

A conversation with Dora Russell

by *W. R. Valentine*

I VISITED ENGLAND recently to work on the international aspects of my master's thesis in telecommunication. One morning I read an article in *The Guardian* about Mrs. Dora Russell and the second volume of her autobiography, entitled *Tamarisk 2*. I have always admired the work of Mrs. Russell, as well as that of her former husband, Bertrand Russell. I then became interested in the idea of having an interview with this remarkable woman. I thought of many questions I would have asked if I were that newspaper reporter. I contacted the newspaper, but they would not give much information other than to suggest contacting her agent. I did so, but was told Mrs. Russell does not give many interviews and, perhaps, if I made a request in writing ...

A visit to her publisher, the Virago Press, produced even fewer results. My grammar school Latin should have forewarned me, since the women in this small walk-up editorial office near Piccadilly Circus seemed annoyed by my very presence. Finally, I turned to the public library for help. Success came from the section containing phone books for the whole country. I was not sure there would be a listed number, until I located an entry for Mrs. Dora Russell in St. Buryan. After determining all the necessary codes for a long distance call from London to Cornwall, I was ready to give it a try.

I had rehearsed a little introductory plea for the secretary or butler who would probably answer. Based on my experience in

London, I expected a pre-programmed negative response. Much to my surprise, Mrs. Russell answered the phone herself. After fumbling for words and untwisting my tongue, I was able to obtain an interview. She said she didn't get into London much these days, but was willing to talk with me if I could come to Cornwall.

While riding the overnight train to Penzance, I was reminded of an episode Dora Russell had related in the first volume of her autobiography, *The Tamarisk Tree*. This concerned another American visitor she and Russell had received in 1919. They found this gentleman to be a minor nuisance. I wondered what kind of impression I would make with her.

Once in Penzance, one must continue by bus to St. Buryan and, finally, on foot to her country house at Carn Voel. The distance is only about eight miles, but it is very hilly and the roads are narrow. The area is rich with ancient monuments erected by the druids and Christians of the dark ages. The famous little town of Land's End is nearby on the Cornish coast. The walk paths through the area are maintained by the National Trust. These treks were always a favourite jaunt of Bertrand Russell, as well as of Merlin in King Arthur's time.

When I reached the house, I was greeted by Mrs. Russell and her granddaughter, Sarah. The eldest child of Bertrand and Dora, John Russell, also lives there. The house contains many things from the school, as well as from her trips to China, Russia, America and Europe.

I was glad to learn that we had similar views about the article in *The Guardian*. She felt the journalist had treated her like an old museum piece and dwelled on her personal relationship with Russell.

Mrs. Russell was anxious to discuss an idea she had been nurturing for many years. She intends to write a book about the machine age and its impact on civilization. I realized her knowledge and experience would make this an engaging discourse and pursued the topic at length. The subject had been a point of contention between Dora and Bertrand. She referred to many works, such as *The Myth of the Machine*, by Lewis Mumford, *The Medieval Machine*, by Jean Gimpel, *Falling Apart*, by Elain Morgan, and she quoted freely from Shakespeare. Many years ago, Mrs. Russell had exchanged views on this subject with H. G.

Wells and found him to be very encouraging about the book. Her idea is to give her book the title *Religion of the Machine*. The subject has been a catalyst for her thoughts since 1919, after she decided to visit Russia to see what changes the Revolution had effected. She views machines as gods that men have created. According to Mrs. Russell, the female is the fundamental heretic of the machine age because women possess a more biological or ecological conception of the world.

Mrs. Russell, then Dora Black, travelled to the Soviet Union on her own after plans to accompany Bertrand Russell had to be cancelled. The official Labour delegation with which Russell was involved would not allow the couple to travel together. Back in England, Dora and Bertrand had very different impressions of Russia, which she recorded in the first volume of her autobiography and he recorded in the second volume of his memoirs.

The school at Beacon Hill was the focus of her life for more than twenty years. She worked with Russell and continued after their marriage to run the school until the uncertainties associated with World War finally closed the doors. The second volume of her autobiography covers this period.

The school represented an experimental approach to education. Some parts of it survive today, in the changes that have occurred in modern education. Mrs. Russell knew Margaret McMillan, who was responsible for developing the notion recognized today as child care. Dora's first two children spent time in McMillan's nursery school. At Beacon Hill, children were allowed great latitude in their thoughts and actions. This approach gave some people the impression that it was a place where "anything goes". It has been shown by various books and articles about the school that this was an erroneous conclusion.

What it did mean was that the adults would facilitate the learning process, but also allow children to participate fully in their own education. For example, the students, who were all under twelve years of age, would write, produce and direct school plays. The adults were present to give advice as to format and choice of subjects, but the students did all the rest. A book entitled *Thinking in Front of Yourself* is a collection of plays by the students of Beacon Hill School. The stories in this book display an uncanny calibre of insight into those troubled days. Mrs. Russell details

many of the problems and pleasures of running the school in her *The Tamarisk Tree 2: My School and the Years of War*. She was admonished by some people who stated that schools shouldn't become involved with politics, religion, and sex, but she replied with the opinion of one staff member, "What else is there?"

We talked about her life with Russell, whom she affectionately referred to as Bertie. She had reviewed Ronald Clark's biography, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (1975), for *The Freethinker* in December 1975. Dora related that she felt her hands were tied when it came to responding to some of the issues broached in Clark's book. Russell had placed an embargo on his letters to and from Dora, Peter Spence, Ottoline Morrell and Colette O'Neil, until five years after these women died. (Both the Morrell and Malleson correspondences are no longer under embargo.) Generally speaking, she did not approve of the approach taken by Mr. Clark. She wrote that the author "is either lacking in the necessary imagination and empathy, or else he is too right-wing in politics to do justice to Russell's campaigns." The book's emphasis on Russell's liaisons with various women can be summed up in the following comment by Mrs. Russell: "Ferretting out every detail of the sex lives of eminent persons is the passport to a large sale and evokes the greatest attention from reviewers."

Dora Russell said Bertrand Russell's attitude toward women was in the tradition of most Englishmen, which was to place the opposite sex in two categories: wives for child-bearing and domestic chores, the rest for romantic encounters. On the other hand, she felt Bertie's gift to her, as to any intelligent person whom he valued, was to inspire the poise and self-confidence which springs from discovering one's inherent talent. Her own attitude about women was posed in the form of two questions; "Do women propose to emulate and themselves live by the masculine sex code? Have they not something better to contribute from the inspiration of their own psyche to human love and human society?"

We also touched on current events during the course of the interview. Dora considers the present status of U.S.-China relations disastrous. She said Mao Tse-tung tried to bring the intellectuals and peasants together, but sees this being completely reversed. She speaks with some authority, having spent time in

China (with Russell), where she was known as the "Very Intellectual Miss Black". When she first met Mao, he was a librarian in Peking. She told me she is "tremendously anti-Marxist, but also a confirmed socialist".

When I asked her to consider the immediate future of civilization, she responded that she sees the world going sharply up or steeply down. She continued, "The selfish individualism of the West is much worse than when I was young. I think the Machine Age is coming to an end."

The afternoon passed quickly, and not wishing to overstay my welcome, I prepared to leave as the late summer sun faded behind the low-hanging, rain-swollen clouds. We embraced for a moment on the steps of the old farmhouse and when the affable doyenne waved goodbye, it seemed to beckon an incipient cloudburst. In spite of the downpour, I chose the cross-country route back to Penzance. Many thoughts accompanied me as I traversed past the Merry Maidens, along the coast near Mousehole. The heavy mist seemed to shroud the draconian world from me in a sense of kinship for the centuries of human presence on Land's End. Her last comment to me echoed in my mind: "I have a dream of trying to shape some way of living in this world." And I had the feeling her dream was fulfilled.

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