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In 1967 Bertrand Russell needed money. To be more precise, the peace foundation that Russell had established in 1963 needed funds to establish an International War Crimes Tribunal to investigate the war in Vietnam. Russell's papers would be highly prized possessions and most likely fetch a sizable sum from libraries, museums and possibly private collectors. Perhaps the papers could serve as the primary source of the needed funds for the tribunal. Thus begins the intriguing story of a famous philosopher, money, a buccaneering librarian, *Newsweek*, and last but not least, a small university with Baptist roots.

McMaster University acquired the papers in 1968. But how did the papers of the world's most famous campaigner for nuclear disarmament come to be housed at a university that prided itself on its own nuclear reactor and its close association with the nuclear research conducted by Harry Thode, president of McMaster from 1961 to 1972, at Chalk River during the war?<sup>1</sup> Oddly enough, the nuclear reactor is part of the story. During the 1960s, humanities at McMaster, then as now under-resourced and under-appreciated, had been looking for something that would put it on the map in the way the nuclear reactor had put the Faculty of Science on the map. Quite what they had in mind before the Russell papers came on the market, I don't know. But the Russell Archives, in the minds of several humanities administrators, was the institutional equivalent of the nuclear reactor.

This, of course, only explains why McMaster wanted the papers. It does not explain how it came to get them. A large part of the answer to that question lies in the fact that the University had, in

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<sup>1</sup> Thode had been a McMaster professor since 1939, but during the war he had worked at the Canadian nuclear research facility at Chalk River, the original purpose of which was to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. After the war, largely through his influence, McMaster became the first Canadian university to have an experimental nuclear reactor

Will Ready, an enterprising and imaginative librarian. Ready had barely been at McMaster a year when the Russell papers came on the market. He had come to McMaster from Marquette University in Wisconsin, where he had already had considerable experience buying archives: he had bought J.R.R. Tolkien's papers and those of Dorothy Day of the Catholic Worker movement for Marquette. To describe Ready as enterprising, however, barely does justice to the man. It may seem like an oxymoron to describe a librarian as buccaneering, but such was Will Ready. In his autobiography he takes pride in what he called his "cavalier" and "headlong ways" – and in the trouble they got him into and which he always managed to get out of.

Ready learned the Russell papers were up for sale by accident. He read of it in the newspaper when he was visiting Britain in the autumn of 1967. Apparently with no more than the newspaper article to go on, he returned to Canada and in November persuaded the Ontario Council of University Libraries to support an application to the Canada Council for money to buy the papers. By December he had a promise of \$150,000 from the Canada Council and by the end of that month had returned to Britain to actually see the papers for the first time. However, the money promised by the Canadian Council was far short of the asking price.

The papers were not being sold by Russell himself. Indeed, Russell himself did not own the papers. He had given them to the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, and a company, Continuum 1, had been set up to catalogue and sell them. Continuum 1 wanted two hundred thousand British pounds (just over half a million Canadian dollars). Ready returned to Canada for more money. Cyrus Eaton, a wealthy financier and McMaster alumnus, and the Laidlaw Foundation contributed, but the lion's share was put up by the Atkinson Foundation. By the end of March 1968, the money was pledged and Ready was back in Britain to sign the contracts. The papers arrived that summer. It had taken Ready all of six months from learning of the papers' existence to actually completing the sale.

I don't know what support Ready got from inside the University to help acquire them, but sadly, he seems to have had little from the philosophy department. One of my former colleagues told the press at the time that he wouldn't have paid two cents for the

papers. These varying estimates of the papers' worth notwithstanding, it seems to me that at two hundred thousand pounds they were quite a bargain. As Ready himself noted, dealers could have formed a cartel to buy them and made many millions selling them off piecemeal.

The conventional wisdom is that the price was kept low because Russell would not sell to the Americans, who would have paid more for them, because of his opposition to the war in Vietnam. Indeed, I have told this story myself. It turns out, however, not to be true, as I learned by going through the recently acquired papers of Anton Felton, Russell's agent in the sale. The truth is, in fact, much more interesting.

Russell needed to sell the papers to support his political work. In 1963 he had set up the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation to continue his work after his death. And in 1967 the Peace Foundation was in urgent need of cash to pay for the International War Crimes Tribunal that Russell was setting up to inquire into American conduct in Vietnam. This was a hugely expensive undertaking and, although there was some hope (never realized) that the Tribunal would be able to raise money for its own expenses, the Peace Foundation was bankrolling the Tribunal throughout its entire existence.

Russell had already given the Peace Foundation the proceeds from his *Autobiography*, the American rights to which were sold by auction (in those days, a rare event). The *Autobiography* had been mostly written much earlier and Russell had intended it to be published after his death. The urgent needs of the Peace Foundation, however, caused him to change his mind. His other main asset at this time was his papers and these, as I've said, he had given to the Peace Foundation to sell.

This, in itself, ruled out certain institutions. The British Museum couldn't afford them, and Cambridge University, which probably could have, sat on the sidelines hoping that Russell would leave them to Cambridge in his will. There was considerable irritation at Cambridge that this didn't happen. Indeed, there was considerable irritation in Britain that the papers were leaving the country. Questions about the sale were asked in Parliament, and the hapless bookseller that McMaster engaged to export the papers was subsequently fined for exporting historical manuscripts without a

licence. This referred not to Russell's own papers, but to some of his family papers, especially those of his grandfather, Lord John Russell, which had been included in the sale and which were over 100 years old. The laws concerning the export of historical manuscripts were subsequently tightened.

Although the Peace Foundation wanted as much money as it could get for them, there were limits on how they would allow them to be sold. I doubt that Russell would ever have allowed them to be bought by a cartel of dealers and sold off individually to collectors, though this would likely have been the most profitable option. Russell wanted them to be housed in a publicly accessible institution, which would look after them and make them available to researchers. With a few exceptions, the sale stipulated that the papers were to be available to whoever wanted to see them. (The exceptions concern some personal documents which were to be embargoed until five years after the deaths of the people concerned. There is very little material still embargoed - most of it concerns Russell's children, his grandchildren, and his third wife, who are still alive.)

Nonetheless, American institutions would likely have paid more for the papers than McMaster did, and, despite the Vietnam war, Russell was not averse to selling to an American university. This was hardly inconsistent: the American universities themselves were, by this time, hotbeds of opposition to the Vietnam war. Indeed negotiations with American universities were underway in 1967, before Ready even knew the papers were up for sale. There was one plan for them to be bought jointly by the University of Chicago and Harvard. Russell had taught at both places. The social and political papers would go to Chicago and the philosophical ones to Harvard. (Given what happened to the Peirce papers at Harvard, as a Russell scholar I am profoundly grateful that they didn't go there.)

But the big player here was the University of Texas at Austin. Backed by Texas oil revenues, Austin would have had no trouble meeting the asking price. It had, moreover, an aggressive acquisitions policy for its Humanities Research Centre, which already had a fabulously rich collection of papers, many of them of direct relevance to Russell. By any objective standards, the Humanities Research Centre at Austin would have been the natural home for the Russell collection.

The University of Texas was already negotiating with Russell's agents before Ready even knew of the papers and would no doubt have concluded the deal, but for a curious mischance. The negotiations, of course, were conducted in private. But news that they were going on was announced in an extraordinary story in *Newsweek*. This would have been bad enough, but *Newsweek* went on to assert that Russell intended to send the proceeds from the sale to North Vietnam to support the war effort. There was absolutely no truth to this claim at all. Russell's lawyers went to work and got the offending issue of the journal pulled from the newsstands in Britain. But the damage had been done. Texas withdrew from negotiations and other potential American buyers backed off.

It is hard to believe that *Newsweek* would publish a completely fabricated story, and it seems most likely that the magazine was set up. By whom is not clear. It could have been a patriotic American, perhaps an employee of the University of Texas, who knew of the negotiations and objected to Texas oil revenues being used to support the War Crimes Tribunal. Or it might have been the American authorities. They were going to extraordinary lengths to prevent the War Crimes Tribunal from taking place. Pressure was brought to bear on the French government to revoke permission for the Tribunal to be held in Paris. And when it finally took place in Stockholm, Walt Rostow publicly berated the Swedish prime minister about it at Konrad Adenauer's funeral. Russell himself was the subject of a campaign of vilification in the American press - some of the worst of it, e.g. an article by Flora Lewis in *Look*, under the auspices of the American embassy in London. The idea that they would plant a false story in *Newsweek* is certainly not beyond the bounds of credibility.

The result of the article was that the papers had become unsaleable in America. The thinking at Continuum 1 was that they should be withdrawn from sale until the fuss had died down. It was at this point that Ready entered the picture. It seems altogether likely that *Newsweek* cost the Peace Foundation many thousands of dollars. By the same token, McMaster got one of the best bargains in its history. It acquired, not only the papers themselves, but copyright in most of Russell's unpublished writings.

McMaster was not unaware of the political controversy surrounding the papers. As Ready forged ahead in his "cavalier"

way, more timid administrators were fearing the criticism that might fall on McMaster for buying the papers of so notorious a rebel. There was no fear that the money would be channelled to Hanoi, but it was known that it would go to furthering Russell's various political causes, and McMaster was quite anxious not to be seen to be directly supporting those. For this reason, McMaster was not willing to buy the papers directly from the Peace Foundation, which owned them, but insisted instead that a company be set up to take possession of the papers and sell them to the University. This was done, and the money was then passed from the company to the Foundation.

So far as I know, McMaster ran into no trouble for allegedly supporting Russell's political causes. It did, however, run into trouble over its very efforts to keep a safe distance between itself and the Peace Foundation. The selling price was supposed to be kept secret, but the day after the deal was completed, *The Observer* published an article speculating on the price and claiming it was a world record sum. It also reported that the money had gone to Russell and not the Peace Foundation. Further reports along similar lines appeared in the press over the next few days.

The impression was given that Russell was only interested in making money from the papers. He was furious. He had, moreover, no doubt that Ready was the source of the stories. Whether Ready had actually revealed the price is unclear, though Russell certainly thought that he had. But the University was so anxious not to appear to be supporting Russell's politics, that it had gone out of its way to insist to all who would listen that it had not bought the papers from the Peace Foundation. The press, not unreasonably, concluded that it had bought them from Russell himself and that he had made a personal fortune from the deal.

Russell wrote sternly to Ready about this:

I have complained to Mr. Felton about the story in *The Observer* of March 31, but should point out to you that the story in the *Daily Telegraph* of 2 April emanated from Hamilton and is in direct breach of the agreement entered into with you not to reveal the price of the archives. This failure appears to me to be entirely your responsibility, and there is nothing in your letter to suggest you recognise this fact.

No serious harm seems to have been done by this last controversy. It did not prevent a second sale to McMaster, after Russell's death, of private and current political papers that had been held back from the first sale and those which had accumulated after it. But it does seem that Ready – a bit like Russell – was unable to keep out of trouble, even in his greatest triumph.

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