MEETING RUSSELL: A MISCELLANY OF ENCOUNTERS

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OFF-THE-CUFF

My first debate with him ... Lord Russell challenged my thesis that the objectives of education were always and everywhere the same because education must be defined as "the process whereby the powers of human nature become developed by good habits." He doubted that we could know enough about human nature and its powers to know which habits were universally and objectively good for human beings to form. In his rebuttal of my affirmative position he regaled the audience with quips and sallies—a display of great wit rather than wisdom....

I will never forget Bertrand Russell's opening rejoinder. We had been asked to wear dinner jackets, I suppose to ensure the formality of the proceedings. It was to be a formal debate—in dress if not in thought. Respecting Lord Russell as my senior by many years, and also as immeasurably more eminent, I had carefully prepared my initial presentation of the affirmative position. It was all written out. Lord Russell came to the platform without a shred of paper and, I suspect, without a jot or tittle of preparatory thought on the subject. But he did have a clean stiff white cuff on his boiled shirt, and on it, I observed as I looked back at him from the podium in the course of reading my speech, he jotted down notes from time to time. When he arose to present the negative position, his opening sally was "I greatly admire Dr. Adler's rugged simplicity."

From that point on, with one off-the-cuff remark after another, Lord Russell provoked outbursts of laughter. At the end, the applause, won

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easily by his witticisms, appeared to indicate that he had triumphed. I felt that I should have been adjudged the victor at the bar of reason, though not in the court of laughter....

Mortimer Adler: Chicago, 1941[1]

"NICE TO KNOW THINGS"

I was fortunate in knowing Bertie Russell throughout my life. His shock of hair grew white but the vigour of it remained, as did, until my last visit to him at Penrhyndeudraeth in 1970, his extraordinary vitality. During the war, he often came to stay with us at Pond Street, and meals were a rich communication of ideas. "Isn't it nice to *know* things," he would say, when some esoteric point was made, and one could feel and share his relish. He communicated this fiery radiance in his unmelodious but compulsive voice, with a dry cackle of laughter, as naturally as he breathed, with every word he spoke. I never met anyone like him....

Juliette (Baillot) Huxley: Oxford, England, 1917[2]

GLASS-CLEAR SENTENCES

My day with him began at 11 a.m. with coffee.... A smile illumined the poetic face.... I found him already frail with his beautifully etched face lit by luminous eyes and the silver hair adding the halo required by the sage ... the cool, high-old voice continued its long, undulating glass-clear sentences. The voice was so perfectly modulated, the words so easily flowing, the statements so identically lucid, it might have been some delicately devised machine full of unmechanical grace, intoning

[1] Mortimer J. Adler, *Philosopher at Large: an Intellectual Autobiography* (New York: Macmillan, 1977), pp. 219, 8–9.

[2] Juliette (Baillot) Huxley, *Leaves of the Tulip Tree: Autobiography* (London: John Murray, 1986), p. 47.

messages formulated, digested, stored up and released without any intervention of human will.

Vincent Brome: Richmond, England, 1952[3]

A SMILE AND A TWINKLE

... [T]wo debates with Bertrand Russell.... Our first encounter took place in Symphony Hall ... our battle over "Is Democracy a Failure?" must have been the best sporting event of the year. Russell, of course, was the major attraction. He was already fifty-five years old, and could hardly have guessed that he had forty-two years left to him. His hair was silvery white. His sharp nose and gleaming eyes promised an alert intellect and a pointed wit, a keenness and relish in debate.... The unusually full stenographic report in the [Boston] *Herald* ... did more justice to me than to Russell, for it could not convey the smile on his lips and the twinkle in his eyes.

After the New York debate, Mrs. Durant lured Russell to a more friendly bite with me in a nearby hotel. We made a bad choice, for the hotel orchestra disported itself in jazz music of a wild sonority that made conversation impossible; I was ashamed. We—or Russell—had a better time, when, a week later, he had dinner in our apartment at 5 West Sixty-ninth Street. I was still at that time under the spell of the Little Corporal, and tried to convince Russell that Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo was a victory for reaction; I failed; I have yet to find an Englishman who can stomach Napoleon.

Will Durant: Boston and New York, 1927[4]

SENSITIVE INTELLIGENCE

After lunch, Bertrand Russell arrived [at H. G. Wells' home] with his

[3] Vincent Brome, *Confessions of a Writer* (London: Hutchinson, 1970), p. 237.

[4] Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), pp. 26–7.

wife. Sensitive intelligence shone in his large dark eyes. His mind was alert and ready to spot instantly some intellectual inaccuracy and obligingly put it right for you....

Bertrand Russell remained behind with a book which, on our return, I was glad to recognize as my *Polyglots*, a copy of which was on view on the drawing-room table. When I saw Bertrand Russell's latest by its side, I was struck by the double coincidence, and my sense of the riddle of things deepened. Bertrand Russell, who had taken no notice of me on the Saturday, came beaming up to me on Sunday morning, explaining that he had not been told till now that I was the man who had written *Futility*; after which we two went for a long walk in the morning sunshine, and Bertrand Russell, whose eyes gleamed with loving-kindness, answered my discreet inquiries into the realm of the Mind with the utmost willingness and lucidity....

William Gerhardie: London, late 1920s[5]

REFUSED OFFICIAL CHAPERON

There were certain members of the British [Labour Party] Mission, however, not entirely inclined to look in open-mouthed wonder at the things about them, with their mental eyes shut. These were not of the labouring element. One of them was Mr. Bertrand Russell. Very politely but decisively he had from the very first refused to be officially chaperoned. He preferred to go about himself. He also showed no elation over the honour of being quartered in a palace and fed on special morsels. Suspicious person, that Russell, the Bolsheviki whispered. But then, what can you expect of a *bourgeois*? ...

... Mr. Russell was of a ... reserved nature, but of gracious and simple personality.

Emma Goldman: Moscow, 1920[6]

[5] William Gerhardie, *Memoirs of a Polyglot* (London: Macdonald, 1973; 1st ed., 1931), pp. 286, 288.

[6] Emma Goldman, *Living My Life* (New York: Dover, 1970; 1st ed., 1934), pp. 794–5.

AMERICAN AGGRESSION

... [W]hen he greeted me at his modest home in Chelsea I asked him if he could possibly be as anti-American as the press painted him to be. The ninety-three-year-old philosopher smiled and said, "How could I be? Fifty percent of my wives have been American."

I began the interview by asking him if the cold war between America and the Communist bloc countries would ever be settled.

"Yes, it will be settled, one way or another. Probably the most likely way will be by the extermination of all combatants on both sides. Then somehow it will be settled."

Then I asked the question which caused Lord Russell's eyes to start flashing: "What *would* be the necessary steps toward world peace?"

"Of course, the first thing would be for Americans to give up aggressive war, give up the habit of invading peaceful countries and torturing them. I think that is a first step."

Merv Griffin: London, 1965[7]

DINNER JACKET

... Russell (by then Lord Russell) was so complicated that what I remember best from our several cordial talks is a little interchange which illustrates so perfectly the lingering sense of class even in those of the English who profess to despise it that I hope he will forgive me for reporting it.

He had been kind enough to come by my hotel for a late afternoon chat and at about six he suggested that if I would permit him to change into a dinner jacket in my room we would have just that much more time for talk. Opening his bag to take out the black-tie outfit he grumbled: "I hate to get into these things. We will never be civilized as long as we put up with them. That's one of the reasons I hate to come to the United States; always having to put on this ridiculous uniform."

[7] Merv Griffin, *Merv: an Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), p. 114.

"But," I protested, "I thought this was more usual in England than in my country." "Used to be," he insisted, "isn't any more." Then: "Know why I have to do it? It's because I am having dinner with *Wells* and Wells is so anxious to prove he is a gentleman.... Of course if he were one he would know it's not necessary."

Joseph Wood Krutch: London, 1936[8]

STILL MENTALLY ACUTE

... I had the privilege of visiting Russell twice at his home in Wales. In his eighties, though somewhat spare physically, his mind seemed as acute as ever as he discoursed on the burning issues of the day. I was much gratified when he wrote a foreword to my book on civil liberties, *Freedom Is As Freedom Does* (1956)....

During the last decade of his life I had a voluminous correspondence with Lord Russell covering his support of civil liberties, his unceasing campaign for international peace and the abolition of nuclear weapons, and his opposition to the American aggression in Vietnam....

Corliss Lamont: North Wales, early 1960s[9]

SILLY OLD PHILOSOPHER

... Separately from the New Left crowd went on the activities that would lead to the Aldermaston Marches and then the Committee of a Hundred. I was invited to a meeting ... near St. Paul's Cathedral, where the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament came into being. In that room that night were a lot of people, nearly all luminaries of the Left and well beyond the Left.... As I left the room, Bertrand Russell was standing at the door, and he stopped me and said with an authoritarian nod, like a governess, "Now I hope you are going home and to bed with your

[8] Joseph Wood Krutch, *More Lives than One* (New York: William Sloane Associates, 1962), pp. 254–5.
[9] Corliss Lamont, *Yes to Life: Memoirs* (New York: Horizon, 1981), pp. 83, 84.

lover." I had never met him before. I thought him impertinent and silly. I did not understand the incident. Later I did. He had been one of the Bloomsbury group, or on the fringes of it. These people were everything that was admirable and excellent, particularly in their loyalty to each other always, through their lives, but they had this silly streak. They reacted to the Victorians' hypocrisies and silences about sex by using the word "bugger" at every opportunity, to show their freedom from cant, and they galloped around drawing rooms chanting naughty words. All this was understandable in the context but left residual foolishness in unlikely places. I thought, Silly old philosopher.

Doris Lessing: London, 1958[10]

QUICKNESS OF MOVEMENT

... I took a train to North Wales to visit [Russell] at his home in Penrhyndeudraeth.

By arrangement, I arrived not long after breakfast. My first physical impression of Russell was how tiny he was ... bird-like and slight, light-boned, spry, quick-darting. The quickness of bodily and mental movement was extraordinary in a man of his age.

He ... peeled the coat off my back, fussed about where and how to hang it, led me into a living room, took pains to see that I was comfortably ensconced on a sofa, plumped the cushions. In the course of time I discovered that he had the courtly manners of the Victorian age and invariably behaved as if whoever he were attending to were of nabob-like importance....

... His normal mode of utterance was to use some sort of literal description for purposes of comic irony, with the result that his almost every remark was informative and funny at the same time. I do not think that I have ever listened to anyone with greater delight. He had an ability unique in my experience to express himself in perfectly balanced and

[10] Doris Lessing, *Walking in the Shade: Volume Two of My Autobiography, 1949–1962* (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), pp. 312–14.

economically formed sentences....

... [L]unch ... was waiting for us on the kitchen table, a hot boiled ham of Dickensian proportions, two steaming dishes of vegetables, and an open bottle of red wine. Russell put a hand on my shoulder and sat me down firmly in a wooden chair and proceeded to carve the ham with a certain flamboyance of gesture, continuing the conversation non-stop. He and the food were to my right, and since he insisted on serving me—first with ham, then with each vegetable in turn—from my left, it involved him in continually dancing round the back of my chair. As an able-bodied twenty-nine-year-old I felt embarrassed at sitting there being waited on in so elaborate a fashion by a man of eighty-seven....

Bryan Magee: North Wales, 1959[11]

"REAL HUMAN BEING"

... The first time I was aware of setting eyes on Russell was in the drab surroundings of Lavender Hill police station. The date was August 1916.

He was sitting at the far end of a wooden bench, and though he seemed curiously detached in mind and body, all the furies of hell raged in his eyes.... At Lavender Hill we were only briefly introduced and had no talk. Early in the following month, however, we found ourselves placed side by side at a political dinner—after which he walked back with me to my Bloomsbury attic. He was rather shy in those days. He seemed humble, simple, a "real human being"....

Constance Malleson: London, 1916[12]

[11] Bryan Magee, *Confessions of a Philosopher* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1997), pp. 130–1.

[12] Lady Constance Malleson, "Fifty Years, 1916–1966", in Ralph Schoenman, ed., *Bertrand Russell: Philosopher of the Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), p. 17.

SUPREMELY INTELLECTUAL

Bertrand Russell is most fascinating. I don't think I've ever met anyone more attractive, but very alarming, so quick and clear-sighted, and supremely intellectual—cutting false and real asunder. Somebody called him "The Day of Judgement".

His notice flattered me very much, and I trembled at the feeling that in half an hour he would see how silly I was, and despise me; his quick humour made me bold.

Ottoline Morrell: Bagley Wood, Oxford, 1908[13]

FLUSHED APE

My own vivid experience of the bodily implications of mental strife came in a radio session I once had with Bertrand Russell. I had spoken in praise of Christianity, and he rounded on me with unexpected ferocity, shrilly insisting that everything most cruel and destructive and wicked which had happened in the world since the end of the Roman Empire had been due to the Christian religion and its founder. I shouted back; it was an absurd and unedifying scene which nonetheless left me physically exhausted, as though I had been engaged in a physical wrestling match. I remember still with a lively sense of horror how, as Russell's rage mounted, a flush rose up his thin white stringy neck, like a climbing thermometer, to suffuse his simian features, making of the great philosopher a flushed ape.

Malcolm Muggeridge: London, 1957[14]

[13] Lady Ottoline Morrell, *Ottoline at Garsington: Memoirs 1915–18*, ed. Robert Gathorne-Hardy (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p. 266.

[14] Malcolm Muggeridge, *Chronicles of Wasted Time*, Vol. 1: *The Green Stick* (London: Collins, 1972), pp. 175–6.

MARRIAGE DEBATE

The only time I ever met Bertrand Russell was when he convinced a thousand and ten people, at a hall in New York, that the institution of Marriage had passed its zenith, as against the nine hundred and ninety who responded to my mediæval defence of the *raison d'être* of this "tragic tension."

John Cowper Powys: New York, 1929[15]

INDIGNANT CASSOWARY

... Bertrand Russell, whom I met with Julian Huxley, was less commanding than I had expected. True, he looked nobly staunch and virile, and instead of levering his torso out of his chair, as many younger men do, rose smoothly and swiftly to his feet like a taut steel spring uncoiling. But then he spoke. Huxley had lately visited Mexico; Bernal Diaz's wonderful account of the Spanish Conquest was a book that I had just read; and I happened to make some reference to the horrors of the Aztec faith, and to the tall white pyramids Diaz describes, the sacrificial shrines that surmounted them coated thick with human blood.

At this point the philosopher sharply interrupted me. The atrocities of the Inquisition, he said, had been equally appalling. It was useless to protest that, while the Inquisition's victims were relatively few, and they were condemned after lengthy legal proceedings, the Mexican priesthood, at the dedication of Uitzilopochli's great temple, had slaughtered twenty-thousand prisoners of war, who formed, as they patiently awaited death, a queue that stretched across the city. Neither quantitatively nor qualitatively could their actions be compared. But Russell, a veteran antagonist of the Christian religion, angrily dismissed my plea; with his large beak, fierce eyes and long, withered, stringy neck, he resembled

[15] John Cowper Powys, *Autobiography* (London: Picador, 1982), p. 535.

an indignant cassowary or some other gaunt, ill-tempered bird; and our conversation was abandoned.

Peter Quennell: London, 1950s[16]

CHARMING COMPANION

Of all my friends, of all persons belonging at all to my world, Bertrand Russell was the most distinguished. He had birth, genius, learning, indefatigable zeal and energy, brilliant intelligence, and absolute honesty and courage. His love of justice was as keen as his sense of humour. He was at home in mathematics, in natural science, and in history. He knew well all the important languages and was well informed about everything going on in the world of politics and literature. He ought to have been a leader, a man of universal reputation and influence. He was indeed recognized to be a distinguished man, having made his mark in mathematics and logic, and largely inspired the new philosophic sect of "logical realists". Yet on the whole, relatively to his capacities, he was a failure. He petered out. He squandered his time and energy, and even his money, on unworthy objects. He left no monument—unless it be the early *Principia Mathematica* written in collaboration with Whitehead—that does justice to his powers and gives him a place in history....

Bertie was small, dark, brisk, with a lively air and a hyena laugh. According to some people he was the ugliest man they had ever seen. But I didn't find him ugly, because his mask, though grotesque, was expressive and engaging. You saw that he was a kind monster, that if he spit fire, it was a *feu-de-joie*. For so violent, so merciless a satirist, he made a charming companion. I, at least, was never afraid of him....

George Santayana: Cambridge, England, 1890s[17]

[16] Peter Quennell, *The Wanton Chase: an Autobiography from 1939* (London: Collins, 1980), pp. 143–4.

[17] George Santayana, *Persons and Places* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT P., 1987), pp. 440–1.

PERMEATING PRESENCE

I wanted Russell's opinions and guidance concerning ... the anti-nuclear struggle; but I retained a puritanical reluctance about seeking out the great man....

I decided it was in order to place these thoughts before Russell and wrote him. He replied inviting me to discuss and I telephoned him to fix an appointment. I hitch-hiked to North Wales, excited and with brief fantasies flitting through my head of finding him impressed with my notions and of an ensuing relationship. I rejected these daydreams as wish-fulfilments, and prepared to speak seriously on matters which seemed then and now to be important.

I arrived late, after predictable disasters with rain, diversions and strange roads nowhere indicated on the map. The towering figure of my imagination was certain to be impatient with this unforgivable lateness and possibly caustic. I cursed myself for the incompetence and folly which led me to jeopardize so valued and serious a meeting....

His welcome on that day was immediate and expansive. He remarked wryly on my soaked clothes....

Our first conversation dwelt on the disparity between the nuclear danger we proclaimed and the methods we proposed for confronting it. There was a mélange of banter and intense pronouncement on the pity of human folly, the evident determination of men to murder and die on a larger scale than previously managed....

At times during that first meeting he would catch me staring as him. "I attribute my longevity to controversy", he said with a smile. I had not been marvelling at his years but I was transfixed by the clarity, the precision, the warmth, the wry humour and dry wit—that permeating presence which works on the senses like ozone after a storm.

Ralph Schoenman: North Wales, 1960[18]

[18] Ralph Schoenman, ed., Preface to *Bertrand Russell: Philosopher of the Century* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1967), pp. 3–5.

"PHILOSOPHY" AND BEHAVIOURISM

... Bertrand Russell spent the academic year ... at the University of Chicago and lectured at other universities in the Midwest. When he came to Minnesota, a few philosophers and psychologists arranged a luncheon ... I sat across from Russell, and when I had a chance, I told him that his *Philosophy* had converted me to behaviorism. "Good heavens," he said, "I thought it had demolished behaviorism." I let him believe that it had done so.

B. F. Skinner: Minneapolis, Minn., 1938[19]

DEBATING EDUCATION

... He came to Lockridge the day North Whitehead left for the front. He was a pacifist and argumentative and although they were very old friends Doctor and Mrs. Whitehead did not think they could bear hearing his views just then. He came and Gertrude Stein, to divert everybody's mind from the burning question of war and peace, introduced the subject of education. This caught Russell and he explained all the weaknesses of the american system of education, particularly their neglect of the study of greek. Gertrude Stein replied that of course England which was an island needed Greece which was or might have been an island. At any rate greek was essentially an island culture, while America needed the culture of a continent which was of necessity latin. This argument fussed Mr. Russell, he became very eloquent. Gertrude Stein then became very earnest and gave a long discourse on the value of greek to the english, aside from its being an island, and the lack of value of greek culture for the americans based upon the psychology of americans as different from the psychology of the english....

Gertrude Stein: Lockridge, England, 1915[20]

[19] B. F. Skinner, *The Shaping of a Behaviorist: Part Two of an Autobiography* (New York: Knopf, 1979), pp. 223–4.

[20] Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (New York: Vintage, 1933), p. 151.

"LET THEM CALL ME FANATIC"

As Bertrand Russell greets you there is a surprising spring to his step. Is that a twinkle in his eyes as he welcomes my companions? I'm startled by the china doll delicacy of his appearance: the women by the vigor and pulse of his manner. A little dog scratches at the tall French window. Shall I open it? I make a slight move. He waves me away. He insists on doing it himself. We see the mountains clearly. And the sky.

The subject [of the interview] has been agreed upon beforehand: survival in a nuclear age. He will speak of nothing else. Some sixty-five books written and God knows how many essays and it all comes down to this. You're prepared for the nimbleness of his wit but not for the depth of his feeling. "I am ninety. In the course of nature, I will soon die. My young friends, however, have the right to many fruitful years. Let them call me fanatic."

Louis ("Studs") Terkel: North Wales, 1962[21]

OLD RADICAL TRADITION

I rang up Russell and he agreed to see Richard Gott and myself the following day.... We arrived on the doorstep of Russell's flat in Chelsea promptly at 11 a.m.... The veteran dissenter and one of the few living embodiments of the old radical tradition in British politics was a regular target of Fleet Street's most vicious snipers. Because of his political opinions he was always dismissed as a senile fool, whose best days were over.

Russell opened the door to let us in, greeted us warmly and made us sit, while he went and put the kettle on for some tea. The suggestion that one of us take over on this front was greeted with disdain.... He had only recently renounced his Labour party affiliations after many decades of membership. The reason? Labour's support for the Americans in Vietnam! ...

Tariq Ali: London, 1965[22]

[21] Louis ("Studs") Terkel, *Talking to Myself: a Memoir of My Times* (New York: Pantheon, 1973), p. 64.

[22] Tariq Ali, *Street Fighting Years* (New York: Citadel Press, 1987), pp. 68–70.