

Bertrand Russell and the Webbs: an interview

by Royden Harrison

SHORTLY AFTER THE publication of my first book, *Before The Socialists* (1965), I was invited by the Passfield Trustees to write the authorized "Life" of Sidney and Beatrice Webb. As biographer I gave a high priority to what Beatrice called "the Method of Interview". Yet I was unable to follow all her counsel—admirable as I took it to be. Thus, she insisted one should not annoy one's respondent by asking him about matters where his testimony was already available or otherwise superfluous. But what if the respondent is advanced in years and of uncertain health? Then the delay which might have been courteous becomes imprudent. Accordingly, I interviewed early. On reflection, it seems right to have done so. If I am often visited by what Diderot called *l'esprit d'escalier* I do not reproach myself with opportunities wholly lost. On the contrary, I cherish many remarkable memories even if they are of very marginal importance to "Webbery": Clem Attlee being laconic beneath an immense tapestry of himself attired in the robes of the Order of the Garter; Dame Margaret Cole shouting obscenities at some delinquent publisher across a Mayfair Restaurant; Ambassador Ivan Maisky coming specially into Moscow to an unnumbered flat in Gorky Street to tell me of the Webbs and Stalin; Kingsley Martin becoming more and more the scandalous gossip over Irish whiskey; Leonard Woolf trembling to the imminent danger of his cup and saucer; Lady Simon of Wythenshawe's delight in the Webb partnership and conviction respecting its usefulness; Professor Willy Robson requiring me to inform him about all references to himself in the Webb diaries and my promising to do so even while I knew it to be quite impossible. (Sidney Webb regarded Robson as the most boring man he had ever met.)

With the exception of Mr. Malcolm Muggeridge everybody that I wanted to interview consented. But by far the most rewarding of these interviews was the one which I conducted with Bertrand Russell at his house in Wales on the afternoon of 19 January 1967. I drove over from Yorkshire and remember bright sunshine on the deserted winter roads. I was received by one of Russell's aides: probably Christopher Farley. He made no interventions in the discussion and even allowed Russell to hop up and down passing cups of tea. Our meeting lasted for about an hour or perhaps an hour and a half. As soon as it was over I rushed to a nearby hotel and wrote down everything that I could recollect and then rewrote it in what I took to be its correct order. This was all in strict accordance with what I understood to be the "Methods of Social Study". Whether Beatrice would have been unimpressed by the advent of the tape recorder and would have objected to its presence on the same terms as she objected to note-taking before the respondent is a nice problem. I do regret not sending Russell a copy of my report for his approval. I asked him if he would be prepared to look it over, but he was very hesitant about that. I should not have been afraid to irritate him. The last thing to be allowed in a biographer of the Webbs is that he should be unprofessional.

INTERVIEW WITH EARL RUSSELL, O.M., F.R.S.
19 JANUARY 1967

- Q) Is it the case that you are going to Paris next month and that after that your autobiography will appear, at least the first volume?
- A) I don't know about Paris. Here in the country I feel healthy and vigorous, but in the cities I soon get tired. Yes, my autobiography is in publication—it has cost me a lot of trouble, more than with any of my other books. It is hard to be agnostic about the facts of your own life. Although I am pretty convinced about the facts concerning my own birth and also of the accuracy of the analysis of my character which my Mother supplied when I was only three days old.
- Q) Among the many reasons which I had for wishing to meet you is the fact that you must be the only man living who knew Webb before he married Beatrice.
- A) Well, they were engaged when I first met them in 1892. I was staying with the Pearsall Smiths. Their daughter Alys, subsequently became my first wife. Incidentally the other daughter married Benjamin Costelloe, a friend and neighbour of the Webbs in Grosvenor Rd. Anyway, we went over in an American buggy to where the Webbs were staying. I was more of a snob in those days than I am now and I noticed how Sidney looked round the table so that he could get some

guidance as to the correct “instruments”. I also noted his cockney accent which he retained to the end of his life. (Not that there is anything remarkable in that. After all most Englishmen speak with a cockney accent.) [Sic.]

Sidney insisted on the scientific character of his work, explaining that the essence of science was verification. I soon got both Beatrice and himself snarled up over this since I had no difficulty in showing that verification was a much more complex matter than they supposed. Beatrice told me off afterwards for my bad manners in being impolite to Sidney. I believe that I never again had an argument with them that involved technical, philosophic points.

- Q) You don't allow that they could be considered as scientists; that they advanced the development of “social science”?
- A) Of course they were not scientists. Like everyone else they were biased. When they turned to Soviet Communism they were senile, but they had always been Machiavellians. I remember how Sidney forced the hand of the L.C.C. [London County Council] by getting a notice sent out to parents telling them that their children were eligible for scholarships before this had been agreed. Then you must consider how Sidney told the Pearsall Smiths that a prison was going to be pulled down by the L.C.C. and replaced by the Tate Gallery. The Pearsall Smiths bought a house next to the prison which subsequently greatly appreciated in value.
- Q) You're not suggesting that Webb was involved in graft.
- A) No. But I do remember him once saying to me: “Russell, I use the other man's premisses and employ them to reach my own conclusions.” I replied: “Webb, if the conclusion follows from the premisses there is no need for your intervention. If it does not, you are guilty of sophistry.” This made him very annoyed.
- Q) People tell me that Beatrice was easy to annoy, but it was hard to have a row with Sidney.
- A) Oh no. Sidney could be teased. Remember the story that I told about him in *Portraits from Memory* when I made a flippant remark about representative institutions?
- Q) In *Portraits* you describe the Webb marriage as the most complete you have ever known, yet is there not evidence that Beatrice was anti-sex? Was there a sexual component in their marriage?
- A) Certainly there was. They went in for some very advanced caressing in public. Beatrice's great love was Joseph Chamberlain. (Having been a Gladstonian, she ceased to be as soon as Joseph broke with the G.O.M.) But when I knew them, the Webbs were very much in love. But Beatrice's attitude to sex and marriage was that of a Victorian

dowager. She wrote me a very severe letter at the time of the break-up of my first marriage and gave me a thorough telling off. My brother's eccentricities in marital matters were as extreme as my own and it was on that account that Beatrice took steps to prevent him securing high office in the first Labour Government. (By the way, I would have had great difficulty in carrying out my brother's wishes and scattering his ashes on the Sussex downs had it not been for the fact that I owned some of them.) Beatrice was an old horror, but I had a real affection for her.

- Q) What does that mean?
- A) Well if you set down a list of her leading characteristics you would say: “What a dreadful woman!” But in fact she was very nice. I had a great liking and respect for her. I always liked to go and dine with the Webbs particularly if there was some rather second-rate person there whose leg I could pull. Beatrice would laugh—not heartily, but she would laugh. Then she would pull herself up and get back to the agenda: there was always an agenda. It seemed to me that in the Webb partnership it was Beatrice who thought up the problems and Sidney who did the work. Unlike Sidney, Beatrice was not very industrious. What interested her was organization: government and governing. And when she thought about these things she was no democrat. She looked to something analogous to her father's business in which the shareholders participated in a purely formal kind of way while the expert manager took the decisions. She liked the Japanese better than the Chinese because she was convinced that they were better organized. I told her that that would be the ruin of them and it was.
- You know, talking of the Japanese, that they took C. P. Trevelyan with them on their world tour in 1912. Why on earth they did that I don't know. He was fearfully stingy and the Webbs had to tip all the waiters on his behalf and he was not at all promising material from their point of view. It was always Beatrice who was on the look-out for ambitious and promising young men whom she could use as her puppets. At least she was never bitter with them when, one after the other, they disappointed her hopes. I think that J. R. MacDonald was the one and only man that they detested and hated. He embodied everything which Beatrice most despised in the British Labour Movement.
- Q) Like Leonard Woolf and Kingsley Martin you seem to be insisting that the Webbs were not democrats or libertarians. I think that Beatrice cared a great deal more for liberty than is sometimes imagined. (The endless tension which this concern caused in her love

affair with the U.S.S.R. is very instructive in this respect). I wonder whether this sense of the Webbs not having the "liberal conscience" is not connected rather with their relative indifference to protest and their distaste for moral indignation.

- A) That's very interesting. I was not aware that Beatrice experienced any inner conflict respecting her attitude to the U.S.S.R. She never showed it in public. Yet it does not wholly surprise me that she should have concealed such a fact. It is quite true that the Webbs did not go in for moral indignation and, for the most part, they were quite right not to. It does come perilously near to self-righteousness and hatred. But it is impossible to be entirely abstemious so far as moral indignation is concerned when you are confronted with a loathsome tyranny such as Stalin's Russia was at the time when the Webbs were writing about it.
- Q) Do you remember taking Freda Utley to see the Webbs in the hope of doing something for her husband who was in a Russian Concentration Camp.
- A) Yes. I knew her well. I remember the occasion quite distinctly.
- Q) Did the Webbs do anything for her?
- A) Oh yes some quite trifling thing, but they refused to be morally indignant.
- Q) How do you feel about concealing your doubts and opinions concerning a cause you believe in for fear of damaging it by the comfort which the public expression of these doubts would bring to the enemies of the Cause? For example, would you publicly admit, supposing it could be shown, that the Viet Cong committed atrocities or would you restrain yourself on the grounds that such an admission might aid the Americans in their war crimes?
- A) Oh yes. It is a difficult question to decide when to keep your mouth shut. For example, Winston Churchill had a mistress in Paris at the height of World War I. I was opposed to that War and I still think rightly, but had I been in favour of it, I would have thought it right to be silent about Churchill's affair.
- Q) Yes, indeed, I don't see that as a moral dilemma at all.
- A) Ah well, you are quite right so long as you make certain distinctions. It is one thing to hold that the sexual affairs of a public figure are his own affair and it is another thing to approve of what's his name?—Churchill—denying the story and *successfully suing for libel*, as he did. That ought to appear to you a moral dilemma.
- Q) In their old age the Webbs' opinions underwent a certain radicalization. Would that also be true in your case?
- A) No. I have always been a pacifist, but never an absolute one. My

approach has always been utilitarian: a matter of balancing up the costs of war or surrender. Generally speaking I have been much more reluctant to accept the necessity of going to war than most of my fellow countrymen. I was wrong on the Boer War and I am ashamed of that. My mistake there was largely due to the influence of the Webbs. I persuaded myself that Britain represented a higher order of civilization and ought to prevail.

- Q) It was not concern for the natives? You did not think that they might be better off under British rule?
- A) No, that was not a governing consideration with me at the time. I did not break with the Co-efficients until I heard an address from Grey on the expediency of killing Frenchmen. That was too much. I left. Beatrice pointed out to me that the Co-efficients came to the dining club in an order which was the inverse of their power—the most powerful came last. I noticed that the Prime Minister did not come last. That place was taken by a businessman and banker!
- Q) Do you feel, as the Webbs came to, that England is just an agreeable backwater and that it is the new civilizations of the East which will accomplish great things in the future?
- A) No. I don't think that we are just an agreeable backwater. But I don't much care one way or another where the next big achievements for mankind come from.
- Q) What do you think was the Webbs' biggest achievement?
- A) The Poor Law: their contribution to the abolition of the Poor Law. It was fun knowing them. They were very odd people. But then the older I get the odder people seem. Did you know that when they lived in London the Webbs used to go to church every Sunday. They went to St. Paul's. They said it was for the music, but I doubt whether that was a full or adequate explanation. Odd, very odd. But then I once knew a President of the P.P.U. [Peace Pledge Union] who admired Napoleon and collected Napoleana.