

# THE BERTRAND RUSSELL SOCIETY BULLETIN

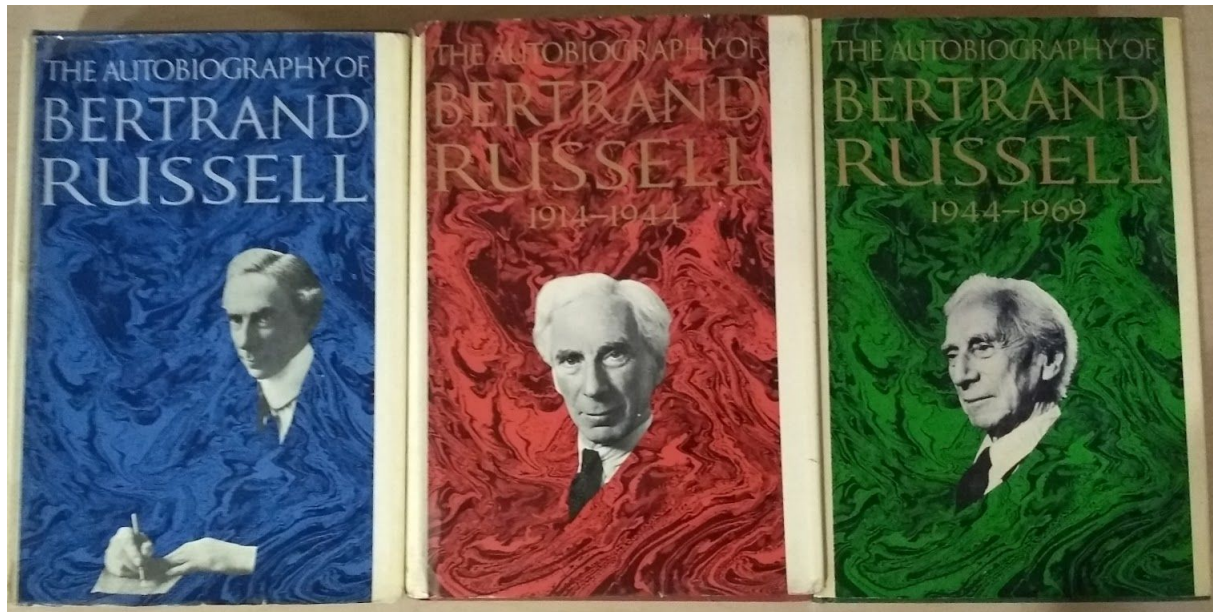
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## In this issue

- 2026 BRS Call for Papers
- June Workshop On *Principia Mathematica*
- Two book reviews by Peter Stone
- Russell's Consumer View of History by John G. Slater
- Russell Quote of the Issue on the last page



*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 3 Volumes*

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## Call for Papers: 53rd Meeting on June 12-14, 2026

The 53rd annual meeting of the Bertrand Russell Society will take place on June 12-14, 2026 in Hamilton, Ontario. The meeting will be locally organized by Andy Bone (McMaster University and Bertrand Russell Research Centre). Information about travel arrangements and logistics will be posted here when it is available.

If you are interested in presenting a paper at the BRS Annual Meeting, please submit the paper here. Full papers are preferred, by abstract

submissions are also acceptable. We welcome papers on any aspect of Russell's personal life and his thought, work, and legacy.

We also welcome proposals for other activities that might be appropriate for the meeting (e.g., a master class on a work by Russell). The abstract should be no longer than two paragraphs. The deadline for submission is **May 1st, 2026**.

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## Call for Student Papers: David S. Goldman Student Essay Prize

The Bertrand Russell Society invites essay submissions for its David S. Goldman Student Paper Prize, which is awarded annually to the best essay in Russell studies submitted by a student (graduate or undergraduate). The Prize includes a free year of membership in the Society, plus registration, lodging, and a \$200 cash prize awarded at the Society's next annual meeting.

The Society has previously awarded a best paper by an undergraduate student and by a graduate student in the same year, and has recognized particularly exemplary runner-up submissions. The Society does not award a Student Paper Prize every year, but only in years where

there is a sufficiently meritorious paper.

Essay submissions should deal with some aspect of Russell's life, work, or influence, and be of suitable length for a 25-to-35-minute presentation (including Q&A) at the annual meeting.

Student Paper Prize submissions should be emailed with a cover page including the paper's title and abstract, plus the author's name, email address, and institutional where they currently (or as recently as the fall semester) attended.

Submissions should be sent via our website using the upload form on our website.

Essay submissions are due by the call for papers deadline of **February 2nd, 2026**.

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## June Workshop on *Principia Mathematica*

The National Endowment for the Humanities has yet again offered substantial support to ongoing Russell studies: Landon D. C. Elkind (Western Kentucky University) has won a Collaborative Research (Convening) Grant of \$49,683 to support a workshop on *Principia Mathematica*'s second edition in its century,

1925-2025. The workshop is scheduled just before the upcoming annual meeting, from June 8-12, 2026, at McMaster University's Bertrand Russell Research Centre. The Centre's director, Alexander Klein (Canada Research Chair, McMaster University), is co-sponsoring the workshop by facilitating some local arrangements.

# A Russellian Life

BY PETER STONE

A review of Michael E. Berumen, *Threads: A Life*. San Bernardino, CA: Independently Published, 2019. 127 pages. ISBN-13: 978-1710642148.

Like most BRS members, I take inspiration from Russell's life and legacy. While Russell certainly said and did many things which I reject (see, e.g., Banks 1999), I would like to think that I am leading a broadly Russellian life, and I think most BRS members would wish the same. At the end of my life, I'd like to be able to say, as Russell did in the famous preface to his *Autobiography*, "This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me" (Russell 1967, 4), and Russell has so far proven a wonderful source of ideas for me in terms of how to accomplish this goal.

Michael Berumen (1952-2020) was active in the BRS for many years, performing two of the Society's most demanding roles—Treasurer and BRS Bulletin editor. A few months before his death, he published *Threads*, an autobiography. And not surprisingly, Russell features prominently in it. Indeed, the very first page features a quote from Russell's *Autobiography*:

I have lived in pursuit of a vision, both personal and social. Personal: to care for what is noble, for what is beautiful, for what is gentle; to allow moments of insight to give wisdom at more mundane times. Social: to see in imagination the society that is to be created, where individuals grow freely, and where hate and greed and envy die because there is nothing to nourish them. These things I believe, and the world, for all its horrors, has left me unshaken (Russell 1969, 330; quoted in Berumen 2019, 1).

But Berumen's book does more than invoke Russell; as a memoir, it is reminiscent of Russell's in many ways. While *Threads* may be considerably shorter than Russell's three-volume

*Autobiography* (108 pages of text plus pictures), it is hard to read the former without concluding that Berumen did indeed lead a Russellian life.

Russell of course came from a prominent aristocratic family, and his pride in his ancestry is well-known. Berumen displays a similar pride in *Threads*; he devotes fourteen pages of the book to describing his genealogy (Berumen 2019, ch. 2; all subsequent citations will be to this book unless otherwise indicated). His ancestry was English and Scottish on his father's side. On his mother's side, things were "murkier," but her lineage likely included German, Scottish, and possibly English ancestors. While Russell was connected to the Quakers via marriage to his first wife, Berumen was descended from a long line of Quakers through his maternal grandfather's father (10). Michael's surname at birth was Sproull; Michael was four when his mother divorced his father and seven when she married Oscar Rudolph Berumen (15). He took Berumen's last name as a teenager, although Oscar never adopted him (52).

Berumen's childhood could not have been less like the sheltered boyhood of Russell, and *Threads* does not skimp on the details in this area. While Russell in his *Autobiography* bemoaned his limited success with the family maid (Russell 1967, 45), the young Berumen was apparently quite successful at playing "doctor" with two girls living down the street (27) and also had a sexual experience with a babysitter (45). Berumen's sexual precociousness continued during his teen years, when he "took every opportunity to have sex with girls when I could talk them into it, and only when they were so inclined" (45). Berumen met his future wife, Carol, in 1975 (76). They married the following year, and remained married until Berumen's death. In 1989, their daughter, Anastasia, was born (84, 104-105); Berumen lived long

enough to note the birth of his first grandchild in a postscript to the book (108).

Unlike Russell, Berumen's family was conventionally but not devoutly religious (Roman Catholic). While an altar boy as a child who occasionally considered becoming a priest, he ceased believing in a deity as a teenager. Berumen credits Russell's "Why I Am Not a Christian" as "instrumental in turning me away from religion" (33, 34).

Berumen was quite the delinquent as a teenager, with a cultivated "bad-boy" image as a skateboarder and surfer (even though he couldn't surf; 54). He was arrested at 15 with a friend for robbing a donut shop and spent several months in juvenile hall (60-61). His life was turned around by a very un-Russellian experience—entering the U.S. Army at the age of 17 (63). His high intelligence secured him training as a cryptographer, which helped keep him out of Vietnam. He instead spent his tour of duty at a U.S. nuclear weapons facility in Bavaria (65). In a more Russellian spirit, after his discharge he joined Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), becoming his local chapter's Political Education Officer (70).

Berumen attended university on the GI Bill, completing an Associate degree at Ohlone College and a Bachelor's degree at Cal State Hayward (now Cal State East Bay; 70). While he eventually hoped to become a university professor, he took a job with Pacific Mutual (later renamed Pacific Life) in 1975, rising through the ranks multiple times before leaving the company in 2001 (78-79, 84-87). He subsequently purchased a small security company, only to find running a small business more trouble than working in the corporate sector (96-97). This led to his retirement in 2011 (85). He never did become an academic, although Pacific Mutual did give him the chance to complete the Stanford Executive Program in 1999 (90).

Beyond relating his life story, *Threads* also lays out Berumen's personal philosophy, a philosophy that Russell's ideas played an important role in shaping. As noted before, Russell's essay "Why I Am Not a Christian" informed Beru-

men's attitude towards religion since his teen years. But Russell's "more technical work in philosophy" was of "special importance" to him. He read his first book by Russell—*The Problems of Philosophy*—while serving in the army in 1970. "This book," Berumen writes, "had more influence on me than any other book before or since. It sparked my interest in philosophy, gave me a perspective on the merits of analyzing things into their most fundamental, component parts, wed me to the importance of clear and precise expression, and opened up a whole new world for me: the world of ideas. It still holds up as a wonderful introduction to the subject." Berumen read many works by Russell after this—*A History of Western Philosophy, Introduction to Mathematical Philosophy, The Principles of Mathematics*, and even *Principia Mathematica*. "I suspect," he concludes, "my personal collection of Russell's books is equaled [sic] only by the ones that I have written by or about the life and times of Churchill and Lincoln" (34-35). *Threads* also mentions, albeit briefly, Berumen's service to the BRS, especially his editorship of the BRSB (90, 99).

Berumen's ethical philosophy was less consequentialist than Russell's. He describes it as a "variation on Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative" and importantly influenced by John Rawls, Bernard Gert, and R.M. Hare (38; see also 75-76). In economics, Berumen was far more skeptical of syndicalism than Russell, and defended a mixed economy (98). He describes his political views as follows:

I support the idea of a world federated government, eschew religion and superstition, support a mixed economy with minimum standards for the least among us, support reproductive and sexual-gender preferences and rights, and recognize the existential importance of global climate change, and I want to eliminate nuclear weapons. I also want to reduce animal suffering caused by meat forming and its concomitant harm to the environment. I believe

in the importance of reason guided by logic and science. And I oppose authoritarianism of all kinds (72).

Berumen set down his ethical ideas in a book entitled *Do No Evil: Ethics with Applications to Economic Theory and Business* (2003). While the book does not seek to apply Russell to practical problems in the same way as similar books by BRS members, such as Lee Eisler's *Morals without Mystery* (1971) or Peter Cranford's *How to Be Your Own Psychologist* (1980), BRS members will no doubt find Russellian themes in this book.

Berumen shared many other traits with Russell. Both enjoyed hiking; backpacking gave Berumen “a refuge from the ordinary vicissitudes of life and a time for rejuvenation” (36). Like Russell, Berumen was “obsessive about putting [his] thoughts in writing” his entire life (99; cf. Stone 2016). Both loved dogs; Berumen was traumatized as a boy when his family gave away his Irish Setter, Titan (47, 104). Both men smoked, with predictable health effects in both cases (103). Like Russell, Berumen was the inspiration for a fictional character, a detective in short story written by a friend (106; cf. Madigan 2021). But there were also differences between the men. While Russell infamously never learned how to drive a car, Berumen was both an experienced pilot and a motorcyclist who survived two near-fatal accidents (39).

Berumen also uses *Threads* to offer many polemical asides on issues of great concern to him. A few examples:

Christian superstition is no less fantastic than the beliefs of the tribes of New Guinea or of the Greeks with their Olympian gods. Monotheism is taught by self-satisfied Christians as being a great intellectual advance. I see no reason to believe it to be any more rational or plausi-

ble than tribal animism or polytheism (p. 33).

As for humanity, well, I find our species as a whole to be more problematic than not. I am always skeptical of the genuineness of proclamations of love or respect for abstract objects such as country or humankind. I don't find abstractions lovable or particularly worthy of love. And humankind has a very spotty historical record, anyway, for ours is surely the most widely and indiscriminately destructive, murderous, and rapacious species to have ever inhabited the planet (p. 37).

The GOP today is barely recognizable as the party of Lincoln... It is not even the party of Ronald Reagan. It is increasingly the party of Jefferson Davis, the odious fool and hypocrite and neo-Confederate, Newt Gingrich, and most of all, the unlettered vulgarian, racist, and a patent fascist, Donald Trump (p. 50).

Berumen ends the book with the following reflection: “There's so much about life that I enjoy, and not least of all, my family and my friends. But I am also very glad that I have had a very good run and I have no complaints. Life has been good to me and I look forward to making the most of whatever time I have left” (108). I feel confident that Berumen, like Russell, would gladly live his life again if offered the chance.

*Threads* is available for purchase on Amazon. Berumen's blog can still be read at *Blogspot*, and many of his writings (including his textbook on business ethics) can be found at his *Academia* page.

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## There's No Royal Road to Russell

BY PETER STONE

*A review of Course Hero, Study Guide for Bertrand Russell's A History of Western Philosophy. Middletown, DE: Course Hero, 2019. 83 pages. ISBN-13: 979-8525521278.*

Like most academics, I have an instinctive dislike of study guides. Whether they be published by CliffsNotes, SparkNotes, or Course Hero, such guides have long struck me as nothing but a tempting way for students to slack off work, cut corners, and spend more time at the pub. But when I received Course Hero's *Study Guide for Bertrand Russell's A History of Western Philosophy* as a Christmas present, I decided to use the opportunity to rethink my attitude. Could my dislike for study guides simply be a prejudice on my part? After all, I haven't looked at any of these shortcut texts in years;

perhaps the current generation of study guides do not merit their longstanding reputation. And if one is going to consult a study guide for any of Russell's books, *A History of Western Philosophy* (hereafter HWP) is as good a choice as any. True, Russell may be an excellent writer—better than anyone who can't get a better job than churning out study guides for Course Hero. But HWP is Russell's longest work (not counting *Principia Mathematica*—and God help the student who relies on a study guide for that book!). Clocking in at 895 pages long, and covering philosophers from the ancient world to the mid-

twentieth century, the book cannot help but try the typical undergraduate's patience, no matter how scintillating Russell's prose may be.

And so I decided to give Course Hero's study guide a read. Perhaps it is doing students a real service. How bad could it be? The answer, as many academics could have told me, is...quite bad, indeed.

Right from the start, *Course Hero's Study Guide for Bertrand Russell's A History of Western Philosophy* (hereafter CH) displays all the marks of cheap quality. For one thing, it lists no author. (Were it published today, I would suspect the text was AI-generated.) This immediately sets it apart from legitimate secondary sources by reputable scholars, such as A.C. Grayling's *Russell: A Very Short Introduction* (2002). CH has a structure of sorts, offering a high-level discussion of the text and its author, then proceeding to chapter summaries before concluding with quotes from the text, a glossary, and a reading list. But the structure seems to be designed for a work of fiction, not a philosophical book. It features a three-page "plot summary" (Course Hero 2019, 15-17; all references will be to this work unless otherwise indicated), for example; most Russellians will be surprised to learn *HWP* has a plot! (What happens at the climax?) Moreover, the structure often functions in a perfunctory way; while there is both a summary and analysis of each section of the book, the latter often spends just as much time introducing new material as it does analysing the material already covered. There is a list of key figures early in the book, but it idiosyncratically features both Asoka (who is mentioned once in *HWP*; see Russell 1945, 222) and Adolf Hitler (!). And while CH regularly quotes from *HWP*, it never provides page references, making it difficult to examine the context of the quotes (a task the book's intended audience will presumably never attempt). It also mentions other authors in the text but again without proper references; the "for further reading" list at the end of the book lists only five (reasonable enough) sources.

As noted before, the book offers both sum-

mary and analysis of each chapter. It makes sense to include the latter, but in analysing *HWP* the book feels compelled to go beyond Russell in odd ways. It makes repeated reference to the "Axial Age" (e.g., 3, 21)—a concept never evoked in *HWP*—and repeatedly mentions non-Western philosophers from this time period, such as Confucius, Lao Tzu, and the Buddha. It routinely attributes Western achievements discussed in *HWP* to non-Western sources. It argues, for example, that Russell "perhaps does not give Egyptians enough credit" (21), even evoking the long-disgraced book *Black Athena* to make its point. (For a measured critique of *Black Athena* by a longtime BRS member, see Lenz 1993.) One can only assume that the audience for the book has heard of "decolonizing the curriculum," and expects to see such decolonization taking place even in cheap study guides. And so there are unsurprisingly complaints about Russell's "cultural bias" (34) and "ethnocentrism" (37).

But what is most striking—and perhaps least surprising—about the book is how little understanding it demonstrates of both Russell and *HPW*. Consider, for example, how the book introduces the Russell Paradox in its potted biography of Russell:

The contradiction is that in some sets (classes of objects) members are also members of themselves (the class of all classes) and some are not (for example, the class of human beings). The class of all classes is the set that includes everything that can be thought of—for example, the entire set of all biological living things on Earth. Thus it should be possible to create a set (a class of all classes) that is not a member of itself. But such an idea is a contradiction. Is the class of all biological things a member of itself? The answer is yes and no (6-7).

The book is also littered with fascinating philosophical claims that do not appear in *HWP*

and/or are simply false. The reader will “learn,” for example, that “Aristotle finds all governments bad” and that Locke “invented liberalism” (2). It is similarly false to say that Machiavelli equates “principalities” with “political entities” in *The Prince* (51) or that Rousseau got in trouble in Geneva for denying the divine right of kings (64), or that Augustine’s *City of God* “lays down a principle for separation of Church and state” (80). While Russell is routinely castigated for getting Kant’s categorical imperative wrong in *HWP* (Russell 1945, 711), CH manages to invent its own way to misunderstand Kant here (66). And then there are bits of “analysis” that come out of nowhere—e.g., “Clearly Hobbes preferred security over freedom, and the majority of the human race seems to be in agreement with him, judging from the number of totalitarian states that have existed and still

exist and the fact that democratic states are always in danger of falling into chaos or absolutism” (p. 57).

I mentioned earlier A.C. Grayling’s introductory book about Russell. The contrast between that and CH could not be clearer, especially with regard to their respective purposes. Grayling’s book is intended to supplement the efforts of a careful student of Russell to make sense of his extensive and often difficult oeuvre. CH, by contrast, is intended to help the lazy student bypass Russell’s work, obtaining just enough insight to get through a university philosophy class. While CH might just be enough to help a student accomplish this task, it can deliver nothing better. When it comes to any philosopher-Russell included—there simply is no substitute for the primary sources. As with geometry, there is no royal road to Russell.

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# Russell's Consumer View of History

BY JOHN G. SLATER

*Editor's note: Slater handed this essay and authority to publish it to Kenneth Blackwell in 2005. We are grateful to Ken for authorizing its appearance in the Bulletin and for assistance digitizing the piece.*

Between 1904 and 1954 Bertrand Russell discussed the importance of a study of history on many occasions. From a close reading of these writings there emerges a complex picture of the role history has played in his life, and, by implication, will play in the lives of his readers if they follow his advice and begin to read history books, if they have hitherto neglected to do so, or to increase their consumption of them, if they are already readers. Although he always claimed he was a mere “consumer” of history, and therefore did not presume to tell historians how they should ply their craft, he does sometimes appear to violate his self imposed restriction, especially with regard to “scientific” historians and to what might be called “grand” historians - those who aim to tuck the past, the present, and the future into a single mould. As we will see, however, his criticisms always fall within his own areas of competence. In this essay I propose to discuss his criticisms of these two groups first and then to examine his positive position.

On 26 January 1903, J.B. Bury delivered his inaugural lecture as Regius Professor of Modern History in the University of Cambridge and sent shock waves through the historical establishment by urging its members to remember “always that, though she [history] may supply material for literary art or philosophical speculation, she is herself simply a science, no less and no more” (1903, 42). Historians rushed to defend the thesis that history was also an art, without denying the importance of gathering their data in as scientific a manner as possible. They felt certain that written history could never be value free in the way (say) physics is. Yet Bury's programme seems to demand a value-free study. Gilbert Murray and others urged Russell to weigh in on their side. “On History” was published the following year;

in it he argues that history can never be a pure science, because in their work historians are obliged to select from among the facts available to them those they will use in writing an account of a particular happening or person or period. Bury and others seem to be claiming that truth is the only value the historian needs to consider, but this cannot be right, Russell argues, because all facts are true in the same way, so other values must be at work in the selection process. One such value is importance; the historian must pick out from the great welter of facts available those that are important for a narrative account of what happened. Different historians will make different selections, at least in part, and in this way colour their account in one direction rather than another. There will always be Whig and Tory historians. The literary skill of the historian in presenting his or her version of what happened introduces other values into the subject. A beautifully written history of a period is likely to attract more readers than a more pedestrian account and therefore to exert a greater influence on the way the episode or period is judged in the long run.

Scientific historians are really hankering after the discovery of causal laws which can be used to predict the direction current affairs are likely to develop. Except for certain parts of economic history, Russell thinks it is very unlikely that such laws are discoverable. The difficulty lies with the nature of historical facts themselves; they differ from the facts on which scientific theories are based in being extremely difficult to analyze. “It is true”, he notes, “that numerous instances are not always necessary to establish a law, provided the essential and relevant circumstances can be easily disentangled. But, in history, so many circumstances of a small and accidental nature are relevant that no broad and simple uniformities are pos-

sible” (1985, 77). To generalize about historical events one must have at least two sets of facts that are similar in all of their essential features, but that is exactly what the raw material of history lacks. A large part of the reason for this state of affairs is that history is composed of the acts of individuals, and the cast of characters is constantly changing. We know so little about the causation of human behaviour – for example, how does diet affect temperament and, therefore, judgment? – that we are constantly surprised by people’s decisions. Given such an untidy database, it seems extremely unlikely we will ever have well-established historical generalizations from which precise predictions follow. The problem is essentially a logical one, and Russell is claiming that the demands of logic cannot be met by the data of history.

Russell notes another way in which historical facts differ from scientific ones: “Historical facts, many of them, have an intrinsic value, a profound interest on their own account, which makes them worthy of study, quite apart from any possibility of linking them together by means of causal laws” (1985, 78). Although he does not provide us with examples here, I think he has in mind, in part at least, the “by-paths of history: communities which have become isolated from the main current of their parent countries, but have trickled by unforeseen courses into the main stream of quite other rivers” (1954, 7). In *History As an Art* he recalls his delight in learning quite unexpectedly of the fate of such peoples as the Bactrian Greeks and the Bogomils of Bulgaria, which his earlier reading had treated as having simply vanished from history. By contrast, in science, isolated facts almost never have the interest that theories linking them together have. Most eclipses, with the exception of the few which help date ancient events, are uninteresting in themselves, but “the laws which determine their recurrence are of the very highest interest, and the discovery of these laws was of immense importance in dispelling superstition” (1954, 4).

The scientific historians share with what I am calling the grand ones a hope that the mul-

tifarious facts of history can be given some kind of order. The scientific historians, however, are content to work in a piecemeal fashion and to attempt to establish laws dealing with only a limited type of event. The grand historians, on the other hand, throw all caution to the wind. They want a single theory which will bind together all of the past with all of the future. Hegel is Russell’s favourite example of this type of historical writer. Hegel advanced the view that the Idea is developing Itself in human history: historical events are governed by a peculiar sort of dialectic, in which every member (thesis) generates its own contradictory (antithesis), and from the tension existing between the members of this incompatible pair a synthesis arises in which some of both the thesis and the antithesis is retained and some of both is left behind. The new synthesis in turn (now considered as thesis) generates its own contradictory, and so on into the indefinite future. The whole process will finally come to rest when the last contradiction has been resolved, then history will come to an end too. Russell objects to all such quasi-logical theories on two grounds: first, that they “require, for their support, a careful choice of place and time”, and, second, that they require, “what is worse, a falsification of values” (1985, 78). In Hegel’s case the choice of time and place was largely confined to the Mediterranean basin during the period when records were kept. Other civilizations are given short shrift. In choosing his time and place Hegel conferred greater importance on the historical facts falling within it than he did to those falling outside. As we saw above, the selection of facts colours the way a writer constructs an historical narrative. In Hegel’s case, his account of world history is skewed towards giving Prussia great importance, and, to Russell’s mind, much more importance than a candid and impartial examination of the facts would support. Russell remarks that philosophies of history like Hegel’s reveal only what the writer knew and judged important; in Hegel’s case, he knew a great deal about Prussia and had almost a worshipful regard for it. To put Russell’s point an-

other way: such philosophies of history tell us a great deal about the individual psychology of their authors and almost nothing about world history. These historians feel that they must order the historical facts they know, so they invent grand hypotheses fitting the facts they judge to be important and ignore the rest. The deficiency in their position, then, is one of logic; instead of the data determining the conclusions to be drawn, preconceived conclusions are used to prune the data into a supporting mass. Such manipulators remind one of the lawyer who got up in court and said, “Your Honour, here are the conclusions on which I base my facts”, and, for Russell, have the same worth.

One grand hypothesis that Russell thinks has a little bit of merit is the great man theory of history. Mention was made above of the important role individuals play in human activities. A change in the head of a state means that the facts will be seen in a different way, with the likely consequence that a different action will be taken than would have been taken by that person’s predecessor or successor. So individuals matter in history. The assassination of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995 brought this fact to everyone’s attention again. The observation that individuals matter in history has led some thinkers – he usually mentions Carlyle and Nietzsche as his examples – to try to explain historical events in terms pretty exclusively of the activities of great men and women. His criticism of these writers on history is that they carry the view to an indefensible extreme. Great individuals do leave an indelible mark on history, but not all indelible marks are made by great individuals. Many others, and at times whole masses of people, leave their mark too. Russell was especially impressed with the role of great individuals in the history of science, but even in science one must keep one’s perspective. Science is not due exclusively to the work of a few great thinkers, although without them science would not be as far advanced as it is. He put his view of the respective roles of great men and women and others in this way:

I wish only to preserve a balance

between the two. I believe that remarkable individuals have done a great deal to mould history. I think that, if the hundred ablest men of science of the seventeenth century had all died in infancy, the life of the common man in every industrial community would now be quite different from what it is. I do not think that if Shakespeare and Milton had not existed someone else would have composed their works. And yet this is the sort of thing that some “scientific” historians seem to wish one to believe. (1954, 17–18)

The evidence, he is saying, cuts both ways; history teaches that there have always been leaders and followers and that both classes have contributed to human development. But his citation of scientists as his example is interesting and I will return to it later.

I think it is fair to conclude that Russell did not intrude upon the work of historians except on questions of logic and value, questions on which he was clearly competent to speak. His criticisms, as we have seen, are nearly always directed to warning that certain ways of thinking in history are too extreme to be defensible. In his critical writings he is clearly performing one important function of the philosopher, namely, that of critically examining a body of work in terms of its logic and its treatment of problems of value.

Turning now to Russell as a consumer of history, I want to begin by calling attention to one of his retrospective essays – one that should be better known than it is. “My Own Philosophy” was written in 1946 for a projected book, to be called *Philosophies of To-day*. Although the book was announced, it was never published; his essay was filed away and only came to light again when his archives were catalogued and sold to McMaster University in 1968. In 1972, as part of the celebrations marking the centenary of his birth, “My Own Philosophy” was printed as a pamphlet in an edition of 623 copies, and was available only from the Bertrand Russell

Archives. For this reason it is not widely known, which is a pity, because Russell took his task seriously. “My Own Philosophy” is printed again in *Last Philosophical Testament*, Volume 11 of his *Collected Papers*.

Russell opens his discussion of history by remarking that with every passing year his estimate of the importance of history has increased. As a young man he read history for entertainment and not because he thought it would make him wiser, but, with the passing years, and especially during the Second World War, he found that the contemplation of past events became necessary if he was to retain a sane outlook on an increasingly chaotic world. As we might expect from our earlier discussion, he hastens to add that he does not believe, in any literal sense, in the “lessons of history”; nor does he give credence to any philosophy of history of the sort peddled by Hegel or Marx. His empirical tendencies are too strong to accept, or even to entertain, any grand, largely *a priori*, theory of the development of human history. Cosmic history, about which a great deal is known with a high degree of probability, dwarfs human affairs to such an extent that it is hard for him to take seriously the claim that in some way or other the whole past history of the cosmos existed simply to prepare the stage for homo sapiens, and especially for those of the Prussian sort. Whatever is to be learned from history cannot be grand. Instead, the most we can hope to learn is something piecemeal, although that does not detract from its importance. He contrasts his position with that of philosophers like Hegel by arguing that from a study of history we cannot derive much of importance to the intellect, but we can gain a better insight into our emotional nature.

A study of history shows that in a very short period of time, as measured from a cosmic point of view, the human intellect has gone a long way toward comprehending the world in which we find ourselves. The scientific method, which almost eliminated subjectivity from human inquiry, has proved enormously successful in both understanding the world and pro-

viding the means for changing it. Nothing comparable has happened to develop human emotions, and as a consequence they are still in a relatively primitive state. Yet they are essential to human action, indeed its engine. So in the twentieth century we find ourselves with machines and, more ominously, with weapons of mass destruction, under the control of people whose passions hardly differ from those of our earliest ancestors, who lived in caves and fought with wild animals using only sticks and stones. This disparity between the intellect and the emotions is a cause of great worry, for at any moment some official, whose passions get the better of his or her intellect or who is simply malevolent, may order the use of these weapons and destroy most of the civilized world, or even bring human history to an end. “Our age”, Russell warns, “is distinguished from the past, not by its wickedness, but by its skill, which makes wickedness more effective than at any former time” (1997, 75). In his essay he outlines several possible futures for humans, none of which is very bright, because people will insist on their differences from others – witness all of the conflicts going on in our own day from Bosnia to Quebec – instead of learning to think of “mankind as a unity”.

In the course of his discussion of history in this essay Russell repeats most of the points he makes in his other writings on the subject. There is first the sheer enjoyment he gets from reading about the past. I have become acutely aware of the truth of this observation through the work I have done in annotating five volumes of his *Collected Papers*. The relish with which he illustrates some point by referring to an obscure historical figure or movement or happening is contagious and makes you want to read the book in which the illustration is found. To cite an example: in discussing the relations between religion and science, he notes without gloating over it, the difficulties with which pious Christians, who believed the Flood had happened within the last 4,000 years, were confronted by the existence of sloths in South America. How could they have got there when they move so

slowly and the Atlantic Ocean intervenes? And why were there none left around Mount Ararat? He found a discussion of these burning questions in one of his favourite historical works, *A History of the Warfare of Science with Theology in Christendom* (1896) by Andrew Dickson White, who shared with him a keen sense of the absurd. White discusses a book published in 1590 by Joseph Acosta, an eminent Jesuit missionary who lived for several years in South America and who was greatly worried by such questions; Acosta considered, amongst others, St. Augustine's theory that these animals were carried there by people in ships, but finds it incredible that humans would willingly spend weeks confined in cramped vessels with wolves and boa constrictors and other ferocious beasts for no other reason than to spread such animals geographically (1896, I: 45–6). Russell cites these delicious perplexities in several of his anti-religious writings.

Another bit of history he got from White has both a tragic and an absurd side. In 1591, Eufame Macalyane, a Scottish noblewoman, was burned alive in Edinburgh for the crime of having sought relief from pain during the birth of her two sons. The authorities took the view that she had violated Biblical law, since Genesis lays it down that women must bear children in pain, the so-called "curse of Eve". This case put a damper on advocating the introduction of anaesthetics for any purpose for nearly three centuries. When, in 1847, James Young Simpson, a Scottish doctor, recommended their use in childbirth, he was met with a storm of opposition. The entire establishment rose up against him and it seemed certain that he would lose the argument. Just when all seemed lost, Simpson made a brilliant move: he pointed out that the very first surgical operation, the one in which a rib was extracted from Adam to form Eve, was carried out after Adam was put into a deep sleep by God, therefore, the use of anaesthetics had divine approval. His opponents were thunderstruck, for they had to admit his point, what else could they do?, but, when they recovered from their shock, they insisted that his ar-

gument proved the case only for *men* and not for women. Opposition crumbled completely when men who underwent surgical treatment reported favourably on their experience with anaesthetics and urged its widespread use.

Russell's delight with history was not merely entertainment. This becomes abundantly clear when one is faced with the task of annotating his writings. Historical examples abound. It seems that he never forgot a single bit of the history he had read. My assistants and I have been able to find sources for about 97% of his historical citations, and the ones that have proved untraceable are esoteric indeed. To cite one such case: he mentions a physicist who was in Japan during an earthquake and was stimulated to discover some mathematics concerning earthquakes. Later he applied his discoveries to reduce vibration in the plates of locomotives (1996, 558). One would think such a case would be easily tracked down, but it has defied our best efforts. It is easy to see why this incident stayed with Russell, since it involved one of his principal loves, mathematics. In other cases there is no such obvious connection to explain why some bit of history stuck in his memory and was recalled just when it was useful in illustrating a point.

Russell used his knowledge of history to broaden both his imagination and his knowledge of human beings. When laying out his philosophical method he recommends as an early step the furnishing of the mind with puzzles of the sort one is trying to explain. A mind furnished with a set of puzzles tends to mull them over subconsciously, and, in favourable cases, to come up with a solution to them, as if from nowhere. But before his method can be used, the mind itself, and especially the imagination, must already be furnished with a wide variety of possibilities not tied to any particular problem. Analogical reasoning is most successful when there are lots of possibilities to be compared. Reading well-written history is one very pleasant way to increase one's mental furniture, as he calls it in *History As an Art*. On that occasion he was citing the Emperor Frederick II as

one who “most certainly does not deserve to be imitated, but he makes a splendid piece in one’s mental furniture”. Russell’s description of him is wonderfully compact and vivid: “The Wonder of the World, tramping hither and thither with his menagerie, completed at last by his Prime Minister in a cage, debating with Moslem sages, winning crusades in spite of being excommunicate, is a figure that I should be sorry not to know about” (1954, 16–17). It is probably true to say that one’s imagination is only as broad as the examples it contains, so wide reading in history is bound to increase its scope.

Knowledge of human behaviour is also essential for the sort of thinking and writing that Russell did. During the course of a very long writing life, some seventy-five years, he canvassed nearly every topic under the sun. Whenever he concerned himself with questions lying outside logic and technical philosophy, which was much of the time, he relied heavily on facts about human beings to make his points. Some of these facts came from his own experience, for instance, his observations of the reaction of British men living in Hong Kong to the appearance of a tiger in the streets (1996, 384), but very many of them, like those already cited, are based on historical testimony.

In “My Own Philosophy” Russell states that, as he got older, the importance of a wide knowledge of history increased dramatically. His historical knowledge has helped him to stay sane in an unstable world. Unless a person can put the great problems posed by the development of nuclear weapons into some sort of historical perspective, it is easy to succumb to a paralyzing despair. But history records that other great societies – notably Rome – fell, yet out of the residue civilization rose again. Perhaps, even after a nuclear war, history might repeat itself. Of course, he did not believe that history taught us that such an event would transpire; his use of the information was to make life bearable in the here and now. Russell often expressed the hope that if there ever was a nuclear holocaust, a few people might survive in the extreme southern hemisphere because of prevailing wind pat-

terns. Those desperate few might in a few centuries produce enough offspring to provide for a gradual repopulation of the earth (when fallout moderated enough to permit it) and a new civilization. Reading history allows individuals, whose emotions have been thrown into turmoil by circumstances about which they feel powerless, to retain a glimmer of hope for the future of humankind.

In advancing the thought sketched in the last paragraph Russell emphatically denies that it is a lesson of history. Such a lesson would (presumably) be a generalization asserting a causal relation between the destruction of great civilizations and the rebirth of new ones out of their debris, from which one could deduce the lesson that, if our civilization is destroyed by atomic warfare, another civilization, perhaps greater than ours, will arise after the nuclear ashes have cooled. As we have seen, he rejects this view on logical grounds: the data with which historians must work cannot support causal generalizations of this sort. The strongest generalization we can make is one stating a mere possibility: events of this sort have happened before, therefore they might happen again. After all, when you are considering atomic warfare, absolutely every person might be killed, because of the pernicious and longlasting effect of fallout. His modification of such historical arguments provides scant comfort for those worried about nuclear warfare, but it may, he thinks, be sufficient to ensure their continued sanity.

Russell rejected so-called lessons of history on logical grounds. The data available to historians is neither full enough nor precise enough to permit inductive arguments of the sort required to lend even a modest degree of probability to their conclusions. One of the principal stumbling blocks facing the historian interested in drawing lessons from history is the role of individuals in it. Similar historical events of necessity involve different actors, and we know from our own experience that people react differently to what appear to be the same set of facts. Those who argue that history has lessons to teach us

must assume that everyone reacts the same way to a stimulus. Individuals make little or no difference to these historians. Russell, as we saw earlier, was on the side of those who thought that individuals were important in history, although not all-important. The last point I want to make concerns the role of science in human history. On this point I think Russell had a contribution to make. During the 1920s he began to write extensively on scientific subjects, and one of his principal concerns was to try to understand the way in which new scientific discoveries are likely to impact upon human history. Most historians then (and perhaps even now) tended to think that political decisions were what moved the world along, but Russell was convinced that modern science would also greatly influence the way in which human history developed. As early as 1923, in *The ABC of Atoms*, he warned that recent work on the structure of the atom made it probable that “it will ultimately be used for making more deadly explosives and projectiles than any yet invented” (1923, 11). The first atomic bomb was exploded a mere twenty-two years later. As we all know only too well, the fact of the atomic bomb (and later the hydrogen bomb) disrupted human history in an extraordinary way.

Scientific prophesy began to be something of a Russell occupation in the late 1920s. He wrote a great deal for the popular press pointing out the ways in which scientific advances were changing, and would continue to change, customary ways of life. Because he was able to grasp even the most esoteric science, that which is essentially mathematical in nature, and to write about both it and the less technical sciences in a way which the scientific unlettered could comprehend, or thought they comprehended, he was in demand amongst editors for articles and books expounding science for their readers. The fact that he was willing to speculate on future consequences of scientific discoveries made his writings even more attractively saleable. He did warn his readers that his predictions would almost certainly turn out to be wrong, because “if they were right, the dis-

coveries would already have been made and he would be writing about the present instead of the future” (1996, 46). One wonders, however, just how much scepticism was induced into the readers (say) of the *Jewish Daily Forward* by such a caveat. At any rate, Russell had covered himself.

Scientific prophesy, like theology, is an exercise in deductive logic, but the nature of the premisses is radically different in the two subjects. When Russell deduces (in outline) the nature of a future society dominated by scientists, he takes as his premisses his knowledge of science at the time. As everyone knows, he read widely in science and tried to keep abreast of new and significant developments both in the natural sciences, especially physics, and the human sciences, especially Watsonian behaviourism. In writing about the likely effects of science on society, then, Russell is engaging in an enterprise not totally dissimilar from what Hegel and Marx had attempted. But his history of the future is loaded with caveats that the actual future when it arrives is extremely unlikely to bear any resemblance at all to his projected society.

What I think is important about these writings is that they help to get across to everyone, historians included, the fact that science has become a widely-pervasive influence in modern life and that it is bound to affect profoundly the way in which the future unfolds. His readers of the 1920s, having just survived the First World War with its many innovations in weapons and communications due to modern science, were prepared to believe that science is as important as Russell said it is. In the popular mind the notions of prediction and science are so analytically entangled that it is all too ready to believe that scientists can predict the way in which their discoveries will change people's lives. So Russell's warnings that his predictions were almost certainly to turn out false probably went unheeded. There is another fact about predictions which make such writings popular, namely, they are exciting. To read about a (presumably) not-too distant day when much human drudgery will be done by untiring and un-

complaining robots fills the imaginations of his readers with much pleasant mental furniture. It may never happen in their lifetime, but it is nice to think that it will come somewhere down the road. And enough of the predictions he and others made did come to pass to keep hope alive.

So far my assumption has been that the predictions are ones that people would like to see come to pass, those of light, so to speak. But there are also those of darkness, the ways in which scientific power can be used to control and manipulate people against their will. Russell spelled this darker side of science out most fully in Part III of *The Scientific Outlook* (1931), as a chilly warning to those who are content to leave science to the scientists, that perhaps such a policy is unwise. Unchecked scientific power, like any unchecked power, is likely sooner or later to lead to unwelcome consequences. Only an informed public can serve as a counterweight to unchecked scientific power, and an important part of the responsibility for keeping the public informed lies with historians. They will have to increase their knowledge of science and incorporate scientific developments in their works, if they are to perform their task properly.

One of the most dismaying aspects of Russell's intellectual biography is the way he clung to utopian ideals after having been one of the first to introduce his readers to the horrors of scientific anti-utopias. For one who knew so much about history and the flawed human nature it reveals, it is surprising to find him so optimistic, and almost off-hand, when he discusses the direction the future could take. In 1929, in "How I Came by My Creed", his concluding paragraph opens with this sentence: "The road to Utopia is clear; it lies partly through politics and partly through changes in the individual" (1996, 17). In politics the requirement is the establishment of a world government; for individuals it is necessary that they be made "less prone to hatred and fear, and this is a matter partly physiological and partly psychological". Surely he knew when he wrote this sentence that such changes were out of the question, especially the latter. And surely also he knew that

even if these changes were made, there was no guarantee that the road to Utopia was clear. He knew about many earlier attempts to found utopian communities and how they had come to grief on the hard shoals of human nature. In 1951, long after the publication of *The Scientific Outlook*, he was still providing his readers with a recipe for paradise; the last chapter of *New Hopes for a Changing World* outlines the changes required in human beings and their institutions if Eden is to be achieved on Earth. The list is a daunting one, and one that even a superficial knowledge of history renders extremely unlikely of ever coming to pass, but Russell claims at the end to find that his conditions will be realized if only one antecedent condition is met:

Man now needs for his salvation only one thing: to open his heart to joy, and leave fear to gibber through the glimmering darkness of a forgotten past. He must lift up his eyes and say: "No, I am not a miserable sinner; I am a being who, by a long and arduous road, have discovered how to make intelligence master natural obstacles, how to live in freedom and joy, at peace with myself and therefore with all mankind." This will happen if men will choose joy rather than sorrow. If not, eternal death will buy man in deserved oblivion. (1951, 218)

This passage reads as if he believed that human nature can be changed by a sheer act of will, that a person, however ill-advantaged, will know what joy is and can open his or her heart to it by just deciding to do so, perhaps persuaded by the argument of Russell's book, but in any other context Russell would have rejected such a view out of hand. In other writings he often refers to persons and classes of persons whose circumstances make it impossible for them to alter their behaviour, and he frequently combats those who advise the poor and downtrodden to change their ways by pointing out that it is impossible for them to do so. How

is it possible, then, that such a hard-headed and well-informed critic of the theories and policies of others could write almost pure propaganda at other times? My guess is that it has something to do with his emotional nature, which, on his own testimony, often showed itself capable of strong and even turbulent passions. Occasionally then, when he sat down to write on matters about which he felt deeply, his desire to leave the world a better place than he found it led him into stating sweeping remedies of a utopian nature. It is somewhat ironic therefore to find him giving this piece of advice at the end of *The Scientific Outlook*: “The new powers that science has given to man can only be wielded safely by those who, whether through the study of history or through their own experience of life, have acquired some reverence for human feelings and some tenderness towards the emotions that give colour to the daily existence of men and women” (1931, 277–8). Since extensive study of history did not rein in his own emotional nature, how likely is it to perform this function for others? Perhaps Russell himself is the best evidence we have of the truth of his observation that the intellect always outpaces the emotions, and that all we can ever hope to do is muddle through.

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## Russell Quote of the Issue

BY BERTRAND RUSSELL

This issue's quote comes to us from Peter Stone's review of Michael's book:

This has been my life. I have found it worth living, and would gladly live it again if the chance were offered me.

*Prologue*, p. 4 in *The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1872-1914*, Volume I, 1967: Little, Brown, and Company: Boston.

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