

LASTING IMPRESSIONS OF BERTIE RUSSELL

[The Denys Blakeway documentaries on Russell's life and reputation, televised by the BBC in spring 1997, make controversial reference to passages in this essay, and indeed display and quote from one of the pages. The complete essay is being published here so that Russell scholars may examine the context of those passages.

Russell preserved the ribbon copy and a yellow carbon of this unsigned essay about himself (filed at RA1 910). He made no attempt to conceal or segregate these documents in his archives. Undated as well as unsigned, the typescript is exactly like those prepared during the period 1950–51 by Russell's then secretary, Sheila Zinkin, and the only handwriting on it is hers. In many respects the essay is a flattering portrait by someone who knew Russell well, and it is not puzzling why he preserved it, particularly as the essay concludes with the hope that it will help English people articulate the truth of their "affection and respect" for Russell. The essay was obviously intended to be published. Possibly it was a gift to Russell after attempts to publish it failed.

Since the author calls Russell "Diddy", the author was surely a member of Russell's family. Various references eliminate his children. He shared a house with his son's family in 1950–53. Russell had separated from his wife in 1949 and did not marry Edith Finch until December 1952. The North American examples of Niagara and the Grand Canyon and other vocabulary suggest the author was American. Susan Lindsay Russell (c. 1925–1990), John Conrad Russell's wife and mother of the grandchildren referred to, was American. The poetic references suit her calling as a poet.

Among other references, (Sir) Clough Williams-Ellis (1883–1978) was the architect of Portmeirion, North Wales, and a long-time acquaintance of Russell. "Lear" is Edward Lear's *Nonsense Books*, still in Russell's library. Russell received the Nobel Prize for Literature on 11 December 1950. The old man of the sea, Fragilion, and the centaur's hoofs all appear in T. S. Eliot's poem on Russell, "Mr. Apollinax". "Samson Agonistes" is Milton's poem (see ll. 1268–72).

On page 8 I added "a" before "magnificent", on page 9 deleted "a" before "queerly un-at-home" and made "impression" plural, and throughout removed a number of superfluous commas.—K.B.]

A medley of people. He reminded me, first of all, of an old Arab—with queer, square slanting eyes: very wide and fixing. His hands were unusual; they were so still, so precise, and so quietly alive. A more utterly quiet aliveness—almost like consciousness—I've never seen. (Eliot got this in the old man of the sea:—his hands were like sea plants, so motionlessly receptive.) His mouth was thin, sweet, severe. His face had a sharpness to it, of suffering: angles: and sharp slants of light all about; like essence of thought.

To be in his presence was like being in the most powerful mountain air; the mental quality was staggering. One felt he had sailed to the edge of the Universe, in dark nights, on the thin edge of thought. The impression of space was quite enormous and vast and deep.

There was a sensual wisdom in the back of his eyes; of a man who knows how to handle women: like an Arab who knows horses. It was an instinctive, not a conscious, wisdom. Like animals.

Once, I began to see him in all his power. I was reminded of scimitars: as though his bones were curving blades of light to cut down, to sweep away: terrifying, keen, and ruthless. Also, he suddenly seemed immensely tall. At the moment when this happened, I suddenly became convinced of his unique power in England for over fifty years: the innumerable impacts he has had on people—aside from his writing. I knew then I was in the presence of a mighty warrior; and I was nearly afraid: although I am not often afraid. The understanding was so dazzling that I could not hold it very long: he and Clough Williams-Ellis seemed to me to be the most permanently affecting people in England of the last fifty years. I love Clough, too. He is like an old tree. He is wise and poetic and silent and powerful: and full of wild beauty, like green leaves—and terrific native insight. But Diddy: Diddy was prickly and irritable and so damned hypersensitively sensitive that it was agony to be in his presence: and when I began to realize the amount of suffering he had simply lived with in utter silence, I was breathtaken and nearly overwhelmed.

In addition, he was ruthless with himself to a degree that, when one began to realize it, doubled one's heart up in pain. He could not have been more ruthless if he had customarily put himself daily on the rack. There was something about him that was wild and shy: that Eliot caught in *Fragilion*—a queer, fragile, woods thing. There was the beat of centaur's hoofs, too: often, sometimes, he would remind me of a terribly

thoroughbred horse: so finely strung that it's almost too perfect to live. He was tough, though; tough as hell: and had that rough country English vigour which goes with English aristocrats and walks on moors or downs in a mackintosh. He was as full of Shelley and Milton as the English countryside is. His love and understanding for these poets was complete: nothing lacked: Shakespeare, too. Blake. It isn't that he just read them or liked them: naturally he would have, being a civilized Englishman. He comprehended them from the soul out. He had a queer faculty on occasion of being able to enter *directly*, in the sense of utterly primary experience, into one's feelings, moods, conscious and half-conscious thoughts, and could, on occasion, anticipate or state them. His psychological understanding was extremely fine—like an arrow. His language was simple when he wrote about it; and perhaps old-fashioned: that is why I say this, because people might not have noticed.

He learned things—for example, about psychology or anthropology or any new thing—with an instantaneous thoroughness that was quite astonishing. By thorough, I mean instantaneously grasping, in an exact and fundamental manner, what one was at. In fact, one had to leap about like hell to keep up with him on one's own familiar ground, if he decided he wanted to explore it.

There was no respect I can think of in which he was not an exertion to be with. I think he was the most intensely exhausting person in that respect that I have ever been with in my life. It should be said that this was because, in a way, in some ways, I could keep up with him and because, in a way, he was his working self when I was about; not retired behind tea or dinner, being the entertaining host—though even there, if one cares to accept the challenge, he sets a terrific pace.

His passions were inexhaustible; mostly about the world and achieving things for it. His affections were strong, and deep too: he delighted in the children and was a quite perfect grandfather, reading to them *Lear* in an exquisitely charming and sympathetic manner; the kids loved him and would climb all over him. One could see there was a bond; and one didn't like to interrupt. He was a real hero; a real one such as mankind very occasionally produces. His courage was enormous: which is the more remarkable, as his pride, his sensitivity, and desire to please were all almost equally enormous. I used to think about him a lot; he never ceased to be a marvel: or to astonish one with what he was, or he did next. That is a remarkable thing, especially if one lives in a family where

remarkablenesses tend to be taken for granted after a while. I was taken with him at first: then after a while, I began to love him in the slightly timorous manner in which one would love a natural phenomenon, like the thunder and lightning or Niagara Falls. His presence was practically tangible; and when he went out of the house—for all that he lived externally a *most* quiet and regular life, beginning with morning tea and post and all that—it felt as though ten people had suddenly left; and one always had that feeling one has after a party, when suddenly twenty guests disappear and there are only one or two people left and a great many glasses and things about. Suddenly, everything has got small and thin: and has to be reorganized in a hastily and somewhat embarrassingly smaller space. It was difficult to keep track of Diddy: it was rather like trying to keep track of all the Grand Canyon while you are wandering about in it. One has to stand a good way back to get any perspective at all. I know he was a magnificent, terrifying, shy, sensitive, scimitar-like, Englishman; true-bred, like a horse, till it hurts, and as mentally powerful as ten people and half a God.

I have often thought, what piece of poetry would be like him. The closest I can get to is Samson Agonistes—How comely it is, and how reviving, to the spirit of just men long oppressed, when God into the hands of their deliverer puts invincible strength, to quell the mighty of the earth.

Diddy was pretty modest: he often used to think he had done nothing at all, and feel despairing. Quite really; and one had to cheer him up. In a way, he knew he had done some good things: but I can quite believe—his passion for doing things was so enormous—that often his achievements looked like nothing at all. I have never seen him rest on a laurel; not once. He was very funny about the Nobel Prize; quite as taken with—and suspicious of—the gold trumpet grandeur, as a kid who had accidentally won a prize and secretly rather liked it—but wasn't quite sure he wasn't being mocked. And wasn't going to be taken in, by God.

People were very cruel to him when he was little; and he has had an awful time, all his life, trying to do the right thing by them: and not having it come right. This worried him a lot: and he used to try to figure it out. He often felt miserable because he felt he'd never got it quite right. I think this was because he left out the kind of effect somebody like him was going to have on people. His personality was such that even

though he was very good with children, and very sensitive and considerate with people, he was the sort of person who was just likely to send people rocketing off into explosions.

Only a very well-armoured person would have been immune to the sheer incredible dynamic power of that presence: strong people would be hurled off at a tangent by it, and sensitive people would be likely to be disintegrated nervous wrecks after a while. Diddy desperately needed warm and sensitive human contact all his life: so much of him was impersonal. He valued it (as a human being) above all else: and it was, for these reasons, the most difficult thing in the world for him to have.

Perhaps it is just as well he never thought about this; because it would have discouraged him too much; probably he would have thought he shouldn't have anything to do with anybody; and since he has lived, often enough, on a knife edge of despair: it wouldn't have been a good thing. A lot of people suffered because of Diddy; but they really suffered because of lack of understanding of his kind of impact.

When I think again of Diddy I am led back to the queer fathomless eyes of the old Arab. A silent and fathomless wisdom: essence of thought: warm: born of the desert: and remarkably un-English.

His temperament was certainly more Mohammedan than English. He felt like a Mohammedan soul acclimatized to English soil. And like someone who had the strain of many lives in them already. His passion for God and justice was fierce, like Islam. Gentleness was acquired,—like taught to a good horse: ferocity and passion were native.—Yet there was also that Greek woods creature; pagan, too; wild and shy: rather inarticulate: queerly un-at-home with the part from Islam. Damned odd: but extraordinarily beautiful in a queer sort of way. There was nothing Diddy ever did without the most exquisite style and finish. That word is going out of fashion now: it doesn't mostly apply to moderns: but it does to Diddy.

Here are my direct impressions. Diddy loved me: I think, first, because I liked him, and then because in some sort of way I managed to understand him. Also, he has had this way of finding people at intervals whom he thought ought to be encouraged. I appear to be one of them. I must say he is a wonderful encourager: and I *am* much encouraged. Whether or not I turn out to have been worth it is, of course, quite another thing. Diddy has suffered a lot, among other things, because he feels somehow his work has given the wrong impression to people: and

he would like to put it right. He's so shy, and been so successful in achievement, that nobody will believe he has a terrible passion for humanity; and a dear love of people—both. I dare say his women have stumbled upon this; I reckon his impulse to affairs was the crying need for human contact. His shyness, his general inability to break down the discipline of formality and so on, which he was taught in his youth,—except through passion—or with great effort—have worried him very much.

Again, people simply don't *like* to believe that someone who can be so successfully clear-headed can be a warm and extremely emotional person. Even more, people don't like to believe that an agnostic (not atheist) and rationalist can have a passionate participation in human suffering, and a desire to relieve it, of dimensions only comparable to the saints and martyrs. But this Diddy has, too. He is a combination of a genius, a saint, a hero, and an honest human being: any one of which would be enough to make people wish to minimize him. If he had failed, of course, everybody would have had a glorious time sympathizing. But he has not failed: and it is hard for people either to comprehend or to accept—because this is such an unusual phenomenon—the magnitude, the incredible magnitude, of his success.

Intellectual England, which knows him as Bertie, has had him to dinner and tea for years and gossips about him—with affection and respect, it must be said—has a bit of a stiff time speaking truth in these matters—especially when it comes to words like suffering, saints and martyrs and so on, which English people are constitutionally incapable of using with either self-confidence or a proper sense of lightness. But I believe this to be more the truth than not speaking it would be. Possibly they will be grateful to me for helping them out of their dilemma. (Modest assertion, on my part.) It isn't very well written, but is pretty straightforward. I think people who write articles and have opinions about Diddy ought to consider these things. Besides, it is time we did a good job, recognizing genius full scale, on the spot and without being scared to say what it is. Calling Diddy the eminent philosopher is like calling Niagara a charming little stream: hell, it's a thundering cascade. But now that they don't have to be empire builders and keep a stiff upper lip, I don't see why they can't stretch out their language to include a little more truth.
