From the Archives
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BOOKS, BOOKS, BOOKS

Bertrand Russell evaluated people, philosophies, political parties, and pretty nearly everything else. Not for nothing was he nicknamed “the Day of Judgment”. Although not what you’d call bookish, he also evaluated books. The breadth of his interests and expertise is astounding. He evaluated them in the course of his private and public writing, in book reviews, and in blurbs requested by publishers. Some of his evaluations are extremely short: he summed up the Koran and Das Kapital in one word, “dull”. Many of his evaluations are rich and lengthy, but they usually contain a pithy remark or two suitable for quick quotation on a jacket blurb or separate publisher’s advertisement. Let us quote these in the manner of the modern “consumer” mini-review that so many websites carry. All the quotations that follow are from the period 1944–50. Exact sources, in context, will be found here. The 52 titles that follow can’t be all of Russell’s book reading during the period, but they must be a good part, and some remain in his library at McMaster. In Russell Studies, we want to know what went into Russell’s head, as well as what came out of it.

There would be numerous other books that he read but didn’t evaluate in his writing. For example, he was photographed after his plane went down in the Trondheim fjord – in pyjamas, in bed, reading My Best Thriller (1947). That’s an implicit evaluation of the wordless kind. And he told the audience at his National Book League lecture in 1946 that he had recently read a book on the Anglo-Saxon invasion of Britain, though he left no clue as to what book it was.

Russell reviewed the autobiography of Ely Culbertson, The Strange Lives of One Man (1940). His comments are definitely high-brow: “It is one of the most interesting books I have ever read. It has all the merits of Borrow, most of the merits of De Quincey, and many other merits of a quite different kind.” At this time his sometime lover Constance Malleson was en route to publishing another autobiographical book, In the North (1946). Its publisher, Gollancz, sent Russell the manuscript. “I looked through it,” he told her, “... and it seems most interesting. How much there is in your life that I knew nothing about.”

In the field of education he provided a dust-jacket blurb for William B. Curry’s Education for Sanity (1947). The book “discusses just those questions that parents are most apt to raise concerning progressive education. I think it is likely to be widely read....

Several books on history caught his interest. C. Delisle Burns’ The First Europe (1947), which Russell reviewed, was “a very important book dealing with an obscure and little known period of history, of which the formative importance in relation to subsequent European institutions has been quite inadequately appreciated. Having been engaged in a history of Philosophy which compelled me to make some study of the Middle Ages, I found Delisle Burns’s book more helpful than any other that I know of.” A reviewer’s opinion of E.M. Butler’s The Myth of the Magus (1948) annoyed him, and he wrote to the editor: “I found the book both delightful reading and highly informative.” At a time when Russell was promoting steps towards the possible unification of Europe, he reviewed John Bowle’s The Unity of European History (1948). After favourably mentioning Bowle’s Western Political Thought, Russell said that Bowle was “concerned in this new volume to bring out the elements of unity which make it possible to speak of ‘European’ civilization, as opposed to that of other continents. This theme is one of pe-
cicular importance at the present time, and we should all be glad that Mr. Bowle has set it forth so convincingly.”

Ironically, Russell provided a “descriptive paragraph” that George Allen and Unwin used in advertising his own Human Knowledge (1948) — in general, an authorial job he disliked doing — but since it does not evaluate the work, it is excluded from this survey. In Human Knowledge he did evaluate some mathematical works. John Maynard Keynes’ A Treatise on Probability (1922) is “the best that can be done for induction on purely mathematical lines...” “The frequency interpretation of probability ... has been set forth in two important books, both by German professors who were then in Constantinople.” Despite their order of publication, Russell’s view was that Richard von Mises’ Wahrscheinlichkeit, Statistik und Wahrscheinlichkeit (1936) was surpassed by Hans Reichenbach’s Wahrscheinlichkeitslehre (1935): “Reichenbach’s book is a development of that of v. Mises, and is in various ways a better statement of the same kind of theory.” He had long since introduced Wittgenstein’s Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus (1922), but in an article on logical positivism he reminded readers that the book was “undoubtedly important”. In the same article he thought very highly of a 1937 work by Rudolf Carnap: “... syntax (in a logical sense) became much more important than it had been thought to be, and also much more complicated. In any language there must be, in addition to vocabulary, rules for the formation of significant sentences, and these rules must be so framed that they exclude sentences which would be self-contradictory ... a large and very technical subject has been developed, which is perhaps best studied in Carnap’s Logical Syntax of Language.” Russell supplied a foreword to James Feibleman’s Introduction to Peirce’s Philosophy Interpreted as a System. He “has performed a most valuable work in presenting to the public a systematic exposition” and “deserves the grateful thanks of all students of philosophy.”

Russell prefaced an old favourite, William Kingdon Clifford’s The Common Sense of the Exact Sciences (1885), saying: “invaluable to the schoolboy”; “it deserved all the adolescent enthusiasm which I bestowed upon it when I first read it”; “knowledge of subsequent work only increases the reader’s admiration for his prophetic insight”; and “readers may imbibe something of its author’s belief in the possibility of excellent things...”. An extract from Russell’s review of A. J. Ayer’s Language, Truth and Logic (1946) may be familiar: “I should like to have written it myself when young”, and he praised Ayer’s “very exceptional clarity”.

He praised the logical positivists’ Erkenntnis (1930–38) as an “admirable periodical”. He told his readership that Alfred Tarski’s Der Begriff der Wahrheit in den formalisierten Sprachen (1936) was “a very important book”. He broadcast a review of his friend and neighbour’s book, The Comforts of Unreason (1947) by Rupert Crawshay-Williams: “I hope this book will have many readers.” In a broadcast on “The Rewards of Philosophy”, Russell extolled Boethius’ Consolation of Philosophy (c. 524 A.D.) as “exquisite and moving”. This is consistent with the judgment in his History of Western Philosophy that it is “as admirable as the last days of the Platonic Socrates”. That comparison is at least a reference to the Phaedo, and probably also to the Apology (4th century B.C.).

Turning to political philosophy, we find Russell “puffing” Karl Popper’s work The Open Society and its Enemies (1945): it is “a work of first-class importance, and one which ought to be widely read for its masterly criticism of theoretical enemies of democracy, ancient and modern... His analysis of Hegel is deadly, and very able... The book as a whole is a vigorous and profound defence of democracy and of a philosophic outlook likely to promote belief in democracy. It is timely, and calculated to have an important beneficent influence. It is also very interesting and very well written. I cannot doubt that it will appeal to a large circle of readers.” In a contemporary essay Russell also described Popper’s thesis as “brilliantly advocated”. Russell’s encomium for George Orwell’s 1984 appeared on the dust-jacket of the first edition (1949): it “depicts, with very great power, the horrors of a well-established totalitarian régime of whatever type. It is important that the western world should be aware of these dangers, and not only in the somewhat narrow form of fear of Russia. Mr. Orwell’s book contributes to this important purpose with great power and skill and force of imagination. I sincerely hope that it will be very widely read.” Elsewhere at this time he wrote of 1984 that “The connection of politics with philosophy has seldom been more clearly set forth.” 1984 maintained the standard of the “biting and masterly satire” of Animal Farm (1946), and because of the latter book Russell bracketed Orwell with Jonathan Swift. Always interested in the literary roots of Nazism, Russell had already commented several times on Johann Gottlieb Fichte’s Addresses to the German Nation (1808). In a 1944 article he called the work “the Bible of German nationalism”.

This brings us to politics, much of it to do with the advent of the Cold War. Russell used a review of Arthur Koestler’s The Yogi and the Commissar
(1945) to describe his growing concerns about Soviet Russia’s internal and external policies. This was prior to getting to know Koestler the next year. “There is much in the first two parts that is interesting and deserves discussion, but I think most readers will agree that the third part, which is concerned with Russia, is much the most important.” Russell was asked about E.H. Carr by Colette. Carr, he told her, “used to write very amusing books about the Russians, e.g. The Romantic Exiles” (1933); now he was “bad, bad, bad”, doubtless because he was pro-Soviet. Russell expressed his keenness about a new book to Colette in 1946. “Have you read The Dark Side of the Moon? (anonymous) about Russian doings in Poland? Very horrible.” The author was in fact Zoe Zajdlerowa, and the book had a preface by T.S. Eliot. Someone gave Russell P.S. Hudson and R.H. Richens’ The New Genetics in the Soviet Union (1946) to review in a weekly Church of England paper, of all places. He judged the book “a most valuable piece of work ... completely unbiased, adequately documented, and mentioning political matters only in so far as they have influenced opinion on purely scientific questions.” At dinner with a high-placed Liberal politician, Violet Bonham Carter, Russell remarked that there was “a terrible book by Kallin [sic] on forced labour” in Russia. The book turned out to be David J. Dallin and Boris I. Nicolaevsky’s Forced Labour in Soviet Russia (1947). As with the “horrible” book above, this one wasn’t poorly written or researched but rather was harrowing in its account of actual events. It happened to be featured in Ram Swarup’s Russian Imperialism: How to Stop It (1950). Russell praised it on the cover as “excellent” and wished the author “all success.”

Russell was asked the same year to participate in the centenary of the Communist Manifesto (1848). His comment on the BBC, “without doubt the most forceful of the works of Marx and Engels”, was not quite on a par with his description of it in German Social Democracy, half a century earlier, as “almost unsurpassed in literary merit”. (Some readers have mistaken this praise for agreement.) Russell’s old friend, Freda Utley, published Lost Illusion in 1949. He blurbed it – “an invaluable source book” – and also introduced it: “I earnestly hope that Freda Utley’s book will be as widely read as it deserves to be, especially by those who find their illusions about Russia difficult to abandon.” In a broadcast and later printed review he called John Langdon-Davies’ Russia Puts Back the Clock (1949) “an admirable little book”. Russell twice wrote about The God That Failed (1950), edited by the left-wing Labour M.P. Richard Crossman, calling it “a deeply interesting new book” because of the contributors’ conversions from communism. He helped promote two periodicals. Russell read the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists (1946), he said in a lost letter that accompanied a submission and was quoted editorially, “with interest and attention”. He published as well in the World Review, which ran his commendation that it “is always interesting, much more so, to me, than most other Reviews. I read it with avidity, and always with profit.”

As for sociological works, we find Russell in an article praising one he had already used in his unpublished book manuscript, “The Problems of Democracy”, namely Robert S. Lynd and Helen Merrill Lynd’s Middletown: A Study in Contemporary American Culture (1929). It is “a book which should be studied by all who wish to understand America.” In a discussion of how to treat vanquished Germany, Russell cited Cyril Burt’s The Young Delinquent (1925): “a very admirable book concerning juvenile delinquency”. He had met Burt in the mid-1930s but did not live to learn of the exposé of Burt’s research into IQ. In a broadcast on crime, during the growth in the U.K. of serious juvenile delinquency, Russell cited Sir Leo Page’s book, The Young Lag: A Study in Crime (1950), as “valuable”. The Mass Observation movement to diarize the ordinary activities and viewpoints of the British public began before World War II. Hundreds of observers contributed notes on their interviews and what they overheard. Several volumes were published. One concerned religion, and Russell provided the publisher with a blur for the title Puzzled People (1947) – “very interesting and valuable”.

In analysing “sin” in 1946, Russell first discussed original sin, “of which”, he said, “the best exposition is to be found in St. Augustine.” It is unclear, even from his History, what writing Russell meant, but it seems not to be The City of God (427 A.D.) or the Confessions (397–398), but rather some unspecified anti-Pelagian works. He went on to cite F.R. Tennant’s The Concept of Sin (1912), in which he said the point of view of modern liberal theologians was “well set forth”. (He would have known Tennant and perhaps his book from Trinity College before both wars.) Russell reviewed Ethics for Unbelievers (1948) by his old friend and intimate correspondent, Amber Blanco White. He judged it to be “extremely useful and timely” and “eminently readable”. In a 1946 ethical manuscript that wasn’t published until 1954, he wrote of the influence of two anti-serfdom and anti-slavery books. “Turgenev’s Sportsman’s Sketches [1852], with all the art of a great novelist,
gave a sympathetic portrait of the serfs’ joys and sorrows, thereby arousing sensibility à la Rousseau in liberal-minded landowners. Uncle Tom’s Cabin [by Harriet Beecher Stowe, also 1852] performed the same service for slaves in the United States.”

Even in his Reith lectures, Authority and the Individual (1949), Russell recommended books. Two supported his preference for workers’ involvement in the workplace. James Gillespie wrote a work on Free Expression in Industry (1948): “This subject [of democratizing management] is dealt with admirably…. He termed John Spedan Lewis’s Partnership for All – A 34-Year Old Experiment in Industrial Democracy (1948) “very interesting” and “based upon a long and extensive practical experience by a man who combines public spirit with experimental boldness.” Finally, he praised William Vogt’s Road to Survival (1949) for setting forth the world’s dire agricultural situation “with great vividness”.

With all these books and more – visitors and photographers would find him with a small stack of books in various stages of reading on his tea-table – Russell might seem to be a very bookish philosopher. Yet he was neither a collector nor a bibliophile, and if “bookish” means avoiding life in favour of books, he wasn’t that either.

2 https://docs.google.com/spreadsheet/pub?key=0AphPqntZrkHrdDgzcVJS-bU1UaEZeNTNFc2hrMjhCWXc&output=html
3 In 1945 he was asked to name ten favourite books, and he did so without comment: J. Drummond and Anne Wilbraham, The Englishman’s Food (1939); J. L. and Barbara Hammond, The Village Labourer (1911); J. Huizinga, The Waning of the Middle Ages (1924); Ernst Kantorowicz, Life of Frederick II (Hohenstaufen) (1927); Lucretius (trans. by R. C. Trevelyan), De Rerum Natura (1937); Gilbert Murray, Five Stages of Greek Religion (1913); Eileen Power, Mediaeval People (1924); W. W. Tarn and others, The Hellenistic Age (1923); Alexis de Tocqueville, Democracy in America (1838); and Arthur Waley (trans.), One Hundred and Seventy Chinese Poems (1918). He also listed, without comment, the six novels by Joseph Conrad that, in his opinion, were “likely to survive”: Almayer’s Folly (1895), The Nigger of the Narcissus (1898), Lord Jim (1915), The Heart of Darkness (1899), Chance (1913) and The Secret Agent (1907).