

BERTRAND RUSSELL'S WRITINGS AND REFLECTIONS ON HISTORY

KENNETH R. STUNKEL

History / Monmouth U.

West Long Branch, NJ 07764-1898, USA

KSTUNKEL@MONMOUTH.EDU

This essay examines Russell's historical writing, views on historical knowledge, and what history meant to him.¹ In addition to frequent historical references in writing on ethics, religion, social issues, education and politics, and some half-dozen works mostly historical in character, he wrote four reflective essays on history and its uses. They are "On History" (1904), "The Materialistic Theory of History" (1920), "How to Read and Understand History" (1943) and "History as an Art" (1954). There are additional scattered, brief examples of historical exposition and interpretation in works for the popular press, but these 80 pages or so stand out from an enormous body of work from about 1895 to 1970.

I. INTRODUCTION

Russell knew a lot of history and used it freely in his writing. His views and accomplishments are worth sorting out for three reasons. First, he cared about historical study, its perspectives on

¹ Kirk Willis has written a fine essay on this topic: "Bertrand Russell on History: the Theory and Practice of a Moral Science", in Bernhard P. Dauenhauer, ed., *At the Nexus of Philosophy and History* (Athens and London: U. of Georgia P., 1987). Although I cover stretches of the same ground, my approach differs from his in two respects. I attempt a detailed scrutiny of works that qualify more or less as historical in purpose and result. I also discuss more fully issues of historical knowledge and truth. My disagreements with Willis are minor, e.g., with his view that "Russell fought shy of offering any 'lessons' or 'laws' of history" (*ibid.*, p. 128). He is correct about a denial of laws, but less so about an inclination to renounce lessons. For example: "History *shows* that, broadly speaking, governments do as much harm they dare, and as much good as they must ..." (my emphasis; *Papers* 15: 90).

the human condition, and its value for a good education. Second, although his arguments about the nature, purpose, procedures, and limitations of history are thinly developed, they have disproportionate interest because of his formidable logical intelligence. Third, his moderate scepticism and unabashedly traditional view of history clash with “post-modern” thought that dismisses historical knowledge as social fiction useful in power struggles or identity seeking.² A deconstructive approach to historical texts says they are only collections of signs riddled with ambiguity, which leaves the reader in full control of indeterminate meanings. In short, there is no past open to objective understanding, no possibility of stable knowledge, only socially constructed claims by historians with irreconcilable agendas and shades of bias. Russell was not friendly to such premisses and conclusions in theory or practice, holding that radical scepticism is logically untenable and self-defeating. Traditional or naïve as one may prefer, he accepted that responsible history is useful knowledge about a past that really happened. Possibly he would have observed that postmodern scepticism is unoriginal (much of it begins with Nietzsche), added its doctrines to his “Outline of Intellectual Rubbish” (1943), and with characteristic irony alluded to “the ocean of insanity upon which the little barque of human reason insecurely floats”.³

For R. G. Collingwood, the best commentator on history reflects philosophically on experience and also does history by asking questions about the past and responding with critical examination of historical evidence.⁴ Unlike Collingwood, who did both (*The Idea of History* is complemented by *Roman Britain*), Russell did little of either, readily admitting he was a consumer rather than a producer of historical works.⁵ He did not work in archives, remained chiefly a user of published historical scholarship, and relied on it consciously as a framework to develop and dramatize his own social and political ideas. History books were part of his intellectual and family environment as a boy: “My

² See Alan B. Spitzer, *Historical Truth and Lies about the Past* (Chapel Hill: U. of North Carolina P., 1996), pp. 2–3.

³ Russell, “The Materialistic Theory of History”, *BW*, p. 531; reprinted from *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920), Pt. 2, Chap. 1.

⁴ R. G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* (Oxford: Oxford U. P., 1946), pp. 7–8.

⁵ Russell, “History as an Art” (1954), *BW*, p. 532.

grandfather's library, which became my schoolroom, stimulated me in a different way. There were books of history, some of them very old.... The net result of them was to stimulate my interest in history. No doubt my interest was increased by the fact that my family had been prominent in English history since the sixteenth century" (his grandfather was a son of the Duke of Bedford and in 1931 Russell himself succeeded to the peerage as the third Earl Russell).⁶ His experiences and associations at Cambridge University embedded the conviction that history is "an essential part of the furniture of an educated mind".⁷ After his first marriage, he settled into a workman's cottage, where "I was ... able to devote all my time to philosophy and mathematics, except the evenings, when we read history aloud."⁸ Russell's distinction as an activist philosopher in social and political matters helps to explain his life-long attachment to history as well as a desire to try his hand at it. In his writing on topics other than logic, mathematics, and technical philosophy, he made frequent, thoughtful use of historical allusions. He assumed that his arguments were supported by verifiable historical fact as well as by logic, and that historical statements have a potential for truth essential to any usefulness they might have.⁹

2. RUSSELL AS HISTORIAN

Russell produced a number of historical or quasi-historical works. They are: *German Social Democracy* (1896), *The Policy of the Entente, 1904–1914: a Reply to Professor Gilbert Murray*, in *Justice in War-Time* (1916), *The Problem of China* (1922), *Freedom versus Organization, 1814–1914* (1934), *The Amberley Papers: the Letters and Diaries of Bertrand Russell's Parents*, (two volumes, 1937), and *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945). *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (1935) contains an interpretive essay on Western civilization.

This body of historical writing invites reservations. Even though Russell never claimed to be a historian, friendly criticism is a condition for taking his efforts seriously and assessing their value. What character-

⁶ Russell, "My Mental Development" (1944), *BW*, pp. 39–40; *Papers* II: 7–8.

⁷ "History as an Art", *BW*, p. 536.

⁸ "My Mental Development", *BW*, p. 43; *Papers* II: II.

⁹ "History as an Art", *BW*, pp. 535–7.

izes his writings in the realm of history? First, he rarely set out to describe how things were, or simply to extract from sources verifiable facts and plausible patterns of human thought and action. Usually he aimed to shed light on contemporary issues—e.g., problems of war, socialism, government, religion, education, and the uses of science—by reflecting on them in light of the past. History was usually secondary to contemporary interests. Second, he seldom hesitated to deliver pungent judgments on people and events. Addressing the “facts” in a spirit of cool detachment or noncommittal scholarship was not his *métier*. Third, he did little research in primary materials. He was more a generalized man of letters with lofty axes to grind than a historian trying to discern the past from a dogged examination of archival or other kinds of evidence. Fourth, his writing has a steady glow of Whig bias, which Kirk Willis sums up as the “conviction that history ... was moving toward ever greater enlightenment and virtue: ... from tyranny to democracy; ... from barbarism to civility; ... from superstition to science.”¹⁰ Threats to this trio of democracy, civility, and scientific rationality, from without and within, stimulated Russell to write history. Fifth, his bias was on the side of individuals rather than impersonal historical forces, whether geographical, economic, or technological. He lost no opportunity to critique pretensions to uncovering historical laws that purportedly regulate historical change. Finally, despite these caveats, Russell as historian is usually instructive and fun to read, far more so than many professionals in the field, and he consistently serves up generous portions of provocative insight. As a reviewer of *Freedom versus Organization* put it, “he read wisely in modern history, and historical students may profit by the reflections of a brilliant amateur.”¹¹ With that much said, I proceed to a closer look at his legacy of historical writing.

German Social Democracy is six lectures given at the London School of Economics and Political Science in February and March 1896 when Russell was not quite twenty-four years of age; it is an informed, sophisticated performance for such a young man.¹² A contemporary reviewer says “he preserves the attitude of the impartial historian” and has “inti-

¹⁰ Willis, “Bertrand Russell on History”, p. 118.

¹¹ *English Historical Review*, 51 (1936): 743.

¹² Russell, *German Social Democracy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965; 1st ed., 1896). This is the first American printing.

mate knowledge of the subject.”¹³ His subjects are labour, freedom, justice, and social theory, all of which had come to a head in England and Germany as two of Europe’s advanced industrial states. He observes how socialists squandered political leverage against a privileged core of power in the German Empire by embracing dogmatic Marxism. In a preface to the 1965 edition, Russell tells us “the point of view from which I wrote the book was that of an orthodox Liberal” (p. v). In the list of 38 principal works consulted, 28 are in German, which is an impressive array of foreign language references. He undertakes to expound and critique the doctrines, programmes, strengths, weaknesses, successes, and failures of German social democracy from predominantly published German works such as Brandes’s *Ferdinand Lassalle: Ein litterarisches Characterbild* (1894) and Mehring’s *Die deutsche Sozialdemokratie* (1879).

This succinct volume addresses the influence of Marx on German politics and labour and the theoretical basis of Social Democracy contained in Marx (Lecture I); the ideas and activities of Ferdinand Lassalle (d. 1864), the fiery labour leader, who “practically created the German labour movement” (Lecture II, p. 64); a historical sketch of German socialism from the death of Lassalle to the passing of the 1878 Exceptional Law, Bismarck’s attempt to neutralize a Marxian-driven labour movement from 1878 to 1890 (Lecture III, pp. 69–91); what happened to the socialist movement under the Exceptional Law (Lecture IV); the organization, programme, and tactics of Social Democracy since 1890, when the repressive law lapsed (Lecture V); and the present situation of Social Democracy (Lecture VI). In the third lecture, Russell provides an extended account of the highly illiberal German constitution, which demonstrates “the absence of Democracy” and helps to explain the momentum of German socialism (pp. 84–9).

Russell’s objective is to show that Social Democracy transcended party politics and economic theory, being “a complete self-contained philosophy of the world and of human development”. The basis of that philosophy is Marx’s dialectical materialism, whose premiss of historical inevitability “gives to Social Democracy its religious faith and power”, which in turn “inspires patience and controls the natural inclination to forcible

¹³ H. Bosanquet in *International Journal of Ethics*, 8 (Oct. 1897): 131. See Willis, “The Critical Reception of *German Social Democracy*”, *Russell*, nos. 21–2 (spring–summer 1976): 35–45.

revolution” (pp. 1, 6). After 1870 the German labour movement was dominated by the party of Marx, whose “principle of class warfare must form the theme of a history of German socialism” (p. 41). While critical of the socialists, Russell also defends them against charges of atheism, free love, anti-nationalism, and revolutionary intent by taking their point of view. He explains, for example, that socialist beliefs about women do not oppose family life (the charge of libertinism) but rather support participation of women in economic and political life (pp. 93–9). He wants to delineate the relationship between political democracy and economic collectivism in its German setting, the quintessence of social democracy “... which the Party could not abandon without political suicide ...” (p. 65). The socialist adventure offers a crude but promising alternative to the “extreme individualist doctrine of the Rights of Man”, which Russell judges “totally false in theory, and in practice destructive ... of all possibility of social life” (p. 166). The book ends with a prescient observation about the future of Marx. If the socialists come to power through revolution, as they are likely to do, with “ideals intact” but without “training in affairs”, they may, like the French Jacobins, “make all manner of foolish and disastrous experiments” (p. 170). A reviewer more than a half century after the book’s publication says “as history it is too sketchy and personal”, but “in essentials the main conclusions which he reached still stand....”¹⁴

The Policy of the Entente, first published as a substantial pamphlet in 1915, is a response to Gilbert Murray’s *The Foreign Policy of Sir Edward Grey, 1906–1915*, an apology for British policy toward Germany, France, and Russia in the years preceding World War I.¹⁵ The pivotal question is responsibility for the Great War and how it might have been avoided, which is addressed by a combination of diplomatic history, political analysis, and well-crafted polemics. About 46 items are cited, sixteen of which are from the news media. Sources and references consist of secondary works, some government documents, and newspaper items. For this reader, the essay has more the feel of a political science treatise than a work of history.¹⁶

¹⁴ See Nevil Johnson’s review, *Political Studies*, 14 (1966): 237.

¹⁵ Russell, *The Policy of the Entente, 1904–1914* (1915), reprinted in *Justice in War-Time* (Chicago and London: Open Court, 1916), a collection of his writings on politics, diplomacy, and public affairs; reprinted in *Papers* 13.

¹⁶ Compare Russell’s work with a standard history of roughly the same period, such

Russell is no less than provocative: "... if our foreign policy in recent years had been conducted with more courage, more openness, and more idealism, there is a likelihood that the present European War would never have occurred" (*Papers* 13: 216). The Triple Entente between Britain, France, and Russia showed "a desire to thwart Germany in ways in which no wise statesman would have wished to thwart her" (p. 265). Thus British support of a French protectorate in Morocco with no compensation for Germany was a damaging humiliation that primed the war pump even though "the German case was technically good" (p. 235). He was cautious, however, to be evenhanded about overall responsibility: "Although Germany's blame is greater than Britain's, it is no proof of our innocence" (*ibid.*). He attacks "the absurd assumption ... that if one side is to blame, the other must be innocent" (p. 217). He tries to show that British foreign policy helped "the war party in Germany", thwarted German peace advocates, and gave aid to France and Russia "in enterprises which were inherently indefensible" (p. 220). Given war fever and self-righteousness among all the European powers in 1914, one can understand why Russell was so unpopular and excoriated in Britain despite the Olympian calm and fairness of his reasoning.

Gilbert Murray accused him of being among the pro-Germans, unable "to see or even to seek the truth" (p. 217). No wonder Russell was piqued enough to write *The Policy of the Entente*. He defended his integrity while exposing bad policies, but did so without *ad hominem* tactics. Neither Edward Grey nor Gilbert Murray faced anything but well-argued doubts about Grey's policies and Murray's apologetics. Russell's main purpose was didactic—to learn from the past to avoid mistakes in the future, for "... if we remain ... impervious to facts which are not wholly creditable to us, we shall, in the years after the war, merely repeat the errors of the past, and find ourselves ... involved in other wars as terrible and destructive as the one which we are now waging" (p. 216). Russell steers deftly through a notoriously tangled diplomatic landscape. He uses effectively the rhetorical tactic of inventing speeches pro and con on British policy toward Germany (pp. 221–3). In the ultra-nationalistic atmosphere of the time, few were likely to be pleased with his conclusions that "no one of the great powers shrinks from wanton aggres-

sion, war, and chicanery”, and that “we and they alike have been immoral in aim and brutal in method” (p. 224).

The Problem of China comprises fifteen chapters.¹⁷ An appendix provides some news about more recent Asian affairs. There are footnotes but no bibliography. One chapter raises questions, seven chapters are on China, four are on Japan, two address diplomatic and geopolitical issues affecting China, Japan, and the Western powers, and one compares Chinese with Western civilization. On the title-page Russell is identified as Sometime Professor of Philosophy in the Government University of Peking, indicating that his reflections on China benefited from first-hand acquaintance and observation. He says: “When I went to China, I went to teach; but every day that I stayed I thought less of what I had to teach them and more of what I had to learn from them.” What he learned was that “... those who value wisdom or beauty, or even the simple enjoyment of life, will find more of these things in China than in the distracted and turbulent West ...” (p. 209).

A reviewer dismissed a later reprint of the book as follows: “... it was not a profound or important study, and the passage of time has not increased its significance.”¹⁸ There is reason to dispute this assessment. For the year 1922, Russell’s book had definite virtues; it is exposition and analysis of respectable scope that confronts East Asian culture and political affairs. There are perceptive comparisons of China, Japan, and the West. His understanding of Chinese civilization is especially credible and intelligent. The historical portions provide background and take up about a half dozen chapters. On traditional China, Russell consulted the best Sinologists of the time—e.g., Legge, Giles, Cordier, and Waley. He also used Chinese works translated into English. References for Japan are much narrower and less interesting in scope. Russell was not *doing* history but rather engaging in ambitious historical exposition and interpretation for a wide audience. The book does not contain fresh historical knowledge, and he relied almost wholly on secondary and popular sources. In perspective, however, it deals engagingly with non-Western civilizations in global context when such efforts were rare. Indeed, it was unusual for a philosopher to trouble himself about Asian cultures and

¹⁷ Russell, *The Problem of China* (New York: Century, 1922).

¹⁸ D. Steeds, in *Political Studies*, 15 (1967): 143.

their relations with the West. As one reads along, there is much insight and wise counsel to be gleaned as well as stimulating diplomatic and geopolitical speculation.

Russell was a sharp observer. He noted, for instance, why Chinese cities are so spread out: "Peking has nearly a million inhabitants and covers an enormous area, owing to the fact that all houses have only a ground floor and are built around courtyards." He understood that "China is much less a political entity than a civilization."¹⁹ He evenhandedly points out strengths and weaknesses of China, Japan, and the West. China gave him a backdrop for critiquing the "self-assertion and domination" of the West as well as its runaway materialism (p. 208). While scientific method is the "distinctive merit of our civilization", China's merit lies in "a just conception of the ends of life" (p. 205). He goes so far as to say Chinese life is a greater source of happiness for Chinese than English life is for the English, with the exception of women (p. 73).

Economic, political, and cultural issues are discussed, but the cultural sphere is considered most important, "both for China and for mankind" (p. 4). The "problem" for China is how to modernize without sacrificing its cultural advantages to westernization. While the Chinese are faulted for avarice, cowardice, and callousness, he is more worried about their good qualities yielding to a siege of Western money, power, and imperialist ambition (pp. 211, 213, 216, 221, 224–5). Russell's unconcealed bias is anti-capitalist and pro-socialist, and he opines "... all politics are inspired by a grinning devil, teaching the energetic and quick-witted to torture submissive populations for the profit of pocket or power or theory" (p. 14). He cautions: "we must cease to regard ourselves as missionaries of a superior civilization", and he does "not see any reason to believe that the Chinese are inferior to ourselves." His view of ethics as a matter of preference beyond logical demonstration was forthright. As to the relative value of civilizations and the most desirable global ends, "... I do not know any argument by which I could persuade a man who gave an answer different from my own. I must therefore be content to merely

¹⁹ *The Problem of China*, pp. 70, 219. Edwin O. Reischauer and John King Fairbank stress traditional China's "culturalism" as opposed to nationhood in their authoritative text on East Asian civilization. See *East Asia: the Great Tradition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958, 1960), pp. 290–4.

state the answer which appeals to me, in the hope that the reader may feel likewise" (p. 5). Among four things he believes are valuable as ends rather than means—knowledge (meaning scientific knowledge), art (meaning pleasure in beauty), spontaneous happiness, and friendship—the Chinese are judged to excel in all but knowledge. Russell stresses that Japan is a major problem facing China, and, of course, he was right. He is prophetic in saying: "In the long run, I believe that Japan must dominate the Far East or go under" (pp. 9, 119). He may well have been prophetic about China as well: "... all the world will be vitally affected by the development of Chinese affairs, which may well prove a decisive factor, for good or evil, during the next two centuries" (p. 3).

Freedom versus Organization, a hefty volume of 471 pages, including bibliography and index, is in my judgment the most historical of his writings. Although Russell's name appears alone on the title-page, he acknowledges the collaboration of Peter Spence (i.e., Patricia Russell, when she became his third wife), who did "half the research, a large part of the planning, and small portions of the actual writing, besides making innumerable valuable suggestions."²⁰ Normally so much participation by a second party would justify joint authorship. There is no easy way to tell where the hand of Patricia Russell intervenes or leaves off, but I assume without really knowing for sure that Russell was principal author throughout.

The book spans 100 years and thereby achieves sweep and depth in time. It displays an abundance of familiar but well-deployed facts and many perceptive judgments. The 32 chapters divided into four parts give it structural luxuriance. There is a grand thesis as well: "... an attempt to trace the main causes of political change during the hundred years from 1814 to 1914", which Russell sees as three—"economic technique, political theory, and important individuals", especially technique (p. vii). His objective is to unravel connections between technology, organization, and freedom; the last ends up being endangered by successes of the first two. In this book Russell believed in something like historical causation and accepted that major causes of change can be sorted out from minor

²⁰ Russell, *Freedom versus Organization, 1814–1914* (New York: Norton, 1934), p. viii. Russell says elsewhere to good effect: "The man who proposes to write large-scale history should not be expected himself to do the spade work." Again, "... the amassing of facts is one thing, and the digesting of them is another" ("History as an Art", *BW*, p. 539).

ones: "It is possible ... to trace the effects of large causes without oversimplification, provided it is remembered that other causes have also been operative" (p. viii). He aims to identify major forces shaping the modern world for good or ill. His conclusion is that industry, technology, and war promoted organization within national states that "increased the power of those who held economic and political command." Political thought, whether Utilitarian, Liberal, or Socialist, failed to keep pace with this concentration of power; rather all doctrines ended by justifying anachronisms of pre-industrial monarchy and early industrial competitive democracy when the reality everywhere was plutocracy, the economic and political domination of the many by the few (pp. 447-8). Liberalism put too much confidence in the unregulated self-interest of individuals and promoted nationalism, which linked up with technology and money to pave the way for imperialism.

As a consequence, economic nationalism is "the dominant force in the modern world" (p. 450). The nineteenth century, for all its optimistic rhetoric and expectations, failed to build an international organization to counter the anarchy of national governments bent on their own interests. About the time this book was written, Hitler came to power in Germany. Russell noted: "... *the same causes* that produced war in 1914 are still operative, and, unless checked ... they will *inevitably produce the same effect*, but on a larger scale" (my emphasis). The safeguard is "world-wide economic organization ..." if "... civilized mankind is to be saved from collective suicide" (p. 451). It appears that Russell was ready in this book to admit lessons of history couched in the language of discoverable, predictable causes, although of a kind lacking the rigour of physics.

The volume is replete with lively biographical sketches, exposition of economic theories, and assaults on child labour, slavery, and imperialism. He traces the development of "progressivism", by which he means cosmopolitanism, rationalism, democratic forms of government, and receptivity to economic and social reform. As nations appeared with tight political, economic, and social organization, protection of individual freedom and rights became a problem. In his view, all the new doctrines fell short of fulfilling their promises, partly because of errors, partly because of political ineptitude. He identifies progressive movements in the nineteenth century as American Jeffersonian and later Jacksonian democracy, Philosophical Radicalism in England (read Utilitarianism),

continental Liberalism flowing from the French Revolution, and Socialism, especially that of Marx and his followers. There are chapters on English thinkers such as Malthus, Bentham, James Mill, Ricardo, Owen, Cobden (a leading Philosophical Radical), and Thomas Hodgskin (a follower of Ricardo who influenced Marx). No less than four chapters are given to Marxism, long a topic in Russell's writing. In the chapter on nationalism he gives generous space to J. G. Fichte, an early theorist of German nationalism (pp. 356–61).

Robert Binkley reviewed the book and faulted it for lacking "a clear and consistent drive along the main path marked out by the promise of the preface and again referred to in the conclusion", mainly failing to show how technology shaped organization and thereby not fitting "evidence to conclusion".²¹ James Harvey Robinson thought better of it, praising Russell's use of federal treasury documents in the section on American economic life, and recommending it to editorial writers and congressmen if they were "miraculously endowed with the intellectual ability to understand it..."²² The book's scholarly apparatus invites comment. I count 121 bibliographical entries, 10 in French and one in German—not much of an arsenal for a grand thesis covering 100 years of European history. There are many irregularities in documentation, more than enough to disqualify the book as an impressive work of scholarship. Primary sources and secondary references are loosely referred to or not at all, which seems to confirm that Russell wanted to get on with writing and was not much worried about nuts and bolts scholarship. For that matter, neither was Patricia Russell (i.e., Peter Spence), if she was the chief documentary watchdog. Many documents and letters are quoted with no footnote citation, while others are provided with exact references.²³ Alexis de Tocqueville is quoted and assigned a footnote where he is quoted still again but without a page citation for either quotation (pp. 245–6). Sometimes one encounters a bundle of notes on one page, which contrast oddly with few references elsewhere (see, e.g., p. 250). In one place, Friedrich List is footnoted and quoted from one of his works with no full bibliographical reference or page number and the

²¹ *American Historical Review*, 41 (1935): 188.

²² *The Journal of Modern History*, 7 (June 1935): 219.

²³ *Freedom versus Organization*, pp. 29, 33–4, 128–30, 370–3 in the first instance, and 322–4 in the second.

work itself is absent from the bibliography, unless one surmises it comes from the included Hirst volume on List's biography with selections from his writings (p. 384). On the one hand, Russell might have smiled at these cavils as mostly pedantry. On the other hand, maybe a bit of pedantry is necessary if historical claims are to have verisimilitude.

Here is an example of Russell's sardonic style, a description of England on the eve of his grandfather Lord John Russell's Reform Bill of 1832:

... the government was inefficient and inconceivably corrupt; the taxes were oppressive, especially to the poorest part of the population, since they were largely on necessaries. The whole legislative power of Parliament was used to enrich the landowners at the expense of all other sections of the community. Everything needed reforming—education, the law, the judicial system, the prisons, the insanitary condition of the towns, taxation, the Poor Law, and much else. Meanwhile the rulers of the country hunted foxes, shot pheasants, and made more stringent laws against poachers. The intelligence of the nation, as well as its humanity and common sense, rebelled against the continuation of such a system. (P. 121)

The Amberley Papers are a documentary history of Russell's mother, father, and other relatives, for which Patricia Russell shares authorship.²⁴ The two volumes contain absorbing material on political, intellectual, and cultural life in Britain between 1854, the date of the first document, and 1876, the date of the last one. They make accessible a body of primary materials about an important English family. Entertaining observations, witty asides, and memorable characterizations accompany the letters and diary entries. An example is Russell's account of Lord Stanley of Alderley, which is an inadvertent description of himself: "His knowledge was encyclopedic and his wit brilliant, though too caustic for success in politics" (1: 25). Bertrand Russell makes his appearance near the end of the 576-page second volume: we learn that he was born "big & fat", "vigorous & strong" (2: 490). Seventy-three pages later, he "begins to talk" (2: 563). What in these documents parallels Russell's taste for history and public affairs? Many of the letters are thoughtful, literate, and expansive (2: 302–4, 311–13). They indicate a family engaged

²⁴ *The Amberley Papers: the Letters and Diaries of Bertrand Russell's Parents*, 2 vols. (New York: Norton, 1937).

intimately with social and political issues of their time (2: 24–7). The tone of the exchanges is worth noting, for Russell makes a point of describing the written conversations as an “agreeable mixture of incisive controversy and close family affection” (2: 449).

A History of Western Philosophy bears the word “history” in its title and claims a historical mission. It is perhaps indicative of Russell’s disposition that history of philosophy was for him the most attractive part of the history of culture. The book is intended “to exhibit philosophy as an integral part of social and political life: not as the isolated speculations of remarkable individuals, but both as *an effect and a cause* of the character of the various communities in which different systems flourished” (emphasis supplied).²⁵ On balance, he failed to achieve that purpose. The reason is not the absence of historical material, of which there is quite a lot, but its marginal relevance to discussions of thinkers and their ideas. History is mostly sealed off from philosophy and philosophers. The poor connection between the two stands out despite a half dozen chapters devoted to “social and political life”. As George Sabine puts it in his review, the historical accounts “do not contribute much to an understanding of the philosophy or the author’s comments on it.” They are “for the most part quite distinct from the exposition and criticism of the philosophies. Hence “... it is only in the vaguest sense that the author exhibits them as an integral part of social and political life.”²⁶ This reservation about the book as a “history” is the most important, but there are other weaknesses and problems as well.

First, the historical material is applied unevenly. It is abundant in chapters on the ancient world. On the medieval period, it virtually takes charge and overwhelms his discussion of thinkers. Then it slackens off in the early modern period until toward the end there is barely any history to be seen.

²⁵ *HWP*, p. ix. This aim is alluded to in “My Mental Development”, *BW*, p. 49 (*Papers* 11: 17), where he says “I am at present writing a history of western philosophy ... in which every important system is treated equally *as an effect and as a cause* of social conditions” (emphasis supplied).

²⁶ *American Historical Review*, 57 (1946): 485. Other reviewers came to the same conclusion. See Isaiah Berlin’s strictures in *Mind*, n.s. 56 (1947): 151ff. See also Joseph Ratner’s review in *The Journal of Philosophy*, 44 (1947): 39. He adds that it is inconsistent of Russell to say logic is the essence of philosophy in his last chapter and then eat up space with social and cultural topics in the rest of the book (p. 40).

Second, too often he slips into anachronistic criticisms, as in his highly judgmental discussions of Aristotle's views on slavery, ethics, and physics, where this reader had an uncomfortable feeling that a major Greek thinker was being measured against contemporary values and the latest findings of modern physical science rather than being understood and appreciated within the limitations of his time and place.²⁷ One might grant that a history of philosophy justly differs from a history of ideas by referring the past to truths of the present. The reservation is that he errs too much on the side of applying modern views and standards to his subjects. George Boas argues in a review that such anachronisms are inevitable, because "... an essential weakness in Lord Russell's book [is to] insist on the timelessness or universality of philosophical problems, ... which is less excusable in a work whose foundation is the connection of philosophy with social and political circumstances."²⁸

Third, the book's documentation is weak and unsatisfying. Too frequently it is nonexistent. Despite citation of some 450 works from a variety of sources, he neglects to cite philosophical works with any regularity, fullness, or precision. Two-thirds of his secondary sources were published before 1930 in the late nineteenth or early twentieth centuries. The revised second edition (1961) included few new references and even fewer after the 1940s. Where quotations lack references, perhaps he was separated from his library and quoted from memory, and he may have felt conventional scholarly apparatus was unnecessary in a work designed for popular consumption.²⁹ Nevertheless, it is not unreasonable to expect a *history* of philosophy to guide readers toward usable editions of relevant texts and provide references to quoted passages.

Fourth, a number of thinkers do not get treatment commensurate with their stature. In five cursory pages given to Francis Bacon, for example, only *The Advancement of Learning* is mentioned, but with no quotation or citation (*HWP*, pp. 541–5). In the chapter on Bergson, there is no mention of *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion*, arguably his most interesting and original book. Although Russell's history is a sizable work of some 895 pages (including index), there are substantial

²⁷ *HWP*, pp. 183–4, 206–7.

²⁸ *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 8 (1947): 120.

²⁹ Dawn Ogden and A. D. Irvine, "A Bibliographical Index for Bertrand Russell's *History of Western Philosophy*", *Russell*, n.s. 19 (1999): 64–5.

omissions. For example, in the closing chapter on analytic philosophy, he comments briefly on Frege and Cantor and goes on to discuss his own theory of descriptions. There is nothing on Moore, Wittgenstein, or the Vienna School (except for a reference to Carnap). Although published in 1945, there is nothing on Husserl's phenomenology or Sartre's existentialism. It would have been useful to know what Russell thought about Heidegger. Whitehead's non-mathematical writings go unmentioned.

The unevenness of inclusion and paucity of citation would be less worrisome if Russell did not routinely intrude and rehearse his own views and preferences, an inclination that led Isaiah Berlin to decide the value of the book "resides in the light which it casts upon the views of the author."³⁰ It is worth comparing Russell with W. T. Jones, who included in his one-volume *History of Western Philosophy* (1952) extensive passages from philosophical texts with supporting references, and well-integrated historical backgrounds with documentation. Historical purposes in a history of philosophy can and have been achieved in one volume. While Russell's history is not the most informative or most reliable, it is a bracing example of a philosopher and man of letters at work. His gifts for lucid prose, logical analysis, and biting irony are given full scope, but one seldom knows for sure where the historical material is coming from or what it means in relation to philosophy.

3. RUSSELL ON HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE AND TRUTH

Russell acknowledged, "history has always interested me more than anything else except philosophy and mathematics."³¹ Conversely, he echoes Boethius, saying "... it has been customary to speak of the consolations of philosophy, but for my part I find more consolation to be derived from the study of history."³² He gave a lifetime of thought to the foundations of philosophy and mathematics but did little with the problem of how one might justify propositions of the historical type, i.e.,

³⁰ *Mind*, n.s. 56 (1947): 152.

³¹ "My Mental Development", *BW*, p. 48; *Papers* II: 16.

³² Russell, "The Consolations of History", *New York American*, 22 Feb. 1933, p. 17; in Russell, *Mortals and Others*, ed. Harry Ruja, Vol. 1 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1975), p. 164.

such-and-such happened in the past for such-and-such reasons with such and such consequences. Why not? One might surmise that a road to precision available to Russell in mathematics, and in philosophy disciplined by logic, was not provided by methods of historical inquiry. An inherent messiness of the past and its remnants assured it third place in competition with the exactitude of mathematics and the close reasoning of philosophical argument, both of which were more congenial to his intense rationality, despite the consolations of history.

He believed historical knowledge is both obtainable and useful but did not wrestle with specific problems of inferring past actions and thoughts from present evidence (documents, archaeological material, oral testimony, and the like). In an essay on "Non-Demonstrative Inference", he discusses two conceptions of probability—a statistical one called frequency theory and a looser one called degree of credibility or doubtfulness, for which he gives a historical example. The former conception provides definite results. The latter yields less definite outcomes but applies to all our knowledge of the world and its contents.³³ One might justly infer from his discussion of inference that historical fact and generalization are more or less doubtful in light of evidence supporting them. While he held that all knowledge of the world is inferential and incomplete, he did not explain what could be meant by probability or weight of evidence in specifically historical judgments. He did not address systematically the psychology and logic of bias. He did note the inevitability of historians choosing among facts, but there is no account of principles by which a selection would minimize bias.

The only work on historiography mentioned in his writing on history is George Trevelyan's *Clio, a Muse* (1913), which defends history as an essential component of liberal education, emphasizes literary rather than scientific values, and defends the place of individuals in good historical narrative. The essay was inspired by Trevelyan's negative reaction to J. B. Bury's inaugural lecture in 1903 as Regius Professor of Modern History at Cambridge University, in which he declared that history is and should be science, neither more nor less. Trevelyan persuaded Russell to enter the fray with "On History" (1904).³⁴ Russell admired

³³ "Non-Demonstrative Inference", *BW*, pp. 648–9; *MPD*, Chap. 16, pp. 192–3.

³⁴ *Papers* 12: 73. "On History" was published originally in *The Independent Review*, July 1904, and reprinted first in *Philosophical Essays* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1966).

Trevelyan's essay, but said in a review that he leaned too far on the side of literary values at the expense of the scientific motive "... to know the truth about the past as it could not be known through the historians of a less laborious school."³⁵ Russell says nothing about several landmark views on the status of historical knowledge, such as those of Descartes (it is untrustworthy because not mathematical), Vico (God alone knows nature, since He created it, while humans create a past that can be truly known), Dilthey (history is a cultural science distinguishable from natural science through a process called *verstehen*), or Collingwood (history is a critical re-enactment of past experience).³⁶ It seems unlikely, however, that Russell was unaware of these views in light his omnivorous curiosity and wide reading.

When asked why he believed the indirect truths of physics, Russell appealed to common sense and argued that "physics has a better chance of being true than has the system of this or that philosopher."³⁷ A similar argument is implied for historical knowledge, although Russell did not propose it. It is common sense to observe that none but the comatose can pass a day without resorting to memory of past events, such as where the car keys were left, and that historical records are needed to confirm last year's tax deductions: "It would seem ... that the mere fact that we can understand the word 'past' implies knowledge that something happened in the past."³⁸ As Carl Becker suggested, exigencies of life oblige every man (and woman) to be his own historian whether he believes in history or not. Meanwhile, no one can know how we got where we are, or even who we are, without historical inquiry. Russell points out that "'knowledge' ... as commonly used is a very imprecise term covering a number of different things and a number of stages from certainty to slight probability."³⁹ While he applied Occam's Razor wherever feasible to clear away unnecessary entities, the content of good

³⁵ For Russell's 1913 review of Trevelyan, see *Papers* 12: 407; Russell commented favourably on Trevelyan's essay to Lady Ottoline Morrell in a letter (*Papers* 12: 406). In 1954 Russell praised *Clio, a Muse* for its "admirable discussion" of the issue ("History as an Art", *BW*, p. 533).

³⁶ Wilhelm Dilthey's views joined Trevelyan's and Russell's in the general campaign against Bury's positivistic historiography (*Papers* 12: 74).

³⁷ "Reply to Criticisms", Schilpp, p. 700; *Papers* 11: 33.

³⁸ Russell, *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (New York: Norton, 1940), p. 194.

³⁹ Russell, "Theory of Knowledge", *BW*, p. 228; *MPD*, Chap. 11, p. 133.

history was not a candidate, for its elimination would diminish the store of knowable things in the universe. Still, in treatises on knowledge and truth, such as *Our Knowledge of the External World* (1914), *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940), and *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948), he does unequal justice to the different objects and methods of discovery characteristic of experimental and historical sciences.

He maintained that historical knowledge has scientific verisimilitude because it rests on fact and not invention: "That the writing of history should be based on the study of documents, is an opinion which it would be absurd to controvert. For they alone contain evidence *as to what really occurred* [emphasis supplied]; and it is plain that untrue history can have no great value."⁴⁰ Elsewhere he says: "... history cannot be praiseworthy ... unless the historian does his utmost to preserve fidelity to the facts. Science in this sense is absolutely essential to the study of history." All historical questions "concern the weight to be attached to different sources of evidence", although there is not much elaboration on the last point.⁴¹ Science long remained his highest standard for truth about the world. History is not a science in the sense of (1) formulating and testing general laws based on observations of fact, and (2) using those laws successfully to predict phenomena. Nevertheless, he accepts that partial knowledge is still knowledge and distinguishes certainty in mathematics from probability in empirical science. History is not fully "scientific" because it cannot predict a future based on general laws derived inductively from observed facts, or as he puts it: "If there were a science of history, its facts would be deduced from general laws, which would come first in the logical order."⁴² But historical sciences, with

⁴⁰ "On History", *Philosophical Essays* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1966), p. 61; *Papers* 12: 76.

⁴¹ "History as an Art", *BW*, p. 533. Russell's analysis of the correspondence theory of truth may be applicable here. Events in the past happened apart from judgments made about them. Disagreements among historians about what happened are merely differences in understanding the facts and do not result from the historian's arbitrary intervention. Events about which there are differences still happened apart from the historian's judgment. Without correspondence between objects, *including historical objects*, and judgments made about them—the only theory with "any chance of being right"—the foundation of truth about the world is incomplete and muddled ("Theory of Knowledge", *BW*, p. 228; *MPD*, Chap. 11, p. 132).

⁴² *IMT*, p. 17. The same point is made in a response to an essay by Sidney Hook on

their relatively “soft” data, still fall within a range of low and high probability that qualifies as knowledge. Since historians are constrained by documents and other kinds of evidence from the past, they are doing science, and he notes that history as a science is “a modern invention”.⁴³ While historians must establish and verify facts, they should be encouraged “to discover causal sequences” where possible, a prospect both limited and unlikely.⁴⁴ “Moreover, general laws in history are less important and interesting than to grasp things that have happened “for their own sakes”, things of no significance to the generalities sought by physics.”⁴⁵ While causal relations were problematic in history for Russell, despite his appeals to cause and effect in *Freedom versus Organization* and *A History of Western Philosophy*, broad lessons apparently were not, as when he cautioned the public in 1933 about Nazi persecution of German Jews with a reminder that “Spain ruined itself in the sixteenth century by the expulsion of the Jews.”⁴⁶

Russell consistently affirms that general laws are not attainable by historians and distinguishes authentic history sharply from philosophy of history. The former provides reliable knowledge of the past. The latter contrives to discover universal laws governing the past. All attempts to find lawfulness in history are possible only by ignoring half the facts and manipulating the rest. Philosophers of history like Hegel, Marx, and Spengler “... think they have discovered some formula according to which human events develop.” These “men who make up philosophies of history may be dismissed as inventors of mythologies.” Hegel’s notion of an Idea (the Absolute) wandering from time to time and place to place to realize itself is dismissed as “fantastic” and “absurd”. Spengler’s notion that a civilization passes through phases like the seasons with a life span from birth to death, and that Western Civilization began its irreversible decline in 1914, is “as groundless as it is gloomy.” All Marx does is to replace the Hegelian scheme with mode of production and

his philosophy of history: “In order that a prediction may count as scientific, it must be made explicitly by means of a more or less general law obtained inductively from observed facts” (Schilpp, p. 735; *Papers* II: 59).

⁴³ Russell, *Understanding History and Other Essays* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), p. 18.

⁴⁴ “History as an Art”, *BW*, p. 534.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.* See also Schilpp, p. 741; *Papers* II: 63.

⁴⁶ Russell, “History’s Lesson for the Nazis”, *The Sunday Referee*, 9 April 1933, p. 6.

similar “mythological machinery” reminiscent of Christian theology (read the Communist Revolution as the Second Coming, and so on).⁴⁷ He goes wrong by pretending to have a key to all historical change and by ignoring non-economic forces in history like nationalism.⁴⁸ Russell was friendlier to Marx in *German Social Democracy*, well before Marxism became sacred writ for Bolshevism and at a time when nationalism and industrialization had created troubling questions of social justice. The *Communist Manifesto* is referred to as a “magnificent work”. *Das Kapital* is praised as having “much logical subtlety, immense knowledge, and a patience often exceeding that of the reader”. Yet Russell demurs even as he appreciates. Marx’s account of surplus value is “false and unnecessary” and “even antagonistic to his theory”. In the end, none of his doctrines “will stand a thorough criticism.”⁴⁹ Does the implausibility of such grand designs mean nothing coherent can be found in the sequence and relationship of human events? While Russell could not accept grandiose patterns of historical development, he concludes modestly that “general trends can be studied, and the study is profitable in relation to the present.”⁵⁰

4. USING AND WRITING HISTORY

For Russell, truth is the path to usefulness: “History is valuable ... because it is true; and this, though not the whole of its value, is the foundation and condition of all the rest.”⁵¹ History can be dangerous, like religion, as a means of indoctrination in the schools, for “history, in every country, is so taught as to magnify that country....”⁵² The proper

⁴⁷ *Understanding History*, pp. 15–17. Arnold Toynbee’s “massive” work is mentioned elsewhere, but without criticism. See “History as an Art”, *BW*, p. 542.

⁴⁸ “The Materialistic Theory of History”, *BW*, pp. 528–30.

⁴⁹ *German Social Democracy*, pp. 13–14, 39.

⁵⁰ “My Mental Development”, *BW*, pp. 48–9; *Papers* II: 17.

⁵¹ “On History”, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 61; *Papers* 12: 76.

⁵² Russell, *PSR*, p. 149. His worry about history as state-controlled propaganda was reiterated at a UNESCO conference on 29 September 1949. However, he says, “all education is propaganda”, including the multiplication tables, and goes on to distinguish good from bad propaganda. H. G. Wells’s *Outline of History* comes off as good propaganda. I leave the reader to judge the helpfulness of this distinction (*Proceedings: General Conference of UNESCO* [Paris: UNESCO, 1949], pp. 153–4).

function of history in the education of men and women is to open horizons in time just as astronomy expands our consciousness of space. It exposes "one's own time as merely a fragment of the life of mankind".⁵³ The proper function of the historian is to balance a scientific obligation of truthfulness and accuracy with an artist's sense of drama that reaches the imagination. As a body of knowledge achieved by description and expressed with powers of literature, it lifts us above the narrowness of personal experience while being subject to the uncertainties of all knowledge. The best cure for believing things have never been so bad as they seem in one's own time is to discover in history books how much worse they were in other times.⁵⁴

His views over time were ambivalent on the relative importance of the individual and the group in history, although it seems on balance he defended the former more readily than the latter. The particular and unique can change the course of history and influence the lives of millions. The Russian Revolution would not have taken the course it did without Lenin, and he agrees with Wellington's assessment that if he had been absent from Waterloo the result would have been different. For Russell, the opposition of heroes and villains is the juice of good drama and he admired historical writing able to exploit it. He was not pleased with the kind of history that ignores the individual or denigrates genius and extraordinary achievement, which amounts to a collectivist view of historical change that says "heroes are only embodiments of social forces, whose work would have been done by someone else if it had not been done by them..."⁵⁵ He argues there would be no progress without exceptional people, for "great ages of progress have depended upon a small number of individuals of transcendent ability"; while social conditions are *necessary* for progress, they are not *sufficient* to bring it off: "If Kepler, Galileo, and Newton had died in infancy, the world in which we live would be vastly less different than it is from the world of the sixteenth century."⁵⁶

⁵³ Russell, "How to Read History", *The Bermondsey Book*, 1, no. 2 (March 1924): 12.

⁵⁴ "The Consolations of History", p. 17; *Mortals and Others*, 1: 164.

⁵⁵ "History as an Art", *BW*, p. 540.

⁵⁶ Russell, "Western Civilization", *In Praise of Idleness and Other Essays* (New York: Norton, 1935), p. 189. See also "History as an Art", *BW*, p. 541, where he says "I do not believe in the independent value of a collection of human beings over and above the

A decade earlier he hummed a different tune with the view that “groups and individuals have played a more decisive part than individuals.”⁵⁷ He likes H. G. Wells’ *Outline of History* because the “hero” is mankind and the “villain” is ignorance, an example of history treated as epic (the clash of individuals are the stuff of drama, the clash of groups the stuff of epic), a device Russell viewed as integral to the historian’s “art.”⁵⁸ And he dislikes the aggressive individualism of Nietzsche’s *Übermensch* and Carlyle’s Hero, both of whom he considers precursors of fascism.⁵⁹ In a review of a book on the French Revolution, he distinguished between dramatic and sociological approaches to history. The former “concentrates attention on individuals who are playing a prominent part”, while the latter “is abstract and general.” He concludes that “the dramatic view is superficial and thin; only the sociological method provides materials for a solid and massive opinion.” This “opinion” is essential if we want “to know whether some event or movement was beneficial or harmful”, or if we want “to understand historical causation”.⁶⁰

Where does that leave us? After migrating between the two approaches, Russell comes down in the middle while leaning toward the role of gifted men. A good historian finds a balance between “the study of masses of men” and “the study of notable individuals”. It is unwise to obliterate greatness, all forms of which, “whether divine or diabolic, share a certain quality, and I do not wish to see this quality ironed out by the worship of mediocrity.”⁶¹ He rejects the view that had great scientists and poets never lived, someone else would have come along and accomplished all their works. High distinction, or greatness, is seated in the unique lives of individuals. He notes that “men of supreme ability are just as definitely congenitally different from the average as are the feeble-minded”, and without them there can be no significant prog-

value contained in their individual lives....” The development of mathematics and science depended particularly on a handful of men: “In history, it is remarkable how localized great advances have been” (Schilpp, p. 739; *Papers* II: 62).

⁵⁷ “How to Read History”, *The Bermondsey Book*, p. 10.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁵⁹ “Western Civilization”, *In Praise of Idleness*, pp. 103–4, 108–12.

⁶⁰ Russell, 1919 review of Nesta H. Webster, *The French Revolution*, in *Papers* 15: 87.

⁶¹ “History as an Art”, *BW*, pp. 540–1.

ress.⁶² There is no such thing, therefore, as a collective entity that is “great”, except maybe in size. In the 1920s, he felt differently about the collective versus the individual. Political history was less interesting to him than “histories of movements or of social conditions”, and he praised the Hammonds’ *Town Labourer* as a book with “the merit that it concerns itself with the ordinary life of ordinary people”; while individuals may rule particular epochs, “... mankind as a whole is obviously more important than the individual.”⁶³ History chronicles and explains as much as possible the deeds and thoughts of individuals, with good reason, but the deeper mission is to inform us in a more generic sense about humanity, “to present the long procession of generations as but the passing thoughts of one continuous life....”⁶⁴

In Praise of Idleness’s essay on Western civilization associates history with travel and anthropology as means of finding perspective on one’s own civilization.⁶⁵ Russell defines “civilization” as: “A manner of life due to the combination of knowledge and forethought” (*ibid.*, p. 184). Without knowledge, by which he means science, intelligent forethought is unlikely, but knowledge cannot guarantee it: “I am afraid Europe, however intelligent, has always been rather horrid, except in the brief period between 1848 and 1914” (p. 203). Knowledge of history exposes us to unfamiliar times, places, and lives, and invites us “... to feel imaginatively the reality of other ages and nations, with their differing culture and outlook, and to acquire that philosophic breadth that enables a man to escape his own interests and prejudices.”⁶⁶ History also instructs us about human nature, which is better understood by reading authors like Thucydides, Plutarch, and Gibbon. On a large scale it tells us how the world came to be the way it is. On a small scale it teaches us about fascinating men and women and promotes “our knowledge of human nature, because it shows how people may be expected to behave in new situations.”⁶⁷

⁶² *Understanding History*, p. 36.

⁶³ “How to Read History”, *The Bermondsey Book*, pp. 12–13.

⁶⁴ “On History”, *Philosophical Essays*, p. 67; *Papers* 12: 81.

⁶⁵ “Western Civilization”, *In Praise of Idleness*, p. 181.

⁶⁶ Russell, “Study of the Past” (review of Watkin Davies, *How to Read History*), *Daily Herald*, 26 March 1924, p. 7. For Russell, “breadth of outlook” means “a certain temper of mind, a certain way of thinking and feeling about contemporary events and their relation to the past and the future” (“History as an Art”, *BW*, p. 542).

⁶⁷ *Understanding History*, p. 25. The parallel with Thucydides on human nature is

Russell was mostly uninterested in the workshop doings of professional historians, but as a humanist and man of letters he paid much attention to their finished products. The value of history as a means to inform and enlighten a general public requires attention to presentation and style, both of which he discusses at length. Good history is at once trustworthy and readable. It must “produce the best possible result in the non-historical reader”, which means it “must be interesting”.⁶⁸ How unfortunate it is, he thinks, that many practising historians who discover knowledge about the past are not likely to communicate it effectively to a non-technical audience. They are well advised to know that historical work is likely to be read if it has some qualities of epic, poetry, or even the novel, and if it is the unified work of a single mind rather than the disjointed product of scholars in committee doing piece-work. Faithfulness to the evidence should not result in a level of detachment so remote from the reader that narrative is drained of all drama and colour. The art in history is to achieve vividness and a flush of life without distorting the facts. An essential quality of good historical work for general readers is style, which means clarity (saying what you mean in few words), diction that is varied and arresting with a touch of drama, all delivered with rhythm, flow, and feeling: “Style, when it is good, is a very personal expression of the writer’s way of feeling...”⁶⁹ This counsel is illustrated profusely by Russell himself. Philosophers as well as historians are advised to follow his example.⁷⁰

evident. See *The History of the Peloponnesian War*, trans. Crawley (New York: Modern Library, 1951), p. 14.

⁶⁸ “History as an Art”, *BW*, p. 537.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

⁷⁰ An early version of this paper was read to the annual meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society at Monmouth University, May 2000. I extend thanks to the editor of this journal for directing my attention to source material I overlooked.
