

# Adaptation

## An Autobiographical Epitome

*Bertrand Russell*

*Russell introduced his collection, Portraits from Memory, with this abstract. Writing during tense Cold War years in the mid-1950s, he surveyed his eight decades and highlighted the pivotal impact of the First World War. More than a decade of work and conflict lay ahead of him, and Russell retained his optimistic and constructive turn of mind.*

For those who are too young to remember the world before 1914, it must be difficult to imagine the contrast for a man of my age between childhood memories and the world of the present day. I try, though with indifferent success, to accustom myself to a world of crumbling empires, Communism, atom bombs, Asian self-assertion, and aristocratic downfall. In this strange insecure world where no one knows whether he will be alive tomorrow, and where ancient states vanish like morning mists, it is not easy for those who, in youth, were accustomed to ancient solidities to believe that what they are now experiencing is a reality and not a transient nightmare.

Very little remains of institutions and ways of life that when I was a child appeared as indestructible as granite. I grew up in an atmosphere impregnated with tradition. My parents died before I can remember, and I was brought up by my grandparents. My grandfather was born in the early days of the French Revolution and was in Parliament while Napoleon was still Emperor. As a Whig who followed Fox, he thought the English hostility to the French Revolution and Napoleon excessive, and he visited the exiled Emperor in Elba. It was he who, in 1832, introduced the Reform Bill which started England on the road towards democracy. He was Prime Minister during the Mexican War and during the revolutions of 1848. In common with the whole Russell family, he inherited the peculiar brand of aristocratic liberalism which characterized the Revolution of 1688 in which his ancestor played an important part. I was taught a kind of theoretic republicanism which was prepared to

tolerate a monarch so long as he recognized that he was an employee of the people and subject to dismissal if he proved unsatisfactory. My grandfather, who was no respecter of persons, used to explain this point of view to Queen Victoria, and she was not altogether sympathetic. She did, however, give him the house in Richmond Park in which I spent all my youth. I imbibed certain political principles and expectations, and have on the whole retained the former in spite of being compelled to reject the latter. There was to be ordered progress throughout the world, no revolutions, a gradual cessation of war, and an extension of parliamentary government to all those unfortunate regions which did not yet enjoy it. My grandmother used to laugh about a conversation she had had with the Russian Ambassador: she said to him, 'Perhaps some day you will have a parliament in Russia', and he replied, 'God forbid, my dear Lady John'. The Russian Ambassador of today might give the same answer if he changed the first word. The hopes of that period seem now a little absurd. There was to be democracy, but it was assumed that the people would always be ready to follow the advice of wise and experienced aristocrats. There was to be a disappearance of imperialism, but the subject races in Asia and Africa, whom the British would voluntarily cease to govern, would have learnt the advantage of a bi-cameral legislature composed of Whigs and Tories in about equal numbers, and would reproduce in torrid zones the parliamentary duels of Disraeli and Gladstone which were at their most brilliant at the time when I imbibed my dominant political prejudices. The idea of any insecurity to British power never entered anybody's head. Britannia ruled the waves, and that was that. There was, it is true, Bismarck, whom I was taught to consider a rascal; but it was thought that the civilizing influences of Goethe and Schiller would prevent the Germans from being permanently led into wrong paths by this uncivilized farmer.

It was true also that there had been violence in the not-so-distant past. The French in their Revolution had committed excesses which one must deplore, while urging, at the same time, that reactionaries had grossly exaggerated them and that they would not have occurred at all but for the foolish hostility of the rest of Europe to progressive opinions in France. It might perhaps be admitted also that Cromwell had gone too far in cutting off the king's head but, broadly speaking, anything done against kings was to be applauded — unless, indeed, it were done by priests, like Becket, in which case one sided with the king. The atmosphere in the house was one of puritan piety and austerity. There were family prayers at eight o'clock every morning. Although there were eight servants, food was always of

Spartan simplicity, and even what there was, if it was at all nice, was considered too good for children. For instance, if there was apple tart and rice pudding, I was only allowed the rice pudding. Cold baths all the year round were insisted upon, and I had to practise the piano from seven-thirty to eight every morning although the fires were not yet lit. My grandmother never allowed herself to sit in an armchair until the evening. Alcohol and tobacco were viewed with disfavour although stern convention compelled them to serve a little wine to guests. Only virtue was prized, virtue at the expense of intellect, health, happiness, and every mundane good.

I rebelled against the atmosphere first in the name of intellect. I was a solitary, shy, griggish youth. I had no experience of the social pleasures of boyhood and did not miss them. But I liked mathematics, and mathematics was suspect because it has no ethical content. I came also to disagree with the theological opinions of my family, and as I grew up I became increasingly interested in philosophy, of which they profoundly disapproved. Every time the subject came up they repeated with unflinching regularity, 'What is mind? No matter. What is matter? Never mind?' After some fifty or sixty repetitions, this remark ceased to amuse me.

When at the age of eighteen I went up to Cambridge, I found myself suddenly and almost bewilderingly among people who spoke the sort of language that was natural to me. If I said anything that I really thought they neither stared at me as if I were a lunatic nor denounced me as if I were a criminal. I had been compelled to live in a morbid atmosphere where an unwholesome kind of morality was encouraged to such an extent as to paralyse intelligence. And to find myself in a world where intelligence was valued and clear thinking was thought to be a good thing caused me an intoxicating delight. It is sometimes said that those who have had an unconventional education will find a difficulty in adjusting themselves to the world. I had no such experience. The environment in which I found myself at Cambridge fitted me like a glove. In the course of my first term I made lifelong friends and I never again had to endure the almost unbearable loneliness of my adolescent years. My first three years at Cambridge were given to mathematics and my fourth year to philosophy. I came in time to think ill of the philosophy that I had been taught, but the learning of it was a delight and it opened to me new and fascinating problems which I hoped to be able to solve. I was especially attracted to problems concerning the foundations of mathematics. I wished to believe that some knowledge is certain and I thought that the best hope of finding certain knowledge was in mathematics. At the same time it was obvious to me that the proofs of mathematical propositions which my teachers had

offered me were fallacious. I hoped that better proofs were forthcoming. Subsequent study showed me that my hopes were partly justified. But it took me nearly twenty years to find all the justification that seemed possible and even that fell far short of my youthful hopes.

When I had finished my student years at Cambridge, I had to decide whether to devote my life to philosophy or to politics. Politics had been the habitual pursuit of my family since the sixteenth century, and to think of anything else was viewed as a kind of treachery to my ancestors. Everything was done to show that my path would be smooth if I chose politics. John Morley, who was Irish Secretary, offered me a post. Lord Dufferin, who was British Ambassador in Paris, gave me a job at our Embassy there. My family brought pressure to bear upon me in every way they could think of. For a time I hesitated, but in the end the lure of philosophy proved irresistible. This was my first experience of conflict, and I found it painful. I have since had so much conflict that many people have supposed that I must like it. I should, however, have much preferred to live at peace with everybody. But over and over again profound convictions have forced me into disagreements, even where I least desired them. After I had decided on philosophy, however, everything went smoothly for a long time. I lived mainly in an academic atmosphere where the pursuit of philosophy was not regarded as an eccentric folly. All went well until 1914. But when the First World War broke out, I thought it was a folly and a crime on the part of every one of the Powers involved on both sides. I hoped that England might remain neutral and, when this did not happen, I continued to protest. I found myself isolated from most of my former friends and, what I minded even more, estranged from the current of the national life. I had to fall back upon sources of strength that I hardly knew myself to possess. But something that if I had been religious I should have called the Voice of God, compelled me to persist. Neither then nor later did I think *all* war wrong. It was *that* war, not all war, that I condemned. The Second World War I thought necessary, not because I had changed my opinions on war, but because the circumstances were different. In fact all that made the second war necessary was an outcome of the first war. We owe to the first war and its aftermath Russian Communism, Italian Fascism and German Nazism. We owe to the first war the creation of a chaotic unstable world where there is every reason to fear that the Second World War was not the last, where there is the vast horror of Russian Communism to be combated, where Germany, France, and what used to be the Austro-Hungarian Empire have all fallen lower in the scale of civilization, where there is every prospect of chaos in Asia and Africa, where the prospect of vast and horrible carnage inspired daily and

hourly terror. All these evils have sprung with the inevitability of Greek tragedy out of the First World War.

Consider by way of contrast what would have happened if Britain had remained neutral in that war. The war would have been short. It would have ended in victory for Germany. America would not have been dragged in. Britain would have remained strong and prosperous. Germany would not have been driven into Nazism, Russia, though it would have had a revolution, would in all likelihood have not had the Communist Revolution, since it could not in a short war have been reduced to the condition of utter chaos which prevailed in 1917. The Kaiser's Germany, although war propaganda on our side represented it as atrocious, was in fact only swashbuckling and a little absurd. I had lived in the Kaiser's Germany and I knew that progressive forces in that country were very strong and had every prospect of ultimate success. There was more freedom in the Kaiser's Germany than there is now in any country outside Britain and Scandinavia. We were told at the time that it was a war for freedom, a war for democracy and a war against militarism. As a result of that war freedom has vastly diminished and militarism has vastly increased. As for democracy, its future is still in doubt. I cannot think that the world would now be in anything like the bad state in which it is if English neutrality in the first war had allowed a quick victory to Germany. On these grounds I have never thought that I was mistaken in the line that I took at that time. I also do not regret having attempted throughout the war years to persuade people that the Germans were less wicked than official propaganda represented them as being, for a great deal of the subsequent evil resulted from the severity of the Treaty of Versailles and this severity would not have been possible but for the moral horror with which Germany was viewed. The Second World War was a totally different matter. Very largely as a result of our follies, Nazi Germany had to be fought if human life was to remain tolerable. If the Russians seek world dominion it is to be feared that war with them will be supposed equally necessary. But all this dreadful sequence is an outcome of the mistakes of 1914 and would not have occurred if those mistakes had been avoided.

The end of the first war was not the end of my isolation, but on the contrary, the prelude to an even more complete isolation (except from close personal friends) which was due to my failure to applaud the new revolutionary government of Russia. When the Russian Revolution first broke out I welcomed it as did almost everybody else, including the British Embassy in Petrograd (as it then was). It was difficult at a distance to follow the confused events of 1918 and 1919 and I did not know what to

think of the Bolsheviks. But in 1920 I went to Russia, had long talks with Lenin and other prominent men, and saw as much as I could of what was going on. I came to the conclusion that everything was being done and everything that was being intended was totally contrary to what any person of a liberal outlook would desire. I thought the regime already hateful and certain to become more so. I found the source of evil in a contempt for liberty and democracy which was a natural outcome of fanaticism. It was thought by radicals in those days that one ought to support the Russian Revolution whatever it might be doing, since it was opposed by reactionaries, and criticism of it played into their hands. I felt the force of this argument and was for some time in doubt as to what I ought to do. But in the end I decided in favour of what seemed to me to be the truth. I stated publicly that I thought the Bolshevik regime abominable, and I have never seen any reason to change this opinion. In this I differed from almost all the friends that I had acquired since 1914. Most people still hated me for having opposed the war, and the minority, who did not hate me on this ground, denounced me for not praising the Bolsheviks.

My visit to Russia in 1920 was a turning-point in my life. During the time that I was there I felt a gradually increasing horror which became an almost intolerable oppression. The country seemed to me one vast prison in which the jailers were cruel bigots. When I found my friends applauding these men as liberators and regarding the regime that they were creating as a paradise, I wondered in a bewildered manner whether it was my friends or I that were mad. But the habit of following my own judgment rather than that of others had grown strong in me during the war years. And as a matter of historical dynamics it seemed obvious that revolutionary ardour must develop into imperialism as it had done in the French Revolution. When I finally decided to say what I thought of the Bolsheviks my former political friends, including very many who have since come to my opinion, denounced me as a lackey of the *bourgeoisie*. But reactionaries did not notice what I said and continued to describe me in print as a 'lily-livered Bolshie swine'. And so I succeeded in getting the worst of both worlds.

All this would have been more painful than it was if I had not, just at that moment, had occasion to go to China where I spent a year in great happiness away from the European turmoil. Since that time, although I had occasional conflicts, they have been more external and less painful than those connected with the war and the Bolsheviks.

After I returned from China in 1921 I became absorbed for a number of years in parenthood and attendant problems of education. I did not like conventional education but I thought what is called 'progressive

education' in most schools deficient on the purely scholastic side. It seemed to me, and still seems, that in a technically complex civilization such as ours a man cannot play an important part unless in youth he has had a very considerable dose of sheer instruction. I could not find any school at that time that seemed to me satisfactory, so I tried starting a school of my own. But a school is an administrative enterprise and I found myself deficient in skill as an administrator. The school, therefore, was a failure. But fortunately about this time I found another school which had recently become excellent. I wrote two books on education and spent a lot of time thinking about it but, as anyone might have expected, I was better at talking than at doing. I am not a believer in complete freedom during childhood. I think children need a fixed routine, though there should be days when it is not carried out. I think also that, if a person when adult is to be able to fit into a society, he must learn while still young that he is not the centre of the universe and that his wishes are often not the most important factor in a situation. I think also that the encouragement of originality without technical skill, which is practised in many progressive schools, is a mistake. There are some things that I like very much in progressive education, especially freedom of speech, and freedom to explore the facts of life, and the absence of a silly kind of morality which is more shocked by the utterance of a swear-word than by an unkind action. But I think that those who have rebelled against an unwise discipline have often gone too far in forgetting that some discipline is necessary. This applies more especially to the acquisition of knowledge.

Age and experience have not had as much effect upon my opinions as no doubt they ought to have had, but I have come to realize that freedom is a principle to which there are very important limitations of which those in education are in a certain sense typical. What people will do in given circumstances depends enormously upon their habits; and good habits are not acquired without discipline. Most of us go through life without stealing, but many centuries of police discipline have gone into producing this abstention which now seems natural. If children are taught nothing about manners they will snatch each others' food and the older children will get all the tit-bits. In international affairs it will not be by prolonging inter-state anarchy that the world will be brought back to a tolerable condition, but by the rule of international law, which will never prevail unless backed by international force. In the economic sphere the old doctrine of *laissez-faire* is not now held by any practical men, although a few dreamers still hanker after it. As the world grows fuller, regulation becomes more necessary. No doubt this is regrettable. The world of the

Odyssey is attractive. One sails from island to island and always finds a lovely lady ready to receive one. But nowadays immigration quotas interfere with this sort of life. It was all very well for Odysseus, who was only one, but if a hundred million Chinese had descended upon Calypso's island, life would have become rather difficult. The broad rule is a simple one: that men should be free in what only concerns themselves, but that they should not be free when they are tempted to aggression against others. But although the broad rule is simple, the carrying out of it in detail is very complex, and so the problem of the proper limitations on human freedom remains.

Although I have been much occupied with the world and the vast events that have taken place during my lifetime, I have always thought of myself as primarily an abstract philosopher. I have tried to extend the exact and demonstrative methods of mathematics and science into regions traditionally given over to vague speculation. I like precision. I like sharp outlines. I hate misty vagueness. For some reason which I do not profess to understand, this has caused large sections of the public to think of me as a cold person destitute of passion. It seems to be supposed that whoever feels any passion must enjoy self-deception and choose to live in a fool's paradise on the ground that no other sort of paradise is attainable. I cannot sympathize with this point of view. The more I am interested in anything, the more I wish to know the truth about it, however unpleasant the truth may be. When I first became interested in philosophy, I hoped that I should find in it some satisfaction for my thwarted desire for a religion. For a time, I found a sort of cold comfort in Plato's eternal world of ideas. But in the end I thought this was nonsense and I have found in philosophy no satisfaction whatever for the impulse towards religious belief. In this sense I have found philosophy quite disappointing, but as a clarifier I have found it quite the opposite. Many things which, when I was young, were matters of taste or conjecture have become exact and scientific. In this I rejoice and in so far as I have been able to contribute to the result I feel that my work in philosophy has been worth doing.

But in such a world as we now have to live in, it grows increasingly difficult to concentrate on abstract matters. The everyday world presses in upon the philosopher and his ivory tower begins to crumble. The future of mankind more and more absorbs my thoughts. I grew up in the full flood of Victorian optimism, and although the easy cheerfulness of that time is no longer possible, something remains with me of the hopefulness that then was easy. It is now no longer easy. It demands a certain fortitude and a certain capacity to look beyond the moment to a more distant future. But



I remain convinced, whatever dark times may lie before us, that mankind will emerge, that the habit of mutual forbearance, which now seems lost, will be recovered, and that the reign of brutal violence will not last for ever. Mankind has to learn some new lessons of which the necessity is due to increase of skill without increase of wisdom. Moral and intellectual requirements are inextricably intertwined. Evil passions make men incapable of seeing the truth, and false beliefs afford excuses for evil passions. If the world is to emerge, it requires both clear thinking and kindly feeling. It may be that neither will be learnt except through utmost disaster. I hope this is not the case. I hope that something less painful can teach wisdom. But by whatever arduous road, I am convinced that the new wisdom which the new world requires will be learnt sooner or later, and that the best part of human history lies in the future, not in the past.

*Routledge recently published new print and electronic editions of Portraits from Memory, with a new Foreword by Nicholas Griffin, which highlights Russell's broadcasting career with the BBC.*  
*routledge.com*

