

HANGING OUT WITH RUSSELL, BRANDO AND LENNON

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Tariq Ali. *Street Fighting Years: an Autobiography of the Sixties*. New edition. London and New York: Verso, 2005. Pp. x, 403. US\$17.00 (pb).

“One Sunday morning in the spring of 1965,” writes Tariq Ali in his memoir *Street Fighting Years: an Autobiography of the Sixties*,

I was so outraged by *The Observer* that I sat down and typed out an angry paragraph in the form of a letter to the editor. A friend who was having breakfast with me that day was cajoled into co-signing the missive. It was published the following week with a reply, which was predictable and pathetic. There the matter might have rested, except that a few days later I received a letter in the post from Wales. It was from “The Earl Russell, O.M. F.R.S.,” and the two lines read: “I should like to congratulate you on your just and excellent letter to today’s *Observer*. *The Observer*’s reply to it sickens me. Yours sincerely, Bertrand Russell.”¹

Ali adds that he was “thrilled beyond belief. Bertrand Russell had been known to me through some of his books a long time ago. He was a legendary figure

¹ [A new letter, since a copy of it cannot be found in the Russell Archives. Other correspondence with Tariq Ali is present there.—Ed.]

somewhere up in the mists and to receive a letter from him completely out of the blue was both a shock and an inspiration” (pp. 111–12).

Ali goes on to write of meeting Russell and his then-secretary, Ralph Schoenman. (After Russell broke with Schoenman, it was the Marxist paper *Black Dwarf*, for which Ali had previously worked, that first published Russell’s final “memorandum” on Schoenman.) He speaks extensively of his work with the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation in its early heady years. There is an entire chapter on Ali’s visit to Cambodia and North Vietnam as part of an investigative team for the International War Crimes Tribunal (Chap. 4), and another chapter on his trip to Bolivia to investigate the arrest of Régis Debray, a French Marxist journalist captured after trying to meet with Che Guevara’s guerilla band (Chap. 6). And there are shorter discussions of Ali’s other work for the Tribunal, such as a trip to Palestine after the Six Day War (pp. 230–1).

The book covers Ali’s entire activist life, not simply his work with Russell. It therefore contains much additional material unrelated to Russell, some dealing with Vietnam, some not. I particularly enjoyed the hilarious story of the time when Marlon Brando’s secretary called to say that Brando was inviting him to dinner. Thinking it was a joke, Ali reply was that “I was far too busy since I had prior engagements to eat with Henry Fonda and Laurence Olivier” (p. 139). (Ultimately, Brando himself took the phone, convinced Ali that the offer was not a joke, and got him to come to dinner.)

Ali paints a very entertaining portrait of Russell the man. He visited Russell at Plas Penrhyn at least once, in order to ask for Russell’s support for a protest campaign against a Labour M.P. Russell spoke at great length of his disgust for Harold Wilson’s support for the U.S. attack on Vietnam, and related with some relish that he had once refused to shake Wilson’s hand. Ali responded as follows:

“So,” I began, “Wilson is the worst of the bunch?” He appeared deep in reflection. Then he shook his head. “Wilson is a small and petty man, but he is not the worst. I suppose if one has to make a choice I would say that Ramsay MacDonald was very dreadful. I can still hear his awful voice telling us that socialism would be built ‘brick by brick.’ Dreadful man. Some say that a party gets the leader it deserves. I don’t think the Labour Party deserved either MacDonald or Wilson.” (P. 134)

The visit lasted for some time, and touched on many other topics. Throughout his discussion of it, Ali’s reverence for Russell (in the good atheistic sense of the term) is plain. (Unfortunately, Ali includes no photographs of Russell, although he does include one of Schoenman.)

Street Fighting Years was first published by Collins in 1987, and reprinted by Citadel in 1991. Both of these editions are out of print. Verso has issued a new and expanded edition. It features a lengthy new introduction containing much

interesting material. (Unfortunately, the edition also has a different pagination from that of the earlier editions.) I especially liked the discussion of Ali's proposal to Channel 4 for a quartet of "chamber epics constructed around the lives and ideas of Socrates, Spinoza, Locke and Wittgenstein", a proposal that ultimately resulted in Derek Jarman's film *Wittgenstein* (p. 12). This edition also reprints a substantive and highly political interview that Ali and Robin Blackburn conducted with John Lennon and Yoko Ono in 1971.

Ali was recently offered honorary membership in the Bertrand Russell Society. One can only hope he accepts. Ali has remained an active voice on the British Left in a manner very much reminiscent of the International War Crimes Tribunal. At one point he writes, "It is a fact that in many parts of the Third World where Wilson was reviled as a toady of the White House, it was Russell's uncompromising tones that enabled one to explain that there were other voices in Britain" (p. 135). In an age in which Tony Blair famously maintains the "toady of the White House" tradition, it is people like Ali who convince the world that the healthy tradition of informed radical dissent—a tradition to which Russell clearly belonged—remains alive and well to this day.
