

Luck in the Russell Archives

by *Kenneth Blackwell*

DR. JO VELLACOTT (formerly Newberry) has written a comprehensive account (in her forthcoming book, *Stickleback*¹) of Russell's pacifist agitation in Britain during World War I. But no one has done extensive research into his agitation in the United States at that time. From almost the start of the war, Russell was interested in influencing American opinion. In the autumn of 1914 he even contemplated a visit to the U.S., including an interview with President Wilson. The plan was dropped when he learned that foreigners had to be presented at the Washington "court" by their ambassadors.²

In November 1914, Russell heard that his well-known letter to the *London Nation*, published 15 August under the heading "The Rights of the War",³ had been reprinted in the *New York Sun* by a Buffalo resident, a C. M. Baker whose relatives in England had sent the letter to him. Mr. Baker prefaced Russell's letter with the remark that it was evidence for Germany's contention "that England has played a double faced game in the European crisis". Another American, seeing the letter reprinted, wrote to Russell to ask if he still held to the views he had expressed so early in the war. All this Russell reported to Lady Ottoline Morrell in a letter postmarked 24 November 1914 (no. 1156), adding

I think of telling him it does [still represent his views], but, being written for English people, takes many things for granted; and that on the balance I am against the Germans. I should not make the emphasis the same in writing for neutrals.

¹ (London: Harvester).

² Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), p. 253.

³ Reprinted in Russell's *Autobiography, 1914-1944* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), pp. 42-43.

He later gave her the draft of his reply to the unnamed American. At the end of the draft there was a postscript from Russell to the effect that his correspondent could make any use of the letter that he wished.

In preparing a final draft of the bibliography of Russell's 1914 articles, I pondered the fact that Harry Ruja and I have no record of the letter being published. I had gone through a microfilm of the *Sun*, but had not found anything except the reprint of the *Nation* letter, which took place 11 October 1914. If only we knew who the unnamed American was, I thought, there would be a chance of locating him or his heirs, and among his papers might be an indication of where he presumably sent Russell's reply to be published. Now, it seemed that the American's letter was the sort Russell would have kept. I started looking in the Feinberg *Catalogue* for a "personal correspondent" whose correspondence with Russell began in 1914. Many interesting and unfamiliar letters later, the American's letter turned up. The man who told Russell about the reprinting of his *Nation* letter in the *New York Sun* was Mr. Chester A. Reed, of Boston. He remarked in his letter dated 12 November that "There is a constant effort on the part of Germany to capture American opinion by any means, fair or foul, and naturally, this letter written by a person of your reputation has not been without effect." Thus Russell felt constrained to explain that he was not a pro-German, and for this reason he took the trouble to reply to Mr. Reed.

Once I had found Reed's letter, I didn't have to go any further. On 26 February 1915, he answered Russell's reply. His five-page letter argued the case that England was "fighting the battle for civilization". Reed had not tried to publish Russell's letter. He could not make up his mind "whether American opinion would or would not become more favourably disposed toward England because of reading your letter of November 24th", and therefore retained it in his possession without taking further action. Russell did not continue the correspondence.

It is always disappointing to follow a good bibliographical lead to a negative conclusion—though any conclusion is better than none. Moreover, Russell's defence against the charge of pro-Germanism had remained unpublished. Without further delay, then, here is the letter which Reed thought might have had an undesirable effect on American opinion. It can now appear in the bibliography—but for the year 1978, not 1914.

Trinity College Cambridge. 24 November 1914.

Dear Sir

I am much obliged to you for drawing my attention to the reprinting, in the *New York Sunday Sun*, of my letter to the "Nation". I was not previously aware that it had been reprinted; and although I see nothing in it that I wish to retract, yet, since it is addressed to English readers, it takes for granted much that would need to be said in addressing the readers of a neutral country. It was not necessary, in an English journal, to emphasise the faults of the Germans: however real and great they may be, it might be assumed that we in this country were fully alive to them. Of our own shortcomings we are not so well aware. But this same lack of justice, in a much more intense form, has been displayed in Germany. It is a phenomenon almost unavoidably resulting from war, and enabling men to blind themselves to the horror of what they are doing: men's consciences are reconciled to war by their belief in the enemy's immeasurable wickedness.

I wrote as an advocate of peace, not as an advocate of the German Government, which I consider far [Russell first wrote "infinitely"] more to blame than the Government of England; I wrote as an advocate of humanity, not as a defender of the violation of Belgian neutrality and the devastation of Belgian towns and villages, which I consider an unspeakable crime; I wrote as an advocate of justice and truth, not as a friend to the German hysteria beside which our English hysteria seems almost an approach to sanity. In time of war, men forget that their enemies are human beings, and to all the more tangible horrors is added a fiery hatred which almost destroys the hope of a really stable peace hereafter. The only way in which this hatred can be lessened is to make men realize that they themselves are not blameless, and yet do not deserve the punishment which the enemy wishes to inflict. It is commonly assumed that, in a war, one side or the other must be in the right. Yet we do not make this assumption when men come to blows in private life, and we ought not to make it as between nations.

Now that war exists, I consider the victory of the Allies of great importance to mankind: the defeat of democracy and the triumph of the Bismarckian tradition would, I believe, postpone for a long time the political progress of civilization. And the participation of Turkey has made the issue even more clear. But I entertain no doubt whatever that the Allies will be victorious,

and I think the more pressing danger is that of their using victory for the humiliation of Germany, leaving an embittered craving for vengeance such as was left in France after 1870. All men sin; but the desire for the punishment of those whose sins are inconvenient to ourselves is not so noble or so humane a passion as we are apt to think. I believe that more wisdom and more understanding on the part of any one of the Great Powers now engaged in the war could have preserved the peace of Europe. And if a stable peace is to emerge, it is important that all the nations should realize this fact.

Yours faithfully

Bertrand Russell.

P.S. You are at liberty to make any use of this letter that you may think fit.⁴

The last paragraph, in particular, shows that even as early as 1914 Russell's political vision did not lack prescience.

The Bertrand Russell Archives

⁴From the manuscript in the Ottoline Morrell papers, Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin. Printed with permission.