

A moralist's testimony

by Stefan Andersson

Al Seckel, ed. *Bertrand Russell on Ethics, Sex and Marriage*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1987. Pp. 348. US\$14.95.

THIS COLLECTION OF Russell's writings on ethical and moral issues is a sequel to *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*.¹ The editor has done a better job this time, but it is far from perfect.

The book starts with an essay on Russell's life in which the editor within the space

of less than six pages succeeds in revealing his shaky knowledge of simple facts concerning Russell's life. He says e.g. on page v that Russell married Patricia Spence in 1938. It is almost correct, but that is not good enough to create confidence in the editor. He might also have sounded less sure about things that neither he nor anyone else knows much about. On page vi, talking about the Cuban missile crisis, he claims that "... Russell's efforts and influence had considerable impact on Soviet premier Khrushchev's willingness to compromise." I don't think that Russell needs that kind of advertising. Maybe he had, but in that case why does the editor not supply the evidence? In his article "Russell and the Cuban missile crisis"² the editor ascribes a more modest part to Russell saying that "... Russell acted as an intermediary in the crisis, allowing Khrushchev an out he otherwise might not have had" (p. 261). That sounds more convincing. This essay could have been omitted without complaints from anyone.

In the Acknowledgments we are told that the only unpublished writing of the twenty-six pieces in the book is an essay called "Morality and Instinct" written in 1926. This text was suggested for inclusion by the Archivist of the Russell Archives. To some readers of Russell this might be reason enough to buy the book; perhaps the only reason.

The book is divided into five parts: Ethics, Moral Rules, Sexual Morality, Marriage and Divorce, and Happiness. Each part is supplied with an introduction and all writings except two are introduced with shorter headnotes which in some cases contain interesting information, but which usually are just attempts to summarize the text that follows.

The general weakness of the collection is that the editor does not inform the reader why he has chosen these twenty-six essays, articles and parts of books rather than any others, if there are different versions of the same text (except in one case) and what other writings by Russell on ethics, sex and marriage there are which could have been included.

It is hardly an accurate description to say that the texts are taken from "... obscure journals, pamphlets, out-of-print periodicals, and hard-to-find books." Until the project of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* has reached a more advanced stage, this book has a certain value because it does include some articles, e.g. "How Will Science Change Morals?" published in *Menorah Journal* and "Chinese Morals" published in *The Modern Thinker and Author's Review*, that might require an inter-library loan. But on the other hand the views expressed in these articles are the same as can be found in Russell's books.

The book includes what is claimed to be a complete list of Russell's books. This is another sign of the editor's lack of relevant information; why say "complete" if you don't know for sure what you are talking about? His bibliography includes more than seventy titles, but it is no easy matter to decide what is exactly to be referred to as "a book by Bertrand Russell". The number of titles listed in the forthcoming bibliography of the *Collected Papers*, Vol. 1: *Separate Publications*, Part A. Books, Pamphlets, and Leaflets, is 161, including the editor's two collections. The editor does not list *Let the*

¹ Reviewed in this journal, n.s. 9 (1989): 94-5.

² *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 253-61.

People Think (1941) or *The Art of Philosophizing* (1974). He does, however, include his own earlier collection of Russell's essays on religion, but he does not show the same generosity to similar collections like *Atheism: Collected Essays, 1943–1949* (1972), *An Atheist's Bertrand Russell* (1980) or *Mortals and Others* (1975), edited by Harry Ruja. The editor has also added a list of selected readings on Russell's life and views, which certainly is very selective, but not surprisingly contains his own earlier collection. The book is supplied with an author and subject index, which is good.

This is not a book that serious scholars are likely to refer to, but for those who cannot wait for the *Collected Papers* it has enough good stuff in it to make it worthwhile purchasing.

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