

Lord Russell's Obsessions

The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, Vol. III (1944-1969), *New York: Simon and Schuster, 1969. 339 pp. \$8.95.*

The following review was written just before Lord Russell's death at the age of ninety-seven years.

THE CHARACTER of Bertrand Russell as a writer and philosopher falls into a trident pattern. One prong represents his quality as a stylist. His prose is an admirable blend of conciseness, precision, and clarity—a clean, classical prose that is widely enjoyed and generally envied. Another prong represents his humanistic outlook, his view of the

past, present, and future of mankind, a view that cannot properly be described as idealistic and has never been uncritical. Lord Russell has long evinced a sensitivity toward men and their problems; also a fixed belief that the problems can and will be solved. He is not, however, a systematic philosopher; he is firmly atheistic and in the tradition of the eighteenth century *philosophes*. His ideas about what is and is not humane and about the solution of human problems have of necessity been subject to considerable modification throughout his extraordinarily long life. The delineation of these ideas is a task that defies brief statement, although Lord Russell sometimes commits the mistake of attempting one. The third prong, and the tall central one, has been his hitherto steadfast devotion to the pursuit of truth and the ordering of his thoughts and his life's activities and aims according to his perception of the truth.

The earlier portion of this third volume of his autobiography continues to validate his reputation for literary excellence, though the latter sections barely sustain it. A large part of the book is tendentious and lacking in depth and a balanced consideration both of fundamental concepts and of certain factual situations of large import. It may be that Lord Russell feels that his other voluminous and widely read works make unnecessary much, if indeed any, restatement of his premises and the arguments he has derived from them, but in the present volume they become implied assumptions that do not obviously support the conclusions he has drawn or the causes and social procedures he has so passionately espoused in his later years. Hence this final opus is unlikely to persuade many besides those who are predisposed to agreement with him. The absence here of adequate premises and connecting argument is unfortunate, because it indicates a lack of respect for the considered contrary opinions of others. What we are dealing with, then, is mainly a vehicle for propagandizing some of the crotchets and controversial ob-

jectives of Lord Russell's old age which are contrary to the style and substance of the works that earned for him his reputation as a sound thinker and master of lucid expression. The inconsistencies between Lord Russell's earlier principles and his present fanatical views and activities (they cannot, with due regard to the accuracy of language, be otherwise described) are many and striking. One example is his insistence, regardless of any contrary considerations, that nationalistic wars must cease and on his own formula for bringing them to an end. He considers the United States the chief of all offenders against peace and therefore the chief obstacle to the realization of his aim. In short, this man, who for so long extolled the virtues of moderation and the open mind, has become altogether immoderate and adamant and consistently violates the first commandment of his own *Liberal Decalogue*: "Do not feel absolutely certain of anything."

Volume III of the *Autobiography* does little either to brighten or to tarnish the second of the lesser prongs of Lord Russell's trident, provided one can accept his views of the basic realities of life and of how life is best to be lived, or can at least suspend judgment concerning them. His empathy for mankind is movingly expressed in the last paragraph of the book, but this brief generalization of his good wishes for man and hopes for his future does nothing to reassure us that Lord Russell's prescriptions are the best means for the realization of those hopes. The long, central prong of the trident, alas, is considerably bent. Even a less than closely critical reading must raise many serious questions about how accurately Lord Russell has understood the fundamental realities that most forcibly affect our lives and how rationally he has related them to the needs and welfare of the human race. The multitude and variety of this active man's interests over so long a life span ought not to obscure his guiding credo, which is that all the adverse and unhappy circumstances of the human condition are avoidable. "All these are unnecessary. In

the regard to all of them means are known by which they can be overcome." His prescriptions are equally simplistic and doctrinaire. The core of the difference between Lord Russell and his critics may not be so much that he is an atheist and materialist, basing his simplistic remedies on materialist dogmatism, as that he is not much of an evolutionist and that he disregards the evidence of anthropology. According to that evidence, he has misunderstood the nature of man and therefore his syllogistic recipes for man's survival and happiness are unlikely to avail.

One of the quirks of Lord Russell's mind and personality in old age is his radical bias against the United States and its people as well as against the policies and programs of our government. Though he goes through a ritualistic denial of prejudice or animus, he has in recent years been almost solely occupied in bitter and violet denunciations of all our activities in Vietnam and elsewhere. One of his contentions, nowhere documented, is that we are guilty of deliberate, repeated, massive, and unconscionable atrocities. Despite the furor (at this writing) over certain purported "massacres," one may doubt the validity of Lord Russell's assertions. Moreover, by reading only Lord Russell, one would never suspect that the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese are not entirely circumspect and chivalrous in their behavior. When armed forces are engaged in protracted guerrilla warfare over heavily inhabited areas, and where civilians become the pawns and prizes of the contending forces, it is folly to suppose that either side will be meticulous about never inflicting injury on those who appear to be, but sometimes may not be, innocent noncombatants. All wars are cruel and bloody, as we should be able to recognize without Lord Russell's emotional indictments. Most of us recognize that the kind of fighting that characterizes the war in Vietnam tends to brutalize all who for long participate in it; but to say that the record of the American forces in Vietnam proves our people to be especially brutal,

vicious, and insensible to human suffering (which is the only conclusion that would justify Lord Russell's fanatical bias against us) is quite another matter, and there is nothing to support Lord Russell's vituperative accusations.

Throughout the middle and later sixties Milord Russell was much too preoccupied with his American guilt phobia to notice how frequently the milk of human kindness has been diluted in those years by other nations than ours. He makes no mention of the Nigerian-Biafran barbarism and slaughter, for the commencement and continuation of which Great Britain has been as much or even more responsible than are we for the tragedies in Vietnam. There is not a word about the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, or about the grim conflict in the Middle East, or about the mass violence in China under the name of Cultural Revolution, or about the savagery and intransigence of the North Vietnamese; but he finds plenty of room to pontificate about events within the United States and to pass judgments in matters about which, presumably, he is no better informed than the rest of us. Thus after reading of the assassination of President Kennedy and "the purported evidence against Oswald and his shooting by Ruby," he decided that "probably something very nasty was being covered up." After meeting Mark Lane, author of *Rush to Judgment*, he was confirmed in his suspicions and hurried into his customary propaganda procedure by organizing a "Who Killed Kennedy?" Committee. It is perhaps true that relatively few Americans are entirely satisfied with the official, or Warren Commission, version of the assassination; but that is beside the point. The point is that Lord Russell, who by his own protestations was chiefly concerned throughout this period with the threatened extinction of all mankind, devotes fourteen pages to the Kennedy assassination and not one to any of the evils here mentioned for which Americans were in no way responsible.

Then there is Lord Russell's astonishing

verdict on the Cuban missile crisis: that our position and actions were criminal acts against mankind and those of the Russians generously humane! The mystique by which Lord Russell arrived at this and other judgments eludes me, but it is neither impertinent nor chauvinistic to resent them and to question whether he is any longer the man of broad objective vision that he once was, or has been deemed to be. The rigidity of Lord Russell's fixations and the ferocity with which he acts upon them must be dismaying to all Americans except the most ardent one-worlders and the most extreme opponents of the Vietnam war. For the organizers of protest marches, demonstrations, and moratoria this book will doubtless afford much satisfaction and provide much lethal ammunition. The rest of us will feel indignation and alarm; also, perhaps, sorrow that an intellect once so greatly respected has now shown itself to be in a degenerated and fossilized condition.

Reviewed by DEAN TERRILL