REPORT ON THE 2007 BRS ANNUAL MEETING

While much of northeastern America can be a little too warm for comfort in June, the proximity of Monmouth New Jersey to the Atlantic Ocean provides it with cool breezes and a pleasantly moderate climate in that month. With Monmouth University already closed for the summer, we had the campus to ourselves, and the availability of pleasant walks around its attractive surroundings was conducive to both solitary and social reflection. It was in this environment that the Bertrand Russell Society held its 34th annual meeting last year from June 8 to June 10, thanks to the hospitality of Alan Schwerin, President of the Bertrand Russell Society, and his wife, Helen Schwerin. (Alan and Helen also hosted annual meetings at Monmouth in 1999 and 2000.) The Turrell boardroom in Bey Hall served as the Society’s home base that weekend, with dormitory space for its members available just several buildings away.

Following registration late Friday afternoon, the Society met for dinner on campus at “The Club”, after which they returned to Bey Hall for a board meeting of the Society. Following the business meeting, we relaxed in the boardroom while David Blitz updated the Society on the progress the Bertrand Russell Audio-Visual Project is making. David and four of his students (Sozting, Rutkowski, Cavallo and Notaro) then provided us with some quite interesting audio-visual samples of Russell. Friday closed with members enjoying the Greater Rochester Russell Set’s hospitality suite/salon.

The first presentation Saturday morning was Marvin Kohl’s “Bertrand Russell on Fear” (to be published in the next issue of the Quarterly). Kohl discussed Russell’s idea that all fear, whether it be unconscious, conscious, or attitudinal, is bad and ought to be eliminated. Contra Russell, Marvin argued that the deserving target is not fear per se, but panic fear and those human ideas and practices that tend to produce it. Tim Madigan then gave a talk on “The Bertrand Russell Case Revisited”. As all Russellians know, after being denied a position at the College of the City of New York, Russell taught for a time at the Barnes Foundation in Philadelphia. However, Russell and Barnes had a bitter falling out a few years later, and in 1943, Barnes self-published a pamphlet entitled “The Case of Bertrand Russell versus Democracy and Education.” In that pamphlet, Barnes argued that Russell had nothing but derision and contempt for democracy and education, and had betrayed the ideals of Barnes’ friend and associate John Dewey. In his talk, Tim critiqued Barnes’ claims and arguments.

Russell archivist Kenneth Blackwell of McMaster University followed with a presentation on Russell’s Electronic Texts. Ken explained that many of Russell’s texts are now available electronically, some freely on the web, some at login websites, and others purchasable through e-publishers. Details of sites were offered. He then pointed out that the availability of the e-texts raises the prospect of being able to search them, perhaps altogether in a “federated” search. McMaster’s Digital Commons, where the back issues of Russell now reside (and are accessible in their entirety to BRS members on the internet at digitalcommons.mcmaster.ca/russelljournal), may provide an approach to accomplishing this. The last presentation before lunch was by Ilmari Kortelainen on “The Compositional Method of Analysis”. Kortelainen used Russell’s philosophy to demonstrate the relationship between the method of analysis and contextuality by addressing the question: how can the principle according to which a sentence gets its meaning from its context be understood when one also accepts the principle of compositionality, that the meaning of a sentence is determined by the meanings of its constituent elements? From the viewpoint of contemporary theory of meaning these two semantic principles seem to be incompatible.

After lunch, there was a general meeting of the Society, followed by a panel discussion by Alan Bock, Tim Madigan, Thomas Riggins, and Peter Stone on Russell’s book “Understanding History, 50 years later”. Following the panel discussion, Phil Ebersole presented a paper for David White, who was unable to attend the meeting. David’s paper was entitled “Russell and Horace Liveright” and described how the publishing firm of Boni & Liveright was founded in 1916 to bring modern and controversial literature to the American readers, and how it went out of business in 1930. The company specialized in authors whose material was considered improper, immoral and indecent. Boni & Liveright are less well remembered today, but the Modern Library series, which evolved out of their publishing program, is universally known. Russell became involved with Boni & Liveright through three books, Education and the Good Life (1926), Marriage and Morals (1929), and The Conquest of Happiness (1930), all published in the later years of the firm’s history. White’s main focus was on Russell’s personal and professional
dealing with Horace Liveright (1884-1933), in particular, Russell's
difficulties with the fast and loose lifestyle of drink, women and
song associated with the firm. The last speaker of the day was David
Blitz, on "Russell's Little Books", a series of pamphlets by Russell
that were published in Girard Kansas by Emanuel Haldeman-Julius.

Dinner consisted of a banquet (from 8:30 to 10:00 pm) at a local
Japanese Restaurant. The evening was then topped off again with the
Greater Rochester Russell Set's hospitality suite.

Sunday's talks opened with Gregory Landini on "The Number of
Numbers". Gregory argued that though Frege's later work offered a
theory of numbers as objects, what is shared by Frege and Russell is
a conception of numbers in terms one-one correspondence relations,
and that on this view natural numbers are not objects and the infinity
of the natural numbers may well not be necessary. Following
this was a talk by Michael Garrall on "Russell: Between Deism and
Atheism". Chad Trainer then read a paper entitled "Russell's Empiricist
Propensities: Empiricism's Survival of Russell's 'Last Sub-
stantial Change'". Trainer began by pointing out that according to
Nick Griffin, the years in which Russell came closest to being an
"empiricist" are the years 1912 to 1914. Trainer then discussed the
limits to Russell's empiricism during the same period, and con-
cluded by proposing an alternative view that, regardless of where
one places Russell on this sliding scale between rationalism and
empiricism, we should see Russell as more empiricist after 1914
than during the 1912-14 period.

The final paper of the annual meeting was Chris Russell on
"Kant and Russell's Logicism". Chris argued that what appears to
be a change in view for Russell on the question of whether arith-
metic is analytic or synthetic a priori was actually more simply due
to a change in the meanings of the terms. Concluding the meeting
was a fine lunch at the home of Alan and Helen Schwerin.

— Chad Trainer, RC

HUMANIST NOTE. Marc Carrier, Canadian humanist, has written on
the religious agenda behind the façade of intelligent design and the
Discovery Institute. Based on exclusive interviews, his essay will

INTERVIEW

ON THE RUSSELL TRIBUNAL
AN INTERVIEW WITH NOAM CHOMSKY
BRANDON YOUNG

Last year marked the 40th Anniversary of the commencement of the
International War Crimes Tribunal, initiated by Bertrand Russell
and known popularly as the Russell Tribunal. It was an organization
of civilians acting to hold world leaders accountable for what they
viewed as grave violations of international law in the conduct of the
Vietnam war. The Russell Tribunal further aimed at gathering testi-
mony and documents showing the massive violence perpetrated by
the United States against the Vietnamese people. Not an actual jur-
isprudential undertaking, it was rather an exclamation intended to
break the silence, and an affirmation of the responsibility that peo-
ple of free democracies have to be liable when international and na-
tional institutions fail.

Nearly forty years later, the legacy of the Russell Tribunal con-
tinues to be an influence in world affairs, most recently by the for-
mation of the World Tribunal on Iraq (WTI), another citizens' tri-
bunal set up to assert international law by making clear the disparity
between world citizens' opinion and the action of international in-
titutions regarding the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Like the Russell Tri-
bunal, it challenges the justificationist orthodoxy of western govern-
ments and media alike by condemning preventative war as nothing
more than a euphemism for a crime of aggression. But unlike the
Russell Tribunal, which at least received ridicule in the press, the
WTI has been ignored by the Western media where it could have its
most effect. Interestingly, many of its participants and leading organ-
izers are women, a striking contrast to the Russell Tribunal, which
the WTI acknowledges as its model.

In the last chapter of At War with Asia (1970), Noam Chomsky
addresses the subject of war crimes and the Russell Tribunal. Prompt-
ed by a discussion in the Russell studies group, russell.h4, of a pur-
purposed account of his views, I recently asked Chomsky about his
thoughts on the Russell Tribunal, its legacy, and the new WTI. The
following is an edited transcript of that correspondence.

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