Poor Bertie

Jonathan Rée

In the dark midwinter of 1916, Londoners had an unusual opportunity to see radical philosophical principles applied to the urgent issues of the day. The peace campaigner and feminist C.K. Ogden had hired the Caxton Hall for a series of eight weekly lectures on politics, to be given by Bertrand Russell. It was a risky venture, both financially and intellectually. Russell was a small-voiced weedy-looking man; although he was still in his early forties, he was grey-faced and grey-haired, and wore old-fashioned dark clothes. The fact that he was also a philosopher and mathematical logician and Fellow of the Royal Society was not guaranteed to compensate for his inexperience as a public lecturer on politics.

The monumental *Principia Mathematica* (written with A.N. Whitehead) had been published in three huge volumes between 1910 and 1913, but, as Russell knew, very few people could understand it, and most of them lived in France, Poland or Germany anyway. On the other hand, its sheer impenetrability could give Russell (like Einstein a little later) a bankable reputation as a symbol of absolute braininess. Russell himself, though, was haunted by doubts (he had been shaken by Wittgenstein's criticisms); and in any case he thought he had lost his capacity for doing original work in logic. So with Ogden's help, he was going to launch himself on a new career, earning his living as a freelance political commentator rather than a mathematician and fellow of a Cambridge college.

He had dabbled in politics before of course; indeed he had been brought up political, in the home of the great Victorian reforming prime minister, Lord John Russell, who was his grandfather. And in 1896, when he was 24, he had published a book about revolutionary socialism called *German Social Democracy*. His experiences as a political tourist in Germany and his interviews with Liebknecht and Bebel had led him to fear that the nascent Marxist movement might eventually prove as violent, repressive and illiberal as the Bismarckian state itself, and the young Russell's conclusion was that the only hope for 'common justice and common humanity' was some kind of synthesis between liberalism and socialism.

Just a century later, the young Russell's view of the prospects of Marxist politics may appear far-sighted; but it was not deeply considered and he attached little importance to it. He was determined to devote his attention to mathematical logic instead, and to founding a British tradition of 'logical analysis' which would at last bring 'scientific method' to bear on the problems of philosophy. He interrupted himself briefly in 1907, to stand for the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies in a parliamentary by-election in Wimbledon. (He won a remarkable 3,000 votes, compared with 10,000 for the Tory.) He also took an interest in Fabian and Liberal affairs, though his involvement took the form of supper parties with Beatrice and Sidney Webb or the philosophical prime minister Arthur Balfour, rather than rubbing shoulders with a broad political public.

But by the end of 1914, apart from feeling burnt-out as a logician, Russell was galvanized into action by the Great War – or rather, not so much by the war itself as by the bloodthirsty relish with which it was welcomed by the people of Britain. He soon became an activist in the Union for Democratic Control and the No-Conscription Fellowship, and in 1915 took a period of leave from Cambridge to pursue his political activities, and prepare for the Caxton Hall lectures in January 1916.

'I have something important to say on the philosophy of life and politics,' Russell thought; 'something appropriate to the times.' He needed to present an account of the origins of war in general, an attack on the war then being waged against Germany, and a sketch of the prospects of socialism, liberalism and feminism; and it all had to be permeated by the authority of a great logician. Russell was naturally nervous; but in the event he was pleased with the response:

> My lectures are a great success – they are a rallying-ground for the intellectuals, who are coming daily more to my way of thinking.… All sorts of literary and artistic people who formerly despised politics are being driven to action, as they were in France by the Dreyfus case.… In philosophy, when I was young, my views were as unpopular & strange as they could be; yet I have had a very great measure of success. Now I have started on a new career, & if I live & keep my faculties, I shall probably be equally successful.

The audience included nearly all the members of the Bloomsbury group. Even Lytton Strachey – who had long ago come to the conclusion that Russell was a ridiculous threadbare remnant of Victorian worthiness, and a 'poor man' who 'looks about 96' – described the lectures as 'a wonderful solace and refreshment'. Although feeling 'nearer the grave than usual', Strachey would drag himself to the 'ghastly Caxton Hall' every Tuesday afternoon, to hear what Russell had to say. 'One hangs upon his words', he wrote; 'it is splendid the way he sticks at nothing – Governments, religions, laws, property, even Good Form itself – down they go like ninepins – it is a charming sight!'

The 'utterly immoral' Ottoline Morrell was impressed as well, though her sense of the ridiculous did not desert her.

> All the cranks who attend lectures on any subject were there, and amongst them was a Captain White, who was slightly crazy, and would make a long speech about sex and free love, pointing out that if children were born from parents who were in love with each other they would never want to fight.… Then Vernon Lee got up and made a long speech about a cigarette case, waving her hands about …; and of course, a representative of Arts and Crafts made an impassioned harangue. Bertie sat looking miserable on the platform. At last he had to ask them to sit down.

Altogether, Lady Ottoline found the lectures 'rather a comic occasion'. But about a hundred people turned up to each one, paying three shillings a lecture, or one guinea for the whole course. Russell and Ogden both scooped a satisfactory profit, and by the end of it Russell had settled his destiny as the most celebrated public British intellectual of the twentieth century. (Only four years later, he would be welcomed in China as 'the greatest social philosopher of the world'; even Mao Tse-Tung, in his mid-twenties, turned up to admire him.)

The lectures themselves were published a few months later as *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, and Russell came to regard them as the 'least unsatisfactory' of all his political works. But it is quite hard to see, reading them today, what all the excitement was about. Political problems of all kinds, as Russell saw it, sprang from a single conflict: the battle between 'the impulses that make for life' and those that 'make for death'. His main argument was that 'traditional Liberalism' was breaking down because it lacked a proper appreciation of psychology, and could not comprehend the fact that social processes are governed not so much by rational calculation as by 'the instinctive part of our nature'. In particular, it could not see that war was an outgrowth of 'ordinary human nature', or that the only way to prevent it in future was to engineer a 'fundamental reconstruction of economic and social life'.

The social revolution proposed by Russell was to be grounded in the principles of syndicalism and co-operation, combining all the benefits of socialist equality, industrial prosperity, and liberal freedom. But Russell did not enter into any analysis of political or economic trends, because so far as he was

concerned the key obstacles to progress were not faulty social structures, or the vested interests of those who benefited from them, but the outmoded superstitions and irrational beliefs that still gave sustenance to the instincts of death and destruction.

Religion, for instance, despite its incidental beauties, always 'steels the hearts of men against mercy and their minds against truth', so what was needed was not so much economists as atheistic iconoclasts, who could destroy the last vestiges of belief. Nationalism, too, was 'noble, primitive, brutal and mad', and what was needed was not sociologists but forthright rational humanitarians, who could face down the primitive instincts of the herd. What was needed, in short, was logicians, but logicians who also understood the 'insinctive' side of life. What was needed, for example, was Bertrand Russell.

Philip Ironside's *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell** is a work of contextualizing intellectual history which explains many of the peculiarities of Russell's conception of politics. Ironside charts, for instance, his fluctuating estimate of the relative importance of 'reason' and 'instinct', connecting it with his wish to ingratiate himself with an artistic elite – Berenson, the Cambridge Apostles and Bloomsbury. He also highlights some more surprising elements in Russell's political complexion – his ferocious support of British imperialism in the Boer War, his indifference to New Liberalism, and his standing obsession with racial degeneration – which now make him seem far more reactionary than he appeared to his audience at the Caxton Hall.

But Russell's converts in 1916 were utterly enchanted by his insouciant philosophical way with politics. Some of the younger ones, according to Ironside, 'seriously discussed the possibility of making him Prime Minister' – which suggests that they shared Russell's rather sketchy approach to the machinery of political power. Ironside also explains a range of other influences, from the British Idealists' conception of the state as a moral force, which he found utterly repellent, to the theory of instinct as elaborated in the early stages of English Freudianism, which he found attractive, and the wild irrationalism of D.H. Lawrence, about which he came to have reservations. In the 1920s, though, he ran out of steam and began to follow the agenda set by Wallas, Cole, Laski and Wells, concerning eugenics, land tax and guild socialism, though he also had a very congenial proposal of his own, for what he called a 'vagabond's wage' – a basic income to be paid to all who chose to sacrifice the comforts of social respectability and lead a bohemian life of philosophy, art and innovation, thereby sustaining 'a much-needed element of light heartedness which our sober, serious civilisation tends to kill'. In 1931, though, Russell gave up on vagabonds: on the death of his brother, he became an earl – and a very sober and serious Labour peer. As Beatrice Webb said after she heard the news: 'poor Bertie; he has made a miserable mess of his life and he knows it.'

Ironside seeks for some consistent doctrine at the heart of Russell's political thought, and comes up with the surprising but – when you think about it – quite plausible suggestion that, with his constant harping on 'life' and 'creativity', Russell belongs 'in that line of English cultural criticism which extends forward through the influence of Leavis and *Scrutiny* and backward to Arnold'. But so far as Russell's concrete political views are concerned, Ironside concludes that they were in a permanent muddle. He oscillated between dull Fabian gradualism and crazy bohemian impossibilism: as Ironside perceptively puts it, Beatrice Webb and D.H. Lawrence marked 'the boundaries of Russell's eclecticism in much the same way as Bentham and Coleridge had provided Mill's'.

There are plenty of gaps in this account, however, and Ray Monk's excellent biography** does a lot to fill them. *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude* is an attempt to repeat the success of Monk's marvellous *Ludwig Wittgenstein: The Duty of Genius* (1990), which managed to integrate lucid explanations of the philosophical issues that troubled Wittgenstein into a fascinating account of his daily life. Russell poses a far bigger problem for his biographer, however. Wittgenstein – as Monk showed – concentrated all his energy on making himself into a supremely fastidious genius: writing was a slow torture for him, and he was assiduous in destroying all traces of imperfection. Russell's life, by contrast, was determinedly multi-track, and he never threw things away. And his literary productivity is one of the wonders of the world: he published seventy books or more, including a three-volume *Autobiography.* Monk calculates that

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*Philip Ironside, *The Social and Political Thought of Bertrand Russell: The Development of an Aristocratic Liberalism*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1995. 280 pp., £30.00 hb., 0 521 47383 7.

**Ray Monk, *Bertrand Russell: The Spirit of Solitude*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1996. xx + 695 pp., £25.00 hb., 0 224 03026 4.

he wrote an average of two or three thousand words a day, throughout his ninety-seven years. He worked, it seems, all the time: sometimes on pure philosophy; sometimes on political theory and agitation; and sometimes – rather a lot of the time, in fact – on himself and his affairs with women.

Faced with these mounds of Russelliana, a biographer might be tempted to recount Russell's activities in a multiple narrative, like Doris Lessing's *Golden Notebook* perhaps: a red book for politics, a white book for philosophy, and a blue one for sex. But it would be hard to cap them all with a golden book that would bring his lives together: they were essentially separate, it seems, and Russell never threw himself wholeheartedly into one field of activity unless he was in full flight from the other two. So Monk has taken the sensible course of presenting Russell's activities side-by-side in an episodic day-to-day story. And although he has kept his focus quite narrow – most of his sources are Russell's own writings, or those of Russell's friends – this volume, though it looks like a doorstep, only gets up to 1920: the forests must still be saplings that will bring us Russell's remaining half century in the second volume.

Monk has been extremely selective all the same. He gives far less attention to philosophy than he did in his book on Wittgenstein, and within Russell's strictly philosophical output he ignores most of the work on knowledge, sense-data and reality – issues that bulked large in works like D.F. Pears's *Bertrand Russell and the British Tradition in Philosophy* or A.J. Ayer's *Russell*. (It would be interesting to know whether Monk would accept that Russell's epistemology is so hopelessly misconceived as to hold no interest at all.) But Monk gives beautiful explanations of Russell's logical achievements in *Principia Mathematica* and the 1905 essay 'On Denoting', which he regards as 'his undoubted philosophical masterpiece'. (This leaves Russell sixty-five years in which to go downhill, and Monk understandably avoids the question as to whether there is anything worth preserving in Russell's logic that had not been done already, and rather better, by Frege.)

But the ordinary sensual reader cannot put up with very much mathematical logic. Like Russell himself, in fact, we are glad to take a break after a few pages, and Monk, a gifted storyteller, unfailingly gives us what we want. After learning a bit about Russell's stupendous cruelty to his first wife, however, or the clumsy manipulativeness of his intrigues with Ottoline Morrell (who could look after herself) and of numerous insignificant others (who unluckily could not) we are glad to turn away again – as Russell did too – with a rekindled passion for logic.

Monk is unable to find much connection between the logic and the love in Russell's daily life, except that each had the attraction of not being the other. But when it comes to Russell's political evolution, the integrated biographical approach becomes more illuminating. Ironside has expounded Russell's belief that political questions are basically a matter of psychology, especially the psychology of 'life instincts' and 'death instincts', and he follows the *Autobiography* in describing how, in the period just before he wrote *Principles of Social Reconstruction*, Russell discussed these matters with D.H. Lawrence, and even contemplated some literary collaboration with him.

But as Monk shows, in the most gripping section of his book, there was rather more to it than that. Lawrence had met Ottoline Morrell early in January 1915, responding to a fan letter which had delighted him as coming from an 'aristocrat'. At that time he was elaborating a 'gospel' – a Germanic 'philosophy', he hoped – which was going to escape from the past and institute a 'new life' on earth. Lawrence told Lady Ottoline that 'every strong soul must put off its connection with this society, its vanity and chiefly its fear, and go naked with its fellows, weaponless, armourless, without shield or spear.' She was mildly entertained by such talk, until Lawrence announced that she herself was to become the 'nucleus' of a prefigurative community of love, and indeed that it should be established at once in her estate at Garsington, just outside Oxford. Perhaps it was sheer mischief on her part, but she then told Lawrence that she knew a man who would be interested in helping him with his schemes: Bertrand Russell.

Lawrence was excited by the thought of collaborating with Russell ('the Philosophic – and Mathematics man,' he mused, 'a Fellow of Cambridge University – F.R.S. – Earl Russell's brother'), and when they met he immediately won the heart of the great logician. 'He is infallible', Russell said after their first meeting; 'he sees everything and is always right.' Lawrence sent him a long letter proposing a socialist revolution, starting with 'the nationalising of all industries and means of communciation, & of the land, in one fell blow.' (That should 'solve the whole economic question', he said.) He was under the impression that he and Russell had sworn *Blutbrüderschaft* in the name of the new order, and by May they were planning to give a joint lecture series, Russell dealing with 'Ethics', Lawrence with 'Immortality'. Russell said that the unifying theme of the series would be the idea that

existing institutions are 'a prison for the infinite in us', and Lawrence envisaged the lectures being presided over by Ottoline Morrell, whose task would be to keep him and Russell striving 'towards the Eternal thing'. After all, as Lawrence observed with entreating urgency, 'We *mustn't* lapse into temporality.'

No indeed. By July, Lawrence was spelling out the details of socialism to his philosophical blood-brother. The state must be all-powerful; in fact it ought to become an object of worship; and of course 'there must be a ruler: a Kaiser: no Presidents & democracies.' There should also be a clear political division between the sexes, with a 'Dictator' to control the 'industrial side of the national life', and a 'Dictatrix' to command 'things relating to private life'. When, after a few months, Russell at last began to quibble with some of these opinions, Lawrence savaged him in a monstrously wounding letter, and abandoned him and Ottoline Morrell as 'traitors'. It was then that the unhappy Russell started work on the Caxton Hall lectures, whose emphasis on a timeless psychology of instincts, we can now see, was a response to Lawrence's precocious National Socialism, as well as to the horrors of the Great War and Russell's need for a role.

But the main thing in this biography is the sex, or rather the business surrounding it. Monk's life of Wittgenstein has been praised for the restraint and delicacy with which it described Wittgenstein's intimate life; but then, Wittgenstein left his biographer with practically no material to be indelicate with. The Russell archives, carefully tended at McMaster University in Ontario, are a very different matter, and the result is that Monk has had to spend a lot of time sorting out the ups and downs of Russell's well-documented penile career. But even those who dote on revelations about illicit love affairs will be slightly disappointed by this saga. We may experience a little elation the first few times Russell is exposed as a self-righteous old goat, a liar and two-timer; but the pleasure does not increase with repetition. Compared with other earls or other logicians, Russell's sexual experience may have been quite wide; but compared with most ordinary human beings, it was numbingly boring. It is not just that he was more interested in the hunt, so to speak, than the kill, but that his top priority always seems to have been to give it verbal expression, so as to avoid at all costs the prudish secretiveness associated with 'Victorianism'. His obsession with putting sex into words – plain ones or flowery, and many of them – is a striking confirmation of Foucault's famous paradox: that the advocates of free love and libidinal liberation were prisoners of the 'repressed' conceptions of sexuality from which they imagined they had escaped. Sex, in Russell's opinion, was an 'instinctive impulse', a base bodily function which, unluckily, may sometimes pester us importunately, like a raging tooth or a bursting bladder. It never seems to have occurred to him that sexual experience might focus on the bodies of other people instead of the efficient gratification of one's own needs. As the inexhaustible Ottoline Morrell noted, he habitually complained that his lovers were selfish, because they would not sacrifice themselves entirely to him: 'He is intensely self-centred, poor man.'

What Russell sought in his sexual encounters, it seems, was simply a helping hand. In 1920, for instance, when he was inveigling Dora Black into becoming his second wife, he forestalled any misunderstanding by explaining that 'I must find a place for sex with the smallest possible damage to work.' And she had already written to him on the same lines: sex, for a modern girl like her, was 'a need, to be satisified now & then as it presents itself, like hunger and thirst'. 'I am all for triviality in sex', she announced; and in Bertrand Russell she had found her man.

There is something quite disconcerting about the way Russell related to his 'need'

for love. It was as if he simply glanced inside himself to observe a set of libidinal traffic signals alternating, sometimes rather rapidly, between three blunt messages: Halt, Caution and Go. Although he was often baffled by what his 'emotions' were telling him, he never seems to have realized that it might be in their very nature to be ambiguous, and always capable of absorbing new interpretations. And, come to think of it, the same is true of his attitude to language and philosophy as well. Disciples like A.J. Ayer used to refer to the 'power and elegance of his literary style', but what is really striking in Russell's writings is that they show absolutely no talent or care for overall composition. They contain points, sharply made, but never lines, firmly drawn: the result is always disjointed and unsustained, with punctual clarity in the details but obscurity and fudge on the whole.

It may be true that Russell never wrote a really duff sentence; but surely he never wrote a fine and memorable one either. True, there are his celebrated quips, like the one in 'On Denoting' about the baldness of the present King of France. There is no King of France, of course, so, as Russell pointed out, 'if we enumerated the things that are bald, and then the things that are not bald, we should not find the present King of France in either list.' But in that case, how could it be meaningful to say that the King of France is bald? Before giving his solution to the conundrum, Russell makes a characteristic joke: 'Hegelians, who love a synthesis, will probably conclude that he wears a wig.'

The one about the King of France's wig is the paradigm joke of British analytic philosophy, still much imitated by the kind of philosophers who fancy themselves as wits. But it is a rotten joke. It is neither accurate nor funny; and it is both showy and beside the point. What is more, it is exultantly complacent: not only conceited, but pleased with its conceit as well.

The same unhappy clever-dick style is to be found in another typical sentence of Russell's, from the *Lectures on Logical Atomism*: 'I think an almost unbelievable amount of false philosophy has arisen through not realising what "existence" means,' Russell says. You can hear the prose pausing to allow readers to applaud the great logician's audacity in suggesting that philosophers have overlooked something so elementary as the meaning of 'existence'. But the invitation is quite fraudulent. It may well be true that past philosophers have all been wrong about existence, but that ought surely to inspire a little humility in us, some attention to the reasons for their difficulties, and a lot of severe circumspection if we imagine we have finally come up with The Answer. Instead, Russell comes on all cocky, assured, and tendentious: as blind, it seems, to the layered ambiguities of philosophy as to those of either politics or love.

And there is another side to Russell's vaunted 'style'. He combined a rhetoric of self-admiring cleverness with a surprising weakness for purple platitudes about how – to quote the peroration of his *History of Western Philosophy* – philosophy can 'suggest and inspire a way of life'. It is to these sentiments, indeed, that Monk has traced the force that drove Russell's astonishing productivity. Russell, like the rest of us, suffered from a recurrent sense of cosmic loneliness. But he sought his solace amongst impersonal things, 'abstract and remote', such as mathematics and especially philosophy. Traditional philosophy could not delight him, though: he dismissed it as unscientific, and we may also suspect that it was too probing and personal for his comfort – not remote and abstract enough. So he sought a new theoretical dispensation, as immaculate as the Lawrentian state: a perfect philosophical science, isolated from the past and untouched by superstition, grief or love. He was intent, in other words, on annihilating everything in philosophy that might remind him of contingency; but in the end, inevitably, he could never find any that did not.

Monk evidently came to his biographical task with the intention of praising Russell. He hoped to find – as he had with Wittgenstein – a deep unity between the life and the work, a single passion that would vindicate and redeem them both. By the end of the book, though – and this is only volume one – Russell is almost buried. Against the odds, Monk has succeeded in unifying the life, by elaborating on the theme of Russell's solitude, and his quest for security in philosophy as in politics and sex. Russell wanted to exist in an unequivocal world where his intellect would reign supreme. But the biography shows – as biographies will – that he kept falling back into another world, the only world there is; and it is enigmatic through and through. When Monk demonstrated the unity of Wittgenstein's life, he portrayed an astonishing and touching philosophical hero; but when the same service is performed for Russell, he appears as superficial, mediocre and unwise: exceptional only in his productivity, and his titanic imperceptiveness about others and about himself. Poor old Bertie. Poor old us.