

## THE CLEAREST INTELLECT OF OUR AGE<sup>1</sup>

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Recently I have been rereading Bertrand Russell, and in so doing I suddenly realized that I owe to this man a good deal of such happiness as I enjoy. Over the years I had forgotten how great my debt was, but when I reread one of his books which I first read as a student, I understood the extent to which he had liberated me from the psychological sadism of Calvin and Knox, to whom I had been unduly exposed when young. It is probably impossible for anyone entirely to escape once these two have got their hands around his throat, but Russell enabled me to escape a little.

<sup>1</sup> [This essay was recently discovered during the cataloguing for BRACERS of an obscure class of correspondence. Mr. Joseph W. Devine had sent Russell a clipping of the essay's appearance in the *Philadelphia Sunday Bulletin* of 15 July 1962.

I had long thought, from reading Elspeth Cameron's *Hugh MacLennan: a Writer's Life* (1981), that he showed signs not only of having been influenced by Russell but of being the sort of person who is attracted to Russell's way of thinking. A promising title in the same scholar's bibliography of MacLennan turned out to be a fuller version of the clipping. "The Clearest Intellect of Our Age" is reprinted from *The Montreal Star*, 14 July 1962, "Entertainments" sec., p. 5. Russell did influence MacLennan.

Neither the Russell Archives nor the inventory of the MacLennan papers at the University of Calgary reveals personal contact between the two. I wish I had asked MacLennan about contacts and influence seventeen years ago, when I sent him an early issue of *Russell*. He commented: "I found your journal fascinating and never before had read that beautiful thing Russell wrote in his early days with Whitehead." He is referring to the essay on the status of women in No. 6, now in *Papers* 12.—Ed.]

I suppose he really is the greatest man alive, in the sense that his teaching grows and his teaching is good, but it is pointless to argue the point between him and Churchill. It is wonderful, however, that many think he is our greatest man and that he has become an international hero to millions of the thoughtful youth.

He must be the first pure logician who ever was that. Until he took his stand against nuclear war, he never appealed to the passions. He lacked the aggressions which youth admires. He never said: "Come live with me and I will be your master"; or, "Follow me and I will purge you of your sins." He had no use for self-sacrifice as such. He simply said, in effect: "Happiness is good. If you desire it, you must be reasonable." As he was intelligent enough to know that anyone who teaches that happiness is good, and teaches how to achieve it, is sure to be considered subversive to a Christian-commercial society, he bore no personal resentment when society persecuted him.

The young know, of course, that Russell is now assumed by the experts to be the most important philosopher since Hume, but that is not why they love him. They love him for the sublime civilization of his courage, for his refusal to let an intensely kind nature blunt his respect for truth. They love him because he loves life even in the twentieth century, and they love him most of all because he is *engagé*.

And of course they also love the wit which refuses to be made tongue-tied by those who insist that whenever one speaks of sex or religion one must be solemn. Russell's wit is worth the study of any writer. It is based on mathematics, and Russell would agree, I think, with the remark Camillien Houde once made to me when I asked the famous mayor of Montreal how he was always able to make people laugh. Houde replied: "Monsieur MacLennan, any time you want to be funny, all you have to do is tell the truth."

Until the prospect of nuclear war horrified him, Russell could not write a page without evoking a smile, a chuckle or even a belly laugh. The technique was usually the same. He would take a set of propositions accepted officially—by the religious, by the economists, by society at large—and then analyze them in such a way that their inner meaning emerged in a series of equations leading to a preposterous conclusion.

Or sometimes he would reduce to absurdity centuries of solemn debate by the use of a casual sentence, as he did when examining the

qualifications a man must possess in order to be classified as a Christian: "Belief in hell fire was an essential item of Christian belief until pretty recent times. In this country, as you know, it ceased to be an essential belief because of a decision of the Privy Council."<sup>2</sup>

Students often ask me whom they should read if they wish to write well, and I give a variety of answers depending on the kind of writing they seem interested in. But there is one paragraph of Russell's, a very recent one, which all my future students are going to have to copy verbatim, and my reason for making them copy it is that much of the professorial English to which they are exposed, especially in the social sciences, is similar to a sample which Russell offers us:

Human beings are completely exempt from undesirable behaviour patterns only when certain prerequisites, not satisfied except in a small percentage of actual cases, have, through some fortuitous concurrence of favourable circumstances, whether congenital or environmental, chanced to combine in producing an individual in whom many factors deviate from the norm in a socially advantageous manner.

Russell then translates this not atypical sample of professoren-English as follows:

All men are scoundrels, or at any rate almost all. The men who are not had unusual luck, both in their birth and their upbringing.<sup>3</sup>

This leads me to a thought I wish more critics and academicians would consider. The prose which stands the test of time is always clear prose, and no matter how difficult the matter, is often remarkably simple. For this reason, in addition to the enormous importance of his material, Russell is the only writer I can think of who is sure to be read two centuries from now. The only impediment to his becoming a permanent classic lies in the possibility of the extinction of the human race. It gives one an odd feeling to realize that the clearest intellect of our age does not, at least in the last two years, give himself much chance even of this kind of immortality.

<sup>2</sup> [*Why I Am Not a Christian and Other Essays*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1957), p. 5. The source, the title essay, was first published in 1927.]

<sup>3</sup> ["How I Write", in *PfM*, p. 197.]