



*Bertrand Russell's own caption to this photograph:*

*I think I could turn and live with animals, they are so placid  
and self-contained,  
I stand and look at them long and long.  
They do not sweat and whine about their condition,  
They do not lie awake in the dark and weep for their sins,  
They do not make me sick discussing their duty to God,  
Not one is dissatisfied, not one is demented with the mania of  
owning things,  
Not one kneels to another, nor to his kind that lived thousands  
of years ago,  
Not one is respectable or unhappy over the whole earth.*

*Walt Whitman*

At the end of June, 1950, I went to Australia in response to an invitation by the Australian Institute of International Affairs to give lectures at various universities on subjects connected with the Cold War. I interpreted this subject liberally and my lectures dealt with speculation about the future of industrialism.

# Rainmaker

## Russell in Australia

Paola Totaro



*Paola Totaro is an Italo-Australian journalist based in London, former President of the Foreign Press Association in London, and Europe correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age, Melbourne. Her book on the sense of smell will be published in the UK in April 2022.*

When I was asked to read and write about Bertrand Russell's travels in Australia, I shared my excitement (and trepidation) on Facebook, eliciting a flurry of posts from Aussie friends. Many reminisced about their grandparents excitedly attending the great man's lectures or their parents shooshing their families to listen to him on radio. However, my favourite came from a much younger journalist colleague: 'Got time for a ramble tomorrow or will you be deep in Bertrand Russell? I've loved him since I got laid once by reading *In Praise of Idleness* in a Newtown pub as a teenager'.

I recount these posts not just to share the laugh but because, for me, they served to reinforce Russell's continuing, vivid, indeed vivifying presence in so many lives, even 150 years after his birth.

I began my immersion into his first and only foray to the antipodes just as the world's news media descended on Glasgow for the UN climate change conference. Russell's initial observation about Australia, one of the driest nations on earth, struck an immediate chord: 'A country of boundless possibilities', he said, with the caveat that a prosperous, fecund Australia would require 'a college of highly skilled scientists of various sorts, meteorologists, agronomists, nuclear physicist and so on, to be engaged permanently in a theoretical investigation of what is necessary to increase the fertile area of Australia'... 'It may be said that all the troubles from which the world is suffering are due to the fact that politics lags behind science and technique', he added.<sup>1</sup>

How potent (and poignant) to read his now seventy-year-old words at a time when

Australia, increasingly ravaged by catastrophic drought and bushfires, is still led by a government sceptical about the anthropomorphic origins and science of climate change.

The invitation to deliver a series of lectures ‘Down Under’ originated with Edward Clarence Dyason, a wealthy Australian mining engineer turned stockbroker instrumental in founding the Australian Institute of International Affairs (AIIA) in 1924. Dyason had lived abroad for many years but, in 1949, launched and funded an annual lecture tour by an overseas scholar in a bid to foster a greater understanding of Australia’s position in the world and bridge what he saw as a dangerous gap between wider society and academia.

Russell was well into his eighth decade when he embarked on the 33,000-mile air journey from London on June 19, 1950, with stops in seven cities before landing in Sydney three days later, on June 23. Reportedly exhausted, he still found the energy to conduct an impromptu press conference for the waiting press corps in Darwin before flying overnight to Sydney where, after just a couple of hours rest, he recorded a first talk for public broadcaster, the ABC, and a session with Movietone News. This first lecture was aired the following Sunday on the ABC’s flagship ‘Guest of Honour’ programme and its subject matter – apart from the need for science to find ways to make artificial rain — is discomfiting today, focusing as it did on the problems of keeping Australia for white men and the dangers of potential invasions from Asian neighbours. Biological racism was abhorrent to Russell, and he was avowedly pro intermarriage, but he didn’t question the White Australia policy throughout his tour, perhaps unaware of the bitter resentment it provoked among neighbouring Asian nations but most probably because it remained so much part of the country’s culture at the time. However, Nicholas Griffin, in a paper written in 1974, observed wryly that this address was unique among Russell’s Australian lectures in that it did not provoke the vociferous opposition of a clergyman.<sup>2</sup>

Briefing notes prepared by the AIIA before Russell arrived suggest that the tour’s organisers felt Russell had widespread name recognition in Australia but rather less was known about his public and intellectual activities. Several newspapers chose to run lengthy scene-setting comment pieces before his arrival including *The Sydney Morning Herald*, which published a remarkably informal interview with ‘the puckish old man with the halo of white hair, the comfortable pipe and face of a mischievous monk’ who told the correspondent he’d always thought of Australians as ‘being rather like Americans ... with more drive and self reliance than the

English'.<sup>3</sup> The correspondent responded, writing:

'It seems we shall all need all our drive and self reliance if we are going to achieve what Lord Russell is going to urge us to do... with a background theme of "Ferment in Asia", he is going to hammer on Australian anxieties and tell us they will probably come true unless Australia develops the north and populates to 50 million...'

It's important to remember that this was a time when Australia was starting to distance itself from Britain, beginning the slow and inexorable path towards the formation of a new national identity. The White Australia policy remained in force but, for the first time, the nation had opened its doors to large numbers of non-British migrants, including refugees from Eastern Europe. Nevertheless, while the population remained principally white, it was a period of high anxiety for Australians frightened by the Cold War and their geographical position and proximity to Asian neighbours, among them Japan and emerging communist countries such as China. The Australian Citizenship Act had only been enshrined into law the year before Russell's arrival while the Federal Government continued to try to foster closer economic, diplomatic, and cultural links with the United States.

Russell selected six broad topics for his Dyason lectures, chief among them his passionate and longstanding belief in the need for an over-arching world government to stop the outbreak of another war. He warned about the perils of communism and Russian Imperialism, the importance of science and investment in technology for development, and the need for youth to foster dynamic, fresh ideas in the new world.

In Sydney, the first lectures titled 'Obstacles to World Government' were delivered to capacity audiences and were followed by another three on the same theme, subtitled 'Race', 'Creeds, Culture and Ideology' and 'Food and Population'. 'Ferment in Asia' was delivered as a private talk to AIIA members and also exhorted the elimination of 'what remains of British, French or Dutch Imperialism'. A similar discourse which condensed the three 'Obstacles to World Government' lectures into one was delivered to Brisbane, Canberra, Adelaide and Perth audiences, apparently raising the odd eyebrow in some quarters about subject repetition.

In Melbourne, however, Russell delivered an entirely different programme and chose to focus his thoughts on 'Living in the Atomic Age', writing separate, wide-ranging forays exploring its effect on both

individuals and institutions. Throughout though, Russell returned regularly to his earliest observation that Australia's future lay in investment in science and technology to transform the continent's vast and parched interior into bountiful lands that could support construction of a new society. This ideal, seen through the lens of the British settler/pioneer who strived to tame and conquer nature via agriculture, did not recognise the long, successful, and symbiotic relationship between Australia's indigenous people and the land. At the end of his tour, however, Russell did speak pointedly and critically about public attitudes to Aboriginal people, observing that police and private citizens seemed 'unwilling to grant [them] elementary rights of justice', although these comments were not widely reported by the media.<sup>4</sup>

Russell had made a handful of modest demands before his arrival, including the need for two hours solitude each day, a preference for seeing the countryside, and an abhorrence for functions, prompting his hosts to try very hard to ensure official engagements didn't swamp his time. He was able to visit the spectacular eucalyptus forests and sandstone formations of the Blue Mountains region outside Sydney and sailed the city's splendid Harbour, spent a weekend in Central Australia, in Alice Springs, explored the magnificent, nearby McDonnell ranges and was struck by their red sands and rust-coloured mountains, and in Western Australia visited the remote gold mining town of Kalgoorlie. Australia would not figure large in his autobiography (and he was rather less flattering about the landscapes in letters to friends) although he mentioned the Snowy Mountains Hydroelectric Scheme, still one of the nation's most ambitious engineering, water transport projects.

In his talk 'Science Can Help Australia' he observed that, unlike America where abundant water and timber allowed pioneering individuals to forge successfully into the unknown, the taming of Australia's much more hostile rural environment could not be achieved without vast state intervention. Despite this, he noted that Australians' instinctive attitude to government is one of suspicion: 'He is more impressed by activities which the Government forbids than by those which makes it possible', comments most Aussies would agree are true to this day.

Writing two decades after the tour, Nicholas Griffin and, later, the Australian scholar, Jo-Ann Grant, both argued that despite the negative-sounding titles of many of Russell's Australian lectures, his thinking was imbued with great optimism and could perhaps even be seen as utopian. Indeed, much of his antipodean material would later be incorporated into a book titled *New Hopes for a Changing World*, proposed before the tour by his publisher, Sir Stanley Unwin. Grant observed that Russell was not

only motivated by the conviction that transforming Australia's largely dry landscape would boost the nation's farming potential but that it would also be a fundamental plank towards 'support of a new age of happiness and prosperity'.<sup>5</sup>

Troubled by overcrowding, industrial over-development, and continuing national, racial and ideological tensions in Europe, Russell seemed to envisage Australia as a place that offered a buoyant alternative where English culture, indeed western civilisation more generally, might be transplanted and, fed by the dynamism of youth, be given new life while also offering the poor fresh opportunity to improve their lot and flourish.

In the 1950s, Australia was 'riding high on the sheep's back', a period of inordinate economic growth, most of it thanks to the boom in primary industries. This idea of a science-led, pastoral utopia for Australia also underlined Russell's personal conviction of the link between notions of civilisation and land and the intrinsic social value held by environmental resources. '[He also] used this vision of the future to imagine a safe refuge for Western civilisation in case Europe was destroyed in a possible Third World War...' Grant wrote.<sup>6</sup>

Ironically, while Australia is often devastated by drought, Russell was dubbed 'The Rainmaker' by newspapers as his visit coincided with massive rainfall thanks to *La Niña*, a Pacific Ocean driven climate event seen every seven years or so.

The period leading into the Australian tour saw an intriguing evolution in Russell's intellectual and philosophical thinking and shift from relatively conventional defences of western Cold War military strategies to becoming an unapologetic dissenter, 'a true anti-nuclear prophet and sage'.<sup>7</sup> Equally, it was the time in modern history when science had shown itself to harbour as much potential for (nuclear) harm as good. Ever anxious about the potential for unlimited global conflict, one can only imagine how Russell must have greeted the news of an outbreak of war when, just two days into his nine-week lecture tour, North Korea invaded South Korea. (One wonders, too, how different the tour might have been had it occurred just a few years later when the Australian Government allowed nuclear weapons testing on its own soil.)

Russell's sense of apprehension in the early 1950s was probably also heightened as his travels to Australia and, three months later, to America, occurred during a period biographer Ronald Clark described as fraught with 'frequent physical upheaval and almost constant emotional strain'.<sup>8</sup> He had recently moved house from the peace and seclusion of North Wales to Richmond in south-west London, renovating to make space for his son,

John, daughter-in-law, Susan and their three, young daughters. He remained in the throes of an acrimonious break-up from his third wife, was involved in a relationship with a long-term love, Miriam Reichl, and would then renew his acquaintance with and, in due course, marry his fourth wife, Edith Finch. (A few years later, Russell's son and daughter in law announced they were leaving and left the three grandchildren to the care of their newly married, 80-plus year-old grandfather, a life chapter I found fascinating and entirely unimagined.) And yet the two years after his antipodean foray were extraordinarily prolific years in which Russell published two books, an astonishing 65 articles and essays, and revised and expanded what became the first two volumes of his autobiography.

In retrospect, Russell in Australia was treated more like a visiting political dignitary than a thinker and private citizen, meeting the acting Prime Minister, Arthur Fadden (Sir Robert Menzies was overseas on parliamentary recess), was received by the British High Commissioner, and granted an audience with the Governor General, William McKell. In a letter to a friend in London, Russell observed sardonically that the return home would be a 'come down'.

The public also responded to Russell with affection, acute interest and he appeared before capacity crowds over the full 60-day tour, on a couple of occasions forcing organisers to use loudspeakers to broadcast the speech to overflow audiences amassed in adjacent auditoriums. The AIIA kept records indicating more than 12,000 people heard him speak. Notes taken by a Victorian branch member on August 5 made me smile: 'He holds his audiences amazingly – practically no coughing, which is most unusual in Melbourne',<sup>9</sup> although press reports show that he wasn't received entirely uncritically either, managing to elicit the ire of both the Australian Communist Party for his 'Living in the Atomic Age' speech and the Catholic Church for his support of birth control. (Russell also locked horns with the Archbishop of Melbourne, Daniel Mannix, who wrongly accused him of being banned from the United States and was forced to issue a public apology.)<sup>10</sup>

As an expatriate (Italo) Australian in despair that my old home is being riven by a feverish culture war fuelled by powerful radio shock jocks and rabid, right-wing columnists, it seemed almost surreal to see how wider society was energised and excited by the arrival of a philosopher on tour. And it was a breath of fresh air to read just how hard Australia's editors vied for Russell to write for them. In fact, many articles were proudly billed as 'Exclusives' despite similar pieces being published in other capital cities under different headlines. In one, written almost as a farewell

– and headlined ‘I’d like to Be Born an Australian’ for Adelaide and ‘If I were young and Australian’ in Melbourne — Russell wrote almost mournfully of British and French culture being ‘infected with a certain weariness’ and its ‘deadening and depressing’ effect compared to the joys of living in a place where ‘visions of the future bring hope and vigour and happiness’. Australians, he warned, must be careful not to allow a ‘taste for uniformity’ or ‘humdrum mediocrity’ stymie the journey to future greatness. Men of creativity, he added, usually have something of the anarchic in their disposition, ‘men of whom their neighbours disapprove’. ‘If a country is to produce truly great individuals, it must add to the four freedoms a fifth – the freedom to be eccentric.’

In 2022, I don’t think I’d be alone in wishing this were so.

*Cold War Fears and Hopes 1950-52, The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell Volume 26, Edited by Andrew G Bone, Routledge, 2020*  
 1132 pages, hardback ISBN 9780049200920,  
 eBook ISBN 9781003104735, £250

## Notes

1. Andrew Bone, editor, ‘Guest of Honour’, Radio talk for the Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), June 23, 1950, in *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell 26*, (Routledge, Oxon New York) 2020 p8
2. Nicholas Griffin, ‘Russell in Australia’, (Russell: the Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies No 16 1974, Old series No 16 pages 1-12
3. No byline, ‘Bertrand Russell sends a message to Australia’, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, June 2, 1950 p2
4. Bone, editor, *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* ibid p120
5. Jo-Ann Grant, ‘Russell the Rainmaker: Touring in early Cold War Australia’, in *Russell: the Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies*, Volume 36, Issue 1, (2016), pp 65-90.
6. Jo-Ann Grant, ibid p 74
7. Bone, editor ibid xiv
8. Ronald Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (Jonathan Cape London) 1975, p 497 cited in *The Collected Papers* xvii
9. Bone, editor ibid xxvii
10. Bone, editor ibid pp 106-108