

Keep the Peace

*Bertrand Russell
50 years on*

Tony Simpson

The author spoke at 'Beyond Remembrance – Pacifism in the aftermath of war 1919', the timely conference organised by Simon Colbeck at Friends House in London on 30 November 2019. This was the centenary of the convention to 'lay down' the No-Conscription Fellowship after its successful resistance to compulsion to fight and kill in the First World War.

Bertrand Russell died at home in North Wales on 2 February 1970. He was in his 98th year, and his last decade was as busy as any that went before. In September 1961, Bertie and Edith, his wife, together with some 30 others were imprisoned for refusing to bind themselves over to keep the peace for one year. This was days before a weekend of demonstrations scheduled for Holy Loch in Scotland, where US nuclear-armed Polaris submarines were due to be based, and in Central London on Battle of Britain Sunday, 17 September. Previous sit-down demonstrations in the capital had passed off peacefully, although hundreds were arrested and fined. In September, the pre-emptive summonses by the authorities, and subsequent imprisonment of an 89-year-old philosopher and his wife, ensured the demonstration the following Sunday attracted huge numbers. Peggy Duff, CND's redoubtable first general secretary, remarked that 'there was a feeling about the Square that day which I found later in Paris during May and June 1968 – a feeling of revolution, of real challenge.' Meanwhile, Bertie was incarcerated in Brixton Prison Hospital Wing, and Edith was receiving reports of what was happening in the Square from fellow prisoners in Holloway.

Brixton Prison was familiar to Bertie. He had been imprisoned there for four-and-a-half months in 1918, from early May until mid September. His offence was to suggest that US troops would be used as strike-breakers in Britain, a role to which they were accustomed at home in the United States. Bertie had also had an earlier encounter with the law, in 1916, over the so-called 'Everett' leaflet, which we shall come to later. First of all, he set the scene in

his own words in his *Autobiography*, drafted in the 1930s:

‘With the coming of 1916, the War took on a fiercer form, and the position of pacifists at home became more difficult. My relations with Asquith had never become unfriendly. He was an admirer of Ottoline’s [Morrell – Bertie’s lover] before she married, and I used to meet him every now and then at Garsington, where she lived. Once when I had been bathing stark naked in a pond, I found him on the bank as I came out. The quality and dignity which should have characterised a meeting between the Prime Minister and a pacifist was somewhat lacking on this occasion ...’

Bertie’s recollections inspire a striking scene in Michael Mears’ memorable play, *This Evil Thing*, about First World War conscientious objectors (see *Spokesman* 132). Russell continues:

‘Lloyd George, however, was a tougher proposition. I went once with Clifford Allen [Chairman of the No Conscription Fellowship] and Miss Catherine Marshall, to interview him about the conscientious objectors who were being kept in prison. The only time he could see us was at lunch at Walton Heath. I disliked having to receive his hospitality, but it seemed unavoidable. His manner to us was pleasant and easy, but he offered no satisfaction of any kind. At the end, as we were leaving, I made him a speech of denunciation in an almost Biblical style, telling him his name would go down in history with infamy. I had not the pleasure of meeting him thereafter.’

Bertie sets the scene for his work with the No-Conscription Fellowship:

‘With the coming of conscription, I gave practically my whole time and energies to the affairs of the conscientious objectors. The No-Conscription Fellowship consisted entirely of men of military age, but it accepted women and older men as associates. After all the original committee had gone to prison, a substitute committee was formed, of which I became the acting chairman. There was a great deal of work to do, partly in looking after the interests of individuals, partly in keeping a watch upon the military authorities to see that they did not send conscientious objectors to France, for it was only after they had been sent to France that they became liable to the death penalty. Then there was a great deal of speaking to be done up and down the country. I spent three weeks in the mining areas of Wales, speaking sometimes in halls, sometimes out-of-doors. I never had an interrupted meeting, and always found the majority of the audience sympathetic so long as I confined myself to industrial areas. In London, however, the matter was different ...’

The late Jo Vellacott, doyenne of Peace Historians and author of *Bertrand Russell and the Pacifists in the First World War*, remarked Bertie's 'short dry comments' about his activities during the First World War.

'His published writing from the period testified to his absorption with the social and political bases of peace and war, to the near exclusion, till 1918, of his philosophical interests ... None of this was sufficient to tell me what Bertrand Russell really did during the war, who were his companions, what were his day-to-day activities.'

So Jo set about discovering the answers to her implicit questions. The great break-through came at the Cumbria Archives when she sorted the papers of Catherine Marshall, organising secretary of the NCF. These complemented the papers Jo had found in the Russell Archives at McMaster University in Canada, where she lived, and elsewhere. In 2015, she wrote:

'Russell's first few months in the No-Conscription Fellowship had qualities which could not last, and could never be replicated. A particular kind of companionship comes when we work closely with a few others in a crisis situation, and Mephy (Russell's nickname), CA (Clifford Allen) and CEM (Catherine Marshall) had it in abundance during the early months of the implementation of the Military Service Act. Russell later forgot the intensity and the joy of the experience, but he left it on record in his letters to Ottoline Morrell.'

Jo had an ambivalent view of Russell. She recognised his courage, fortitude and creativity in opposing the First World War at some considerable personal risk. But she thinks he played a part 'in shrinking the picture of [Catherine Marshall's] work for the NCF, and distorting it'. That's a question for another day. Jo succinctly sums up the division of labour at the NCF office:

'In these early days, CA's role was to inspire, Russell's was to provide a name, to write letters and articles, to speak and to learn, CEM's was to organise, to provide knowledge of public personalities, to show how the system worked, and to be constantly on call. For Russell, she was in fact a mentor and a facilitator, enabling him to make use of his special gifts and providing the nitty-gritty of support. Russell appreciated her special skills and knowledge. These three called each other 'Comrade' and in their various roles rubbed along together informally and effectively, responding to crisis after crisis, until two

things occurred to change the balance and the interaction. The first was CA's imprisonment, predictable and indeed delayed for longer than could have been expected. The second was the formalisation of their roles; the old Political Associates' Committee was gone and Russell and Marshall became part of the formal structure of the NCF. At the end of 1916, both were candidates for the position of Acting Chair of the NCF; Russell took the position. She was still the one who best knew what needed to be done, but she tried to play the subordinate; he made a better administrator than he himself thought, but unconsciously retained some of the expectations normally attendant on his rank and position.'

Unsurprisingly, Bertie had his own take on his experience with the NCF. On Thursday 1 June 1916, he wrote to Ottoline, 'Ever since I got in with the NCF life has been full of happiness'. He relished tying the British authorities in knots. Two days earlier, a summons had been served on Russell 'for impeding recruiting and discipline' by the Everett leaflet. In April, the NCF had issued an anonymous leaflet written by Russell about the case of Ernest Everett, a pacifist schoolteacher, who had refused non-combatant service and been sentenced to two years' hard labour. On 4 May, two Welsh members of the NCF were fined £10 and jailed for one month for distributing the leaflet; shortly afterwards three other members were arrested for the same offence. Russell tried to force the authorities to act by writing to *The Times* (17 May) admitting his authorship of the offending leaflet. As Nicholas Griffin remarks in *A Pacifist at War*, the authorities 'held back, reluctant to give [Russell] any fresh publicity, until they were prompted by the Foreign Office which had reasons of its own for wanting Russell charged'. The Foreign Office wanted to prevent Russell travelling to the United States to take up an invitation from Harvard University to lecture for six months starting in February 1917. They feared he would speak against the War to those he would encounter at Harvard and elsewhere in the United States.

Russell was tried at the Mansion House in the City of London on 5 June, found guilty and fined £100 plus £10 costs or 61 days in jail. His appeal on 29 June was dismissed and he refused to pay the fine. Bailiffs seized his furniture and books and put them up for auction to pay the fine. His library was saved by a group of friends, organised by Philip Morrell, Ottoline's husband, who covered the fine and costs with a bid for the first lot. Russell made a good show at his trial, until the judge lost patience and shut him up. Subsequently, the NCF published *REX V BERTRAND RUSSELL, Report of proceedings before the Lord Mayor at the Mansion House Justice Room*, price 1p.

Russell's bouyant mood continued. On 10 July, he wrote to Ottoline saying

'... I see room for endless work on political theory. And it will have the advantage that it will involve seeing all sorts of people and getting to know all sorts of human facts – it won't leave half of me unsatisfied as abstract work does.'

Having lost America and probably Trinity, from membership of which he was subsequently dismissed, Russell expected to be 'very poor'. To earn some money, he planned public lectures in London on philosophical subjects. 'I feel I am on the threshold of life,' he wrote to Ottoline. 'The rest has been preparation — I mean as far as work is concerned. Quite lately I have somehow found myself. I have poise and sanity.'

In fact, the first lecture would be given in Manchester on 16 October, under the collective title 'The World As It Can Be Made'. In 1917 in America only, the lectures were published as *Political Ideals*. This formed one of a series of books on political theory that Russell wrote during these years. It was preceded in 1916 by *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, while *Roads to Freedom* was published in 1918. In these works, Russell tried to elaborate a political philosophy that would avoid repetition of the horrors of the First World War. He revisited this effort in 1934 when he published *Freedom and Organisation 1814-1914*, which was an 'attempt to trace the main causes of political change during the hundred years from 1814 to 1914'. At the end of this rather unnoticed work, Russell warned that 'the same causes that produced war in 1914 are still operative, and, unless checked by international control of investment and of raw material, they will inevitably produce the same effect, but on a larger scale'. Portentously, he concluded, 'it is not by pacifist sentiment, but by world-wide economic organisation, that civilised mankind is to be saved from collective suicide'.

Meanwhile, Russell's mood went up and down. By 1 September 1916, he was complaining to Ottoline that

'The effect of so much work is that I feel simply a machine, incapable of feeling — all poetry and all sense of beauty goes out of me, and I can't imagine doing anything for pleasure except rest ... The NCF work does not have the joy in it that it had, because all the vigorous and delightful people who used to be on the Committee are in gaol. I miss Allen terribly ... There is no fire or

enthusiasm left in me, only grim will. One must exist till the war stops, and then begin to live again.'

Some exhilaration returned when Russell encountered Constance Malleson, an assiduous NCF volunteer, who had the stage name Colette O'Neil. Their third meeting was on 23 September 1916 at a two day NCF Convention in London, where Russell was one of the main speakers and received a huge ovation. After dinner, Bertie stayed over at her flat in Bernard Street, near Russell Square, where they talked for hours. Soon they became lovers. Their relationship helped sustain Russell for much of the rest of the War, notwithstanding ups and downs, particularly when he was in prison. And they maintained regular contact until Bertie's death in 1970, when Colette sent Edith the red roses she always sent Bertie on his birthday.

But the War ground on, and life became harder for those in the NCF, until November 1918, when it came to a sudden halt. The Fellowship and its young men had succeeded in resisting conscription to fight and kill against their conscience, although it would not be 'laid down' until November 1919 as men continued to be imprisoned.

Fast forward to summer 1940, when Russell was living and teaching in California. He and his young family had already been in the United States for 18 months, so that he was cut off from direct contact with people in Britain. Germany had just invaded France and would quickly overrun the country's defences. On 13 May 1940, Russell wrote to Kingsley Martin, editor of the *New Statesman*:

'Ever since the war began I have felt that I could not go on being a pacifist; but I have hesitated to say so, because of the responsibility involved. If I were young enough to fight myself I should do so, but it is more difficult to urge others. Now, however, I feel that I ought to announce that I have changed my mind, and I would be glad if you could find an opportunity to mention in the *New Statesman* that you have heard from me to this effect.'

In June 1940, two day after the last Allied troops were evacuated from Dunkirk, Russell wrote to Emily Balch, who was later to win the Nobel Peace Prize for her work with the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, and with whom he had discussed the efficacy of withholding taxes as a means of promoting pacifism:

'... As for pacifism, since the war started I felt that, since it had broken out, the only hope for the world lay in the defeat of Hitler. On the whole, I no longer

believe that non-resistance would have preserved any of the values that Nazidom aims at destroying. The Nazis are so efficient, thorough, and technically intelligent, that any country they subdue is likely to be subdued mentally as well as physically. So there seems nothing to be done except to meet violence with violence. It is a dreadful conclusion, and something deep in me rebels against it; nevertheless I am forced to accept it.'

In the 1950s Russell concentrated his efforts on opposing the hydrogen bomb and the risk it would be used during the long Cold War between the Soviet Union and the United States. During the 1960s, in addition to opposing nuclear weapons, he campaigned determinedly against the war in Vietnam.

Now, we face climate catastrophe. Greta Thunberg has warned us. Our children contemplate extinction of species. Why bring children into such a world, they ask themselves. 'We're all gonna die,' says my 17-year-old son, partly in jest. 'Remember your humanity and forget the rest,' said Russell. 'The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge,' is the motto of the Bertrand Russell Society. These are general pointers to ways ahead in these difficult times. But they are not enough. We need much more.

Russell and Edith sat down in Whitehall in the 1960s. Greta sat down outside the Swedish Parliament a few years ago. Now, the whole world knows about the climate catastrophe, and millions go in the streets to signal their alarm. Knowing our history helps us to maintain our hopes and aspirations. Protest and survive!

Sources

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