

The Last Survivor of a Dead Epoch

Bertrand Russell

Bertrand Russell outlived his allotted span in this 'auto obituary' penned in the particular style of a London newspaper of record.

◀ Russell in London in 1966 launching the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal

By the death of the Third Earl Russell (or Bertrand Russell, as he preferred to call himself) at the age of ninety, a link with a very distant past is severed. His grandfather, Lord John Russell, the Victorian Prime Minister, visited Napoleon in Elba; his maternal grandmother was a friend of the Young Pretender's widow. In his youth he did work of importance in mathematical logic, but his eccentric attitude during the First World War revealed a lack of balanced judgment which increasingly infected his later writings. Perhaps this is attributable, at least in part, to the fact that he did not enjoy the advantages of a public school education, but was taught at home by tutors until the age of 18, when he entered Trinity College, Cambridge, becoming 7th Wrangler in 1893 and a Fellow in 1895. During the fifteen years that followed, he produced the books upon which his reputation in the learned world was based: *The Foundations of Geometry*, *The Philosophy of Leibniz*, *The Principles of Mathematics*, and (in collaboration with Dr. A. N. Whitehead) *Principia Mathematica*. The last work, which was of great importance in its day, doubtless owed much of its superiority to Dr. (afterwards Professor) Whitehead, a man who, as his subsequent writings showed, was possessed of that insight and spiritual depth so notably absent in Russell; for Russell's argumentation, ingenious and clever as it is, ignores those higher considerations that transcend mere logic.

This lack of spiritual depth became painfully evident during the First World War, when Russell, although (to do him justice) he never minimized the wrong done to Belgium, perversely maintained that, war

being an evil, the aim of statesmanship should have been to bring the war to an end as soon as possible, which would have been achieved by British neutrality and a German victory. It must be supposed that mathematical studies had caused him to take a wrongly quantitative view which ignored the question of principle involved. Throughout the war, he continued to urge that it should be ended, on no matter what terms. Trinity College, very properly, deprived him of his lectureship, and for some months of 1918 he was in prison.

In 1920 he paid a brief visit to Russia, whose government did not impress him favourably, and a longer visit to China, where he enjoyed the rationalism of the traditional civilization, with its still surviving flavour of the eighteenth century. In subsequent years his energies were dissipated in writings advocating socialism, educational reform, and a less rigid code of morals as regards marriage. At times, however, he returned to less topical subjects. His historical writings, by their style and their wit, conceal from careless readers the superficiality of the antiquated rationalism which he professed to the end.

In the Second World War he took no public part, having escaped to a neutral country just before its outbreak. In private conversation he was wont to say that homicidal lunatics were well employed in killing each other, but that sensible men would keep out of their way while they were doing it. Fortunately this outlook, which is reminiscent of Bentham, has become rare in this age, which recognizes that heroism has a value independent of its utility. True, much of what was once the civilized world lies in ruins; but no right-thinking person can admit that those who died for the right in the great struggle have died in vain.

His life, for all its waywardness, had a certain anachronistic consistency, reminiscent of that of the aristocratic rebels of the early nineteenth century. His principles were curious, but, such as they were, they governed his actions. In private life he showed none of the acerbity which marred his writings, but was a genial conversationalist and not devoid of human sympathy. He had many friends, but had survived almost all of them. Nevertheless, to those who remained he appeared, in extreme old age, full of enjoyment, no doubt owing, in large measure, to his invariable health, for politically, during his last years, he was as isolated as Milton after the Restoration. He was the last survivor of a dead epoch.

B. RUSSELL

* This obituary will (or will not) be published in *The Times* for June 1, 1962, on the occasion of my lamented but belated death. It was printed prophetically in *The Listener* in 1936.