



Bertrand Russell and Emile de Antonio on the train to North Wales

Bertrand Russell's Film Obituary that Never Was

Tony Simpson

Emile de Antonio wrote to Bertrand Russell, 'I hope our film can express some part of the wit, courage and intelligence that is the quintessential Russell'. This was one 'Tuesday' in 1965 – 'D', as he was known, didn't date his blue note. Unfortunately, no such finished expression was forthcoming, as D reluctantly quit the film project in November '66. What happened?

Looking back in 1972, after Russell had died, de Antonio remarked that he had asked the philosopher a question which 'I might have been reluctant to ask anyone else I've ever known: whether I could film his obituary while he was still living?' Russell apparently liked the idea and filming went ahead. Russell also invited D to become a director of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, which he duly did.

Emile de Antonio first met Russell at Hasker Street, Chelsea, where Russell lived when in London. 'He was extraordinary even then ...' D later wrote, 'and the British and American press were engaged in putting him down as gaga and senile primarily because of his effective campaign against our war in Vietnam'.

Mark Lane and Ralph Schoenman introduced D to Russell. Lane was already working with D on a separate film, *Rush to Judgment*, based on Lane's book of the same title challenging the official Warren Report on the murder of US President Kennedy in November 1963. The Russell Foundation helped finance the *Rush to Judgment* film.

Filming the Russell 'obituary' commenced at Hasker Street on Monday 22 November 1965 with D, Lane and Schoenman attending plus Richard Stark, a

(1965?)
TUESDAY

DEAR LORD RUSSELL -

I HAVE LONG ADMIRERD YOUR
WORK & THE SPIRIT WHICH
ANIMATES. OUR BRIEF
MEETINGS AT HASLER STREET

HAVE INCREASED THE ADMIRATION -
A RARE EVENT GIVEN THE DISTANCE
WHICH SEPARATES MOST MEN FROM
THEIR WORK.

I HOPE OUR FILM CAN EXPRESS
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SINCERELY,
Emile de Antonio

rich young American. Stark was 'initiator in London' for *Rush to Judgment*, according to D. Filming with Russell continued on Tuesday. On Wednesday, an agreement to make the Russell film was drawn up. On Thursday, filming moved to the train from London to North Wales via Birmingham. Thereafter, Russell was filmed at home at Plas Penrhyn, with cameraman Peter Whitehead and soundman Glyn Johns. These two subsequently had long and successful careers, particularly in the music industry. Subsequently, D was to say he stayed three weeks filming Russell in Wales.

D's questioning of Russell indicates his enthusiasm for his subject. On Tuesday in London, he commences the interview by asking Russell about his experiences in 1940 when he was appointed lecturer at City College of New York. Russell explains that he was appointed to the job but wasn't permitted to take it up, largely because of opposition from the churches. D pursues his line of questioning about Russell in America, asking about Russell's visit in the 1890s. He's interested in Russell's engagement in political action, contrasting Wittgenstein and Santayana, who were not so engaged. 'Is it simply a matter of temperament?' asks D. This line of questioning leads to how the Russell family was founded, and Bertie gives rather detailed replies about some of his ancestors, including the founder (John Russell, First Earl of Bedford, died 1555) who is 'out there with a beard ... a really fine beard'. The portrait evidently hung on the wall at Hasker Street.

Unlike some of Russell's other questioners, D listens carefully to Russell's replies and asks consequent questions.

Later, filming at Plas Penrhyn begins with Russell reading selected passages about the First World War, philosophy, and how 'the habit of thinking in terms of comparisons is a fatal one'. He then speaks off the cuff about Vietnam, the Warren Report, Shaw, D H Lawrence, and Orwell, who was a 'much more just man than either Shaw or Eliot'.

'What did Whitehead mean by process?' D asks Russell, pursuing his evident philosophical interests. This section ends with Russell reading 'some old people are oppressed by the fear of death ... the best way to overcome the woe ... is to make your interests gradually wider and more impersonal until bit by bit the walls of the ego recede and your life becomes increasingly merged in universal life'. Russell concludes, his voice full with emotion, 'I should wish to die while still at work knowing that others will carry on what I can no longer do, and content in the thought that what was possible has been done'.

Towards the end of the film transcript, in response to a direct question



from D, Russell gives his view of the war in Vietnam, citing terrible instances of brutality as well as the legal aspect ‘dominated by the conference in Geneva in 1954’ which ‘decided that Vietnam would be completely independent, completely free of any foreign troops whatever’ and that ‘the Americans from the very start ignored this decision completely and the Americans sent troops in after the French had withdrawn all their troops ...’ D links the discussion to the sit-down protests in London in 1961, saying ‘there is in America now, I think, a very strong if small protest against what is happening in Vietnam and I think many of the techniques used by American student groups and by Americans who are opposed to the war in Vietnam come from the movement which you helped to begin here, particularly the 1961 meeting ...’. He has in mind the sit-down protests in London and elsewhere against nuclear weapons and testing, initiated by the Committee of 100. Russell replies ‘well it was a very exciting time, but of course the final outcome was disappointing. People weren’t yet ready for a mass movement of protest ...’

D muses about his collaboration with Mark Lane: ‘the fact that he was a lawyer prejudiced me against him somewhat’. ‘Do you think all lawyers are wicked?’ asks Russell. ‘Almost all lawyers,’ D replies. ‘Mark Lane is one of the few who probably isn’t. Putting yourself for sale in a sense that whoever comes and pays you, you have got to defend them.’

Russell then pronounces on resistance:

‘... the whole question of resistance to authority and breaking of law and all that people make it a matter of principle, but I don’t think it is. I think it is a proper thing to do if you can bring it off and not if you can’t. We tried it on and we found it wasn’t coming off and we dropped it but there is no question of principle involved.’

The discussion then moves to poetry and Russell recites from memory Shelley’s ‘Ode to the West Wind’, while outside Plas Penrhyn the November light declines. ‘Do you want to put a log on the fire now, Bertie?’ asks Ralph. ‘Leave it,’ says D. ‘No, I will go and do it,’ says Russell.

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In his *Autobiography* (page 636 Routledge Classics 2010), Russell writes:

‘Those who wish to make up their own minds as to whether or not I am senile or even sillier than they had formerly believed me to be, have been given ample opportunity to do so as I have given countless newspaper and TV interviews and made several films.’

D evidently thought that Bertie was ‘extraordinary even then’. So why did he abandon the film. ‘I find it painful to be unable to conclude the film about you which I have begun,’ D wrote to Russell from New York in a letter dated 29 November 1966. ‘... I believe that the raw materials of the film, as now unedited, is (sic) of great value’. Later, in a letter dated 6 April 1967, D gave Schoenman his opinion of what should be done:

‘... there is film in the footage. I would proceed as follows: hire an intelligent, young, not terribly experienced film editor. Set up a cutting room, renting your own equipment. Under your direction start assembling the main areas you want in the film. Also, I do think the fact must be faced that too many people were asking questions ... If I were doing it now, I would choose one interviewer ... what I wanted to avoid was that fruity, BBC quality ...’

D had clearly given his Russell film much creative thought, notwithstanding that he insisted on being dissociated from it. These rather explicit directions have yet to be followed.

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* * *

Rather Cheap

An excerpt from the film transcript

- 21-9 Emile de Antonio How did it go, Lord Russell? How was the Russell family founded?
- 21-10 Lord Russell Well it was like this. A ship wrecked on the coast of Dorsetshire and it was obvious from their clothes that they were very grand people, but they could not speak a word of English and none of the natives that they talked to knew any of their language until they came to my ancestor, who had travelled on the Continent and he knew French And German, and so he talked to these people and found out that it was a son of the Emperor Charles 5th who was wrecked, and he enlisted my ancestor to act as his interpreter on the way to London to see the King. So when they got to London, my ancestor, who was I think the only shrewd member of the Russell family there has ever been, by this time gratiated himself with the Archduke and got himself recommended to the King and so he was given a job in England. Then presently the King died and Mary gave him a better job. Then Mary died and Edward VI gave him....no Edward VI it was first, of course, who gave him a better job....then Mary, and he accomplished the singular feat of getting a step up in the peerage, first by Edward VI and then by Mary – which was rather tight rope work.
- 22-1 Mark Lane But you had an ancestor, Lord Russell, that slipped off the tightrope!

- 22-2 Lord Russell Oh yes. That was William Lord Russell and, well, he was supposed to be implicated in the Rye House Plot. The family always say he wasn't but that I do not know. I have never gone into it but anyway the Rye House Plot was a plot to murder the King as he passed by the Rye House on his journey from Newmarket to London.
- 22-3 Emile de Antonio Was it like Dallas do you think?
- 22-4 Lord Russell What?
- 22-5 Emile de Antonio Was it like Dallas, Texas do you think?
- 22-6 Lord Russell Well, I do not know. No, that is a little....that is a moot point! And then after he was executed there was a revolution and his party came to power and his father was made Duke and that is how my father was made a duke. It was rather cheap.



William Lord Russell and Rachel, his wife