1962, asking her to sponsor

¹⁹ Brittain to Russell, 2 April 1940, box 6.31, RA1 811, Russell papers, McMaster.

²⁰ 19 September 1961.

²¹ 9 October 1960, Brittain papers, McMaster; copy in RA3 Rec. Acq. 159. See this file for other letters quoted below.

an appeal for public financial support, she responded immediately and more forcefully,

I enclose a donation towards the Committee’s expenses, but I fear I cannot sign an advertisement asking for funds because this would immediately involve my husband, who neither endorses civil disobedience nor supports any part of the CND organisation. For twenty-five years he has been seriously penalized by my pacifist affiliations, and it would be wrong and unfair further to impose on his tolerance by a public association which would finally torpedo his own work within orthodox Labour channels.

This meant that

such help as I can give to CND or the Committee of 100 must be confined to occasional money gifts, to the membership of inconspicuous committees, and above all to my work as Chairman of the Board of *Peace News*, which gives to both CND and the Committee of 100 as much publicity as it can.

It was Brittain’s chairmanship of the *Peace News* board that brought her into a correspondence with Russell, early in 1963. Just back from a long visit to India, she found herself embroiled in a heated conflict springing from a disagreement between Hugh Brock, the *Peace News* editor, and Russell and Schoenman, in regard to the imprisonment of two young airmen who had written to *Peace News* proposing to establish a “Services CND group”. Russell’s ire was especially aroused by Brock’s refusal to publish a statement he had submitted,²² on the ground that it was factually inaccurate—and by Brock’s implying (apparently in a telephone conversation) that the letter had not been written by Russell himself. Brock reported his version of what had happened to Brittain, with a request that she try to calm Russell’s anger by writing to him. She did so immediately, expressing regret over the “difference of opinion between yourself and the editorial staff.... As you know, I have the greatest respect and regard for yourself personally, which everyone at *Peace News* shares. If there is anything that the Editor or I can do to put things right, I do hope you will let me

²² Dated 19 February 1963, RA1 630, box 1.46; RA4, box 17-F7. Schoenman’s follow-up letter to Hugh Brock, dated 1 March 1963, is in RA2 360.193135.

know.”²³ Russell’s anger was not easily assuaged. He wrote Brittain a long letter of complaint, insisting that

Any statement which I make is one with which I am prepared to face the world. I consider it intolerable that it should be said to my secretaries that the statement was not written by me.... [A]ny reflection upon the integrity of my associates is a reflection upon myself. My secretaries have my utter confidence and they are meticulous in their reflection of my views and my wishes with regard to my public work.

He concluded:

I am sorry to be writing to you in this way. I appreciate your frequent kindnesses and I do not wish to cause you personal distress.... Nevertheless, I feel that I must tell you that I do not have confidence in the accuracy of the reports in *Peace News* nor in its journalistic standards.

(17 March 1963)

Brittain responded with a short submissive letter, and the same day wrote a very critical “Personal and Private” letter to Brock:

I feel very sorry indeed that this matter should have arisen, and been allowed to reach the present stage of exacerbation. Even if Lord Russell was in the wrong on matters of detail (which I am not saying), I do not think that *Peace News* should have publicly criticized him.... When Lord Russell uses the word “effrontery” I think he is probably right.... It was *absolutely* wrong to refuse to publish Lord Russell’s statement on the ground that “it misrepresented the position at RAF Locking”. If it did, an editorial note following his letter could have made this clear.

(19 March 1963)

She referred to a “direct clash of evidence, upon a point of fact, between Schoenman and yourselves”, but concluded

My advice, if it is of any value to you, would be to avoid further controversy on details, and send Lord Russell a sincere letter of apology. *Peace News* and its staff should not be too arrogant to “climb down” before an old man of 90 with a grand international reputation, even if he

²³ Brittain to Russell, 15 March 1963, RA1 630, box I.46.

or his secretary was wrong on technicalities. There is a quality of magnanimity in his letter which suggests that he probably would accept such an apology.

Her advice was of course accepted, and she accompanied it with another emollient letter of her own to Russell (22 March 1963), to which he responded “I appreciate the generous things you say and your efforts on my behalf. I too hope that the unpleasant atmosphere which has obtained between *Peace News* and myself will improve.”²⁴ And so that dimension of the matter ended—and probably with it the relationship of Russell and Brittain.

Clearly it was a positive relationship. For Brittain, it enhanced both of the causes that dominated her life, feminism and pacifism—and she was grateful to him for that. As a practical activist, as well as a historian, who believed strongly that some beneficial changes had been achieved in the past—in both the conduct of war and the status of women—she was convinced that further change was possible with sustained effort. She was essentially a meliorist, and consistent in her opinions and behaviour. She came thoughtfully and carefully to her positions, and then held firmly to them. Russell was in some ways her opposite, in his social and political behaviour, often flinging himself from one intellectual opinion to another, from one position to another—in such debate often the gadfly. For those who value him as the brilliant and influential philosopher and mathematician, his often unpredictable, often confusing, often careless popular polemics on feminist and pacifist topics between the two world wars must sometimes seem to be an embarrassment to be dismissed or better ignored. Perhaps it is easier to think of Russell as two (or more!) different and compensatory professional personalities, and to be grateful for the range and vigour of his thought and writing, always raising very important questions about fundamental issues. Like Brittain, he achieved all this while living a complex, demanding and often painful domestic life; however, as a man, in that period, he could override most distractions from his work priorities; Brittain, as a woman, with husband and children to consider, could not, and she was further handicapped in handling antagonisms by the expectations imposed

²⁴ But see the indirect reference to the episode in the exchange between Russell and the editor under “Telephone Guerrillas”, *Peace News*, 24 May 1963, p. 11.

not only by her gender but her middle-class origins. For instance, her behaviour in mollifying Russell and Schoenman and quite harshly criticizing colleagues when she seems to have accepted that the editor and staff of *Peace News* were factually in the right, was questionable, and perhaps justified only by avoidance of a public controversy that could have damaged the peace movement as a whole. Throughout her life, she worked amicably and diligently with colleagues on committees and always tried to be a peacemaker in her family, as well as in the internal disputes of the PPU and other organizations. Russell and Brittain were complementary personalities whose strengths drove forward positive social and political reform in the last century.

But one should not forget the great value Brittain found in Russell's popular polemics and admittedly "common sense" self-help writings. As her daughter Shirley Williams has recently reminded us in her autobiography *Climbing the Bookshelves* (2009), Vera Brittain's "deepest commitment was to writing" (p. 5); and her admiration for Russell's popular books was certainly genuine. I end with the quotation from *The Conquest of Happiness* to which Brittain referred in her 90th birthday tribute to Russell, a passage that comforted and inspired her in times of near despair after the loss of so many close to her—not only her brother and fiancé and two friends during the First World War, but her father, and especially her close friend Winifred Holtby, in 1935. Her gratitude for this passage—the gratitude of one writer to another—was clearly profound. Russell wrote:

To be defeated by one loss or even several is not something to be admired as a proof of sensibility, but something to be deplored as a failure in vitality. All our affections are at the mercy of death, which may strike down those whom we love at any moment. It is therefore necessary that our lives should not have that narrow intensity which puts the whole meaning and purpose of our life at the mercy of accident. (*CH*, p. 229)

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