

# Reviews

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## New works from Dora Russell

by Brian Hendley

Dora Russell. *The Dora Russell Reader: 57 Years of Writing and Journalism, 1925–1982*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983. Pp. ix, 242. \$9.95 (paperbound). *The Religion of the Machine Age*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983. Pp. xvii, 267. \$42.25.

WHEN DORA RUSSELL died on 31 May 1986 at the age of ninety-two, her last reported words were: “I am growing tired of the world and very fed up.”<sup>1</sup> Having spent her long life battling for causes such as sexual freedom for women, nuclear disarmament, and humane education, she might well have gotten fed up with a world that seemed to blunder on towards self-destruction, though she remained actively involved in human affairs right up to the very end.<sup>2</sup> The publication of these two volumes of her work is timely in the sense that it serves to remind us of the depth of feelings for humanity and the steadfastness of her loyalty to the causes she felt were most important. Having said this, it should not be assumed that what she has to say in these books is either startlingly original or unquestionably correct. Persistence of argument is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for cogency.

*The Dora Russell Reader* is a useful, easy-to-read sampler of her writings, beginning with her short book, *Hypatia* (1925), and ending with her article, “Challenge to Humanism”, which appeared in *The Free-*

<sup>1</sup> Reported in the *The Guardian*, 2 June 1986.

<sup>2</sup> I had personal experience of this by receiving a letter from her dated 23 May 1986, reacting to a copy of my book, *Dewey, Russell, and Whitehead: Philosophers as Educators* (Carbondale, Ill.: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986). Although she found the book interesting, she chided me for not contacting the teachers or students from Beacon Hill School. She then quoted from recent letters from those who found the school a great help to their lives. All of this from someone who was to be dead a week later!

thinker (1982). Included are excerpts from her other books, such as *The Right to be Happy* (1927) and *In Defence of Children* (1932), articles from newspapers and radical journals, book reviews, letters to the editor, and the like. Each selection is preceded by a short editorial sketch which situates it historically. Unfortunately there is no bibliography of all of her writings, and there are some important works left out; for example, her recent autobiography (*The Tamarisk Tree*, 3 vols.) and her various articles on the Beacon Hill School. It may have been felt that these were better known than some of the other pieces, but their omission deprives the reader of Dora at her best.

She began working on *The Religion of the Machine Age* in 1922, and indeed a contract for the book was signed with Routledge & Kegan Paul in 1923. It is a tribute to publisher and author that this project was finally completed some sixty years later. She dedicates the book to her son Roderick Barry, who had been crippled for life in a mining accident when he was a young man and died suddenly when the book was in press. The theme of the book is man's attempt to supplant God as the clockmaker who regulates a smoothly running universe and creates his own "religion of the machine age". By means of a lively, popular account of the history of mankind from primitive man to the twentieth century, Dora traces the development of what she calls the cult of the impartial, scientific intellect. Man has created an industrial, functional society which represents a flight from the biological basis of life. The intellect is seen as something superior and apart from man's animal life. Emotion is excluded and disparaged. The suppression of feeling and idolatrous worship of mechanization is leading the world to destruction. The remedy to this long historical race toward oblivion is to become aware of and give due respect to the very different approach to life followed by women.

According to Dora Russell, women have a greater sense of kinship, of belonging to the rest of nature, than do men. This is their virtue, not their sin. The impulse of parental care and creative love stems from women's defence of the life of their offspring. This caring, nurturing approach to life is precisely what is needed in the political realm. Women have been largely ignored by historians, she says, specifically mentioning H.G. Wells in his *Outline of History* and Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy*. They have been relegated to the animal kingdom because they display emotion and subjective feelings rather than reason and objectivity. But none of the great thinkers of the past, including Bertrand Russell, really lived by the intellect alone, she adds, and that is why the quality and care of early acquired emotions is so important. Through education of the young we can begin to

break away from the narrow emphasis on reason and intellect and allow ourselves to feel a sense of oneness with the rest of the world. Future achievements of the human spirit require new people, not new machines.

None of this is particularly innovative, nor is it always well argued for. To claim that historians have given us a one-sided picture of human life by excluding the attitudes and accomplishments of women is not thereby to establish that women really do act and think as Dora says they do. No evidence is provided for her sweeping generalizations about women's approach to life. Exceptions immediately come to mind. Do they prove the rule? Are we to dismiss so-called objective accounts of human life and replace them with what we personally feel is right? The dangers in this become apparent when we read her original "Preface" to *The Religion of the Machine Age*, written in 1920-21, where she enthuses that she is confident that by cutting out from the industrial system the motives of profit and exploitation, and administering it in terms of humanity and justice, communism "could so transform industrialism as to make of it a thing of beauty, not of terror" (p. xv). The memory of the Chernobyl disaster is too fresh to allow me to let this comment pass, as Dora tries to do, as "the reactions of a young person of 26 to the inspired mood of the Russians of that date" (p. xvii). Surely our political judgments had better be based on facts and not subjective impressions. There is too much at stake to simply go with our feelings when dealing with issues like war and peace, famine and disease, or the proper uses of technology.

Her analysis of gender-specific traits like caring and feeling for women and reasoning and mechanization for men tends to stereotype each sex. She calls for balance and harmony between the sexes, with a recognition of differences, and chides early feminist ideals of education for denying or ignoring real differences between the sexes; but I think she goes too far in her efforts to link women with our animal nature and men with machines. She makes only the briefest of suggestions as to why men feel hostile to women and try to repress them (i.e. because they resent being dependent on women as sex partners and as the maternal source of safety and care during childhood—*Reader*, p. 169). Why do these conditions of sexual interdependence, which apply equally to the sexes, have such a deleterious effect only on men? Do women never feel hostile to and attempt to repress men? Apparently not, if you read the course of history through Dora's eyes. To depict women as always the victims is as one-sided as the male-biased view of human life that Dora is attacking.

Despite their shortcomings, these volumes are clear proof that Dora

was not just “Mrs. Bertrand Russell”. Her lifelong concern for the problems of mankind makes us realize how deeply rooted many of our difficulties are and how unlikely it is that they will be easily resolved. In reading these books, I found myself caught up by the fighting spirit of the woman and her commitment to finding a better way for human beings to live together. Rather than the final words reported in the newspapers, I think a more fitting epitaph for Dora Russell comes from *The Religion of the Machine Age*, which she thought about for nearly sixty years and concluded with the statement: “Humanity will ever seek, but never attain perfection. Let us at least survive and go on trying” (p. 253). It is to her credit that for ninety-two years she did precisely that.

*Department of Philosophy*  
*University of Waterloo*