

# Reviews

## Transatlantic Russell

by Nicholas Griffin

*Bertrand Russell's America*, vol. II: 1945–1970; *A Documented Account*. By Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils. Boston: South End Press, 1983; London: George Allen & Unwin, 1985. Pp. xii, 423. Illus. US\$25.00 and \$10.00 (paper); £14.95.

TEN YEARS AFTER the first volume was published by Allen and Unwin, Barry Feinberg and Ronald Kasrils have brought out the second volume of their chronicle of Russell's multifarious relations with the USA. This long delay, apparently, was no fault of the authors'. Despite the fact that the first volume covers fifty years to the second's twenty-five, and that Russell's interests in the USA during the earlier period were a good deal more various (including a long period of residence), the second volume is longer than the first. This indicates, first, the fulness of documentary record for the last years of Russell's life; second, the extent of Russell's political concern with America during the *bellum americanum*; and, third, the political interests of the authors. For this volume, even more than the first, is a political record.

On the personal side, for these years, there is much less to tell: no extended periods of residence, and only two lecture tours (in 1950 and 1951). Both tours are described in some detail—the authors relying for personal details on Julie Medlock's regrettably still unpublished memoir. Medlock's task as a publicist for the first tour was made easier by the fact that Russell's Nobel prize was announced in the course of the tour. On the second tour, during five days in New York, Russell took part in a three-day forum organized by the *New York Herald Tribune*, taped five CBS broadcasts, spoke at Columbia University and attended many receptions: not a bad performance at seventy-nine. Unfortunately, we don't get many details, beyond the occasional title, of Russell's many talks at universities and colleges during these tours. Many of these talks were political, but a number were philosophical. For example, the original purpose of his first tour was to give a short philosophy course at

Mount Holyoke College. It's unfortunate that we don't learn more, even at an anecdotal level, of his classes. Material newly acquired by the Russell Archives can fill this out.

There is less, also, in this volume of commentary on American life and mores. Only a couple of the articles reprinted in Part II fall into this (quite extensive) genre of Russell's writings: a review of Albert Ellis's *The Folklore of Sex* (1951) and an article from the *New York Times Magazine* for 1952 headed "The American Way ... is Dour". Two more, "The American Mentality" and "Political and Cultural Influence of U.S.A." (both of 1949), border on the genre, but both have a political subtext: the improvement of political relations between Britain and the USA. In the first pair of articles Russell is mainly concerned to deplore the small role of impulse in American life, which becomes dour in consequence. Where the impulse exists it is, of course, thwarted, especially in large organizations: "The more energetic you are and the more vision you have, the more you will suffer from the impossibility of doing any of the things that you feel ought to be done" for "you will find yourself invariably under the orders of some big man at the top who is elderly, weary and cynical" (p. 336). Of course, it is a mistake to write as if such things happen only in the USA—each of us could, after all, cite at least one such example from north of the border. Some of his other commentary applies across the border as well. For example, his comparison of the "large and airy" offices of university administrators with "the holes and corners in which the professors are housed" (p. 24). This eternal verity of North American academic life is mentioned in illustration of the power and prestige of business in American universities: "... when I was invited to dinner if my host wished to do me honour he invited me to meet business men rather than professors, on the ground that they stand higher in the social scale" (p. 24). The corporate ethos of the North American university is still likely to offend academics raised in Europe (or elsewhere), especially now that aspects of the Japanese corporate mentality (e.g. regimentation and paternalism) are beginning to be included.

This sort of commentary on American life is confined almost entirely to scattered remarks in the 1940s and early 1950s. The bulk of the book is taken up with much more sombre themes: the Cold War, political suppression in the USA, and Vietnam. There are, in addition, two further topics which receive a chapter each: the (first) Kennedy assassination and the movement for black rights. Nonetheless, the three main themes account, in one way or another, for perhaps eighty per cent of the book's content. The present volume takes the same form as the first: Part I consists of a connected narrative, heavily loaded with documentation, while Part II reprints twenty-one articles by Russell. In this volume,

unlike the first, none of these pieces are published here for the first time.

Much of the material in Part I, however, is either new or else not very widely known. Thus we have for the first time a full account, both before and behind the scenes, of Russell's break with the right-wing Congress for Cultural Freedom, and the sustained efforts of the Congress to keep Russell's support. We have, also, a full account of Russell's efforts over many years on behalf of Morton Sobell who was jailed (probably unjustly) for spying in 1951. Like Voltaire's efforts on behalf of Calas, Russell's on behalf of Sobell ended happily (in some weak sense) just in time, for Sobell was released in 1969. Two relatively small items that were completely new to me, each delightful in its own way, were Russell's correspondence in the mid-sixties with James Boggs, a black militant, and an article by Max Freedman in the *Los Angeles Times* warning Martin Luther King that he was likely to suffer the dread fate of becoming "the Bertrand Russell of the United States".

Some of the material is already well known from other sources. The account here of the Cuban Crisis adds nothing to what is available in *Unarmed Victory* (1963). Feinberg and Kasrils do indeed claim that Russell played "an important role" in the resolution of the crisis (p. 158). But contrary to what Ronald Clark<sup>1</sup> and Al Seckel<sup>2</sup> say, I find no reason to suppose that this was Russell's own view. That in *Unarmed Victory*<sup>3</sup> Russell's final telegram to Khrushchev urging further appeasement is followed by the news of further appeasement by Khrushchev is not intended to let us think that the former was the cause of the latter, but a result of simple chronology—the two events occurred, in that order, on the same day. In any case, the settlement that Russell suggested in his telegram was different from the one which Khrushchev finally accepted: and Russell himself, as Clark notes, on many occasions disclaimed any responsibility for bringing about the settlement. While on this topic, I feel compelled to add that I couldn't at the time, and still cannot, see any basis for the frequent charges that Russell's account of the missile crisis was unfair to the Americans. Kennedy's resort to the type of gunboat diplomacy suitable for a comic opera was a pathetic regression to machismo, and Khrushchev responded with magnificent restraint. If he hadn't, we'd all be dead.

Another well-known story is that of Russell's contretemps with *The New York Times* over Vietnam. The *Times* had assailed Russell for criticizing American policy without evidence, so Russell wrote a further

letter providing the evidence. This the *Times* published in part, omitting exactly those passages which provided the documentation it had called for in the first place.<sup>4</sup> However, this particular episode had a sequel of sorts which only now emerges. Ever after this exchange Russell found it extremely difficult to get political statements published in the *New York Times*—until, that is, the *Times* got hold of a statement Russell had sent to a black rights meeting in New York, in which he had urged blacks to eschew violence. This the *Times* printed in full, under the heading "Negroes Warned by Lord Russell". Out of its context, the overall effect was to make it appear that Russell did not support the militant black rights movement and even that he was blaming the blacks for the recent outbreaks of race violence. Not surprisingly, Russell wrote to the *Times* clarifying his position. This letter they found themselves unable to print.

But Russell's troubles with the American press go back even to his most pro-American period. During his 1950 lecture tour Russell had been big news, lecturing to capacity audiences and widely reported in the press as the new Nobel laureate in literature. On his return to England he wrote a short article called "Why America Is Losing Her Allies", a rather mild article for the most part which lamented the American tendency to assume that any country with a welfare system must be communist, a view which, he thought, was damaging Anglo-American relations. Medlock, Russell's agent in America, sent this article to 1,850 American newspapers, of which only the *Wichita Beacon* published it (p. 18). One might have thought that an article by a media star of a few weeks before would have done rather better. Even Russia could tolerate a free press as well behaved as this one.<sup>5</sup>

*Bertrand Russell's America* is full of good things and serves to remind one of some of the reasons why one admired Russell when he was alive. The following summary of British post-war foreign policy was made during the Cuban crisis:

[I]f America were to declare the planet flat and the Tories a host of baboons, the Prime Minister would spend fortunes to persuade us all that gaping primates were a grand species, especially fitted for the new and adventurous conditions provided by the flat earth we all have desired since the Americans told us to do so. (P. 153)

<sup>4</sup> These letters and the others which immediately ensued were printed in the first chapter of *War Crimes in Vietnam* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967).

<sup>5</sup> In this story and a number of others, *Bertrand Russell's America* provides anecdotal support for Chomsky and Herman's detailed account of political suppression by the "free" press in *The Political Economy of Human Rights*, vol. 1: *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* (Montréal: Black Rose, 1979).

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape and Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), p. 600.

<sup>2</sup> "Russell and the Cuban Missile Crisis", *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984-5): 259.

<sup>3</sup> Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1963, p. 51.

What better description than that do we have of Mrs. Thatcher's recent transatlantic grovel in support of Star Wars? Reagan didn't even bother to wait until she arrived before issuing the statement she'd have to agree to. Other passages are equally timely, some ironically so. In 1963, for example, Russell conducted a long correspondence with John Fischer of *Harper's Magazine* about nuclear deterrence. It was not dissimilar to his correspondence with the *New York Times* over Vietnam. In the course of the exchange Fischer argued that the Polaris submarine had made the world safer by making a delayed response to nuclear attack possible and thereby eliminating some of the dangers of an accidental war due to radar error. Russell stuck to his guns, pointing out that Western defence still relied upon the unreliable DEW-line warning system. Fischer replied that in the age of Polaris and hardened missile silos the DEW-line was obsolete and only maintained "for whatever minor service it might be to unhardened installations and to the civilian population" (p. 168). It's good to know that the civilian population are the beneficiaries of this welfare service, since it is the civilian population that is now being asked to pay seven billion dollars to keep the system, which was supposed to be unnecessary and obsolete twenty years ago, functioning. The DEW-line gives us fifteen minutes early warning: at 500 million dollars a minute no expense is spared where the civilian population is concerned.

*Troy, Ontario*