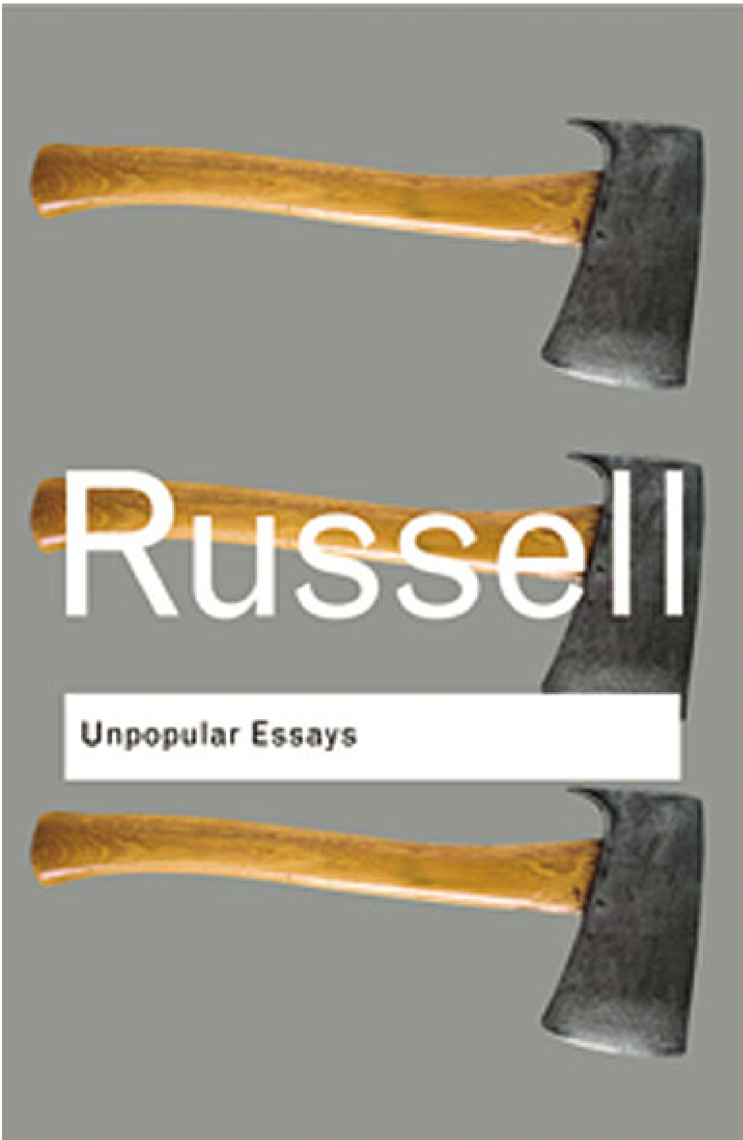
Russell
Unpopular Essays

Unpopular Essays

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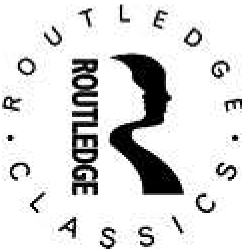

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Bertrand Russell

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INTRODUCTION

Reputations are notoriously fickle. Difficult to acquire, they are often impossible either to lose or to realise. Woe, therefore, to the unfortunate soul who – like Bertrand Russell – manages to collect not simply one but several reputations. Praise and obloquy, admiration and contempt, agreement and denunciation all accompanied Russell as, in the course of his immensely long life, he evolved from respectable scion of the Whig aristocracy to defiant CND disobedient, from conventional Victorian gentleman to notorious enthusiast for a new morality, from path-breaking logician to out-moded defender of tired philosophical fashions, from best-selling populariser and essayist to stigmatised 'crank' and gadfly. So varied was Russell's life and so variable his reputations, indeed, that he seems to defeat any attempt to see his life and work whole. And yet at its heart Russell's life had a coherence – an intellectual, political, and temperamental unity which underlay its apparent shifts and turns, paradoxes and contradictions. And it is its capacity to give witness to that underlying unity that makes *Unpopular Essays* one of Russell's most characteristic and self-revealing books.

To be born a Russell in the full summer of Victorian Britain was to assume a place among England's social and political ascendancy. Grandson of a prime minister and heir to an earldom, Russell was born (in 1872) into one of the proudest and most esteemed families of the Whig aristocracy – a social fact which determined much of Russell's upbringing and education and which neither he nor his contemporaries ever forgot.

In the two and a half decades stretching from his arrival as an anxious young undergraduate at Cambridge in 1890 until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914, Russell won for himself a quite different renown – as a philosopher and logician of rare fertility and sophistication. Books such as *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903) and *Principia Mathematica* (3 vols, 1910–13), articles such as 'On Denoting' (1905) and 'Mathematical Logic as

Based on the Theory of Types' (1908), and pupils as diverse as T. S. Eliot and Ludwig Wittgenstein combined to make him – on the eve of the Great War – indisputably the most celebrated and influential philosopher in the English-speaking world. Simultaneous with the growth of this largely academic reputation, moreover, Russell also acquired a broader fame as a philosophical populariser and versatile essayist, writing such introductions as *The Problems of Philosophy* (1912) and *Philosophical Essays* (1910) as well as such celebrated essays as 'The Free Man's Worship' (1903), 'On History' (1904), and 'The Study of Mathematics' (1907). Combined with strongly held political views and occasional forays into such on-going campaigns as those in favour of female suffrage and its opposition to tariff reform, such writings served to make Russell a direct descendant of the Victorian man of letters – the intellectual as well as familial godchild of John Stuart Mill.

The Great War served not so much to besmirch these reputations as to bury them beneath layers of disapproval and condemnation. Convinced that Britain's participation in the conflict was an act of criminal folly and prepared to commit his energies wholeheartedly to the task of dissent, Russell threw himself into the small and bitterly unpopular anti-war movement. Determined to do all he could at once to question the government's wasteful military policy, to denounce the gradual erosion of civil liberties, to defend conscientious objectors from public wrath and military discipline, and to bear witness to the continued existence in Britain of at least a minority immune from the contagion of prejudice and hatred, Russell worked tirelessly – counselling objectors, lobbying ministers, editing newspapers, administering the No-Conscription Fellowship, and finding time to lecture on the causes of conflict and prospects of reconstruction. Such work was bitterly unpopular – not simply to the authorities but to all manner of Britons who saw such dissent as scarcely disguised treason. Russell thus found himself vilified by his enemies, scorned by many former friends, dismissed from his Trinity College lectureship, and – in the spring of 1918 – imprisoned by the government.

At the same time, however, Russell's unyielding opposition to what with every passing day became an increasingly unpopular

conflict and his brave willingness to put his own social position and academic reputation at risk also won him admirers – among dissidents and war resisters who had experienced his counselling and benefited from his intervention as well as among others who admired his intellectual honesty and political courage. Still others, however, found his wartime lectures and writings on social and political philosophy – *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916), *Political Ideals* (1917), and *Roads to Freedom* (1918) – to be both inspirational and practical guides to the creation of a new social order on the ashes of the ancien regime destroyed by the war.

The immediate post-war years thus saw Russell as a political renegade to some and an intellectual hero to others. For his own part Russell aspired in the 1920s and into the 1930s to win for himself a new repute – as ‘the Voltaire of the twentieth century’, the conscience of Europe. Less grandiloquently but equally ambitiously, Russell was determined to pursue the steady, patient business of genuine peacemaking – not the drafting of treaties or the forging of alliances, but the creation of a world without either the impulses or the means to war. To this end Russell travelled extensively (including trips to Russia in 1920, to China in 1920–1, and to America repeatedly), lectured tirelessly, and wrote prolifically – all the while managing, in his spare moments, to run for Parliament (twice, in irredeemably Tory Chelsea), to marry for a second and then a third time, to father three children, and to open a school – at Beacon Hill in Sussex – as a model of what education in an age of peace must be. Determined not merely to condemn what he judged to be the causes of warfare – nationalist and sectarian rivalries, militarism, propaganda, intolerance, aggression, technology – but also to promote what he believed to be the true principles on which an authentic and enduring peace must be built – tolerance, education, freedom, science, justice, creativity – Russell sent forth a positive torrent of words in lectures, essays, magazine articles, and books. Even a partial list of his books makes plain both the range of his concerns and the breadth of his audience: *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (1920), *The Problem of China* and *Free Thought and Offcial Propaganda* (1922), *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* and *The ABC of Atoms* (1923), *Icarus, or the*

Future of Science and *Bolshevism and the West* (1924), *What I Believe* and *The ABC of Relativity* (1925), *On Education* (1926), *An Outline of Philosophy* and *The Analysis of Matter* (1927), *Sceptical Essays* (1928), *Marriage and Morals* (1929), *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930), *The Scientific Outlook* (1931), *Education and the Social Order* (1932), *Freedom and Organization* (1934), *Religion and Science* (1935), *Which Way to Peace?* (1936), and *Power: A New Social Analysis* (1938). Aimed at a wide audience and intended quite avowedly to help mould the intelligent opinion he believed to be such a motive force in history, these books – as well as the dozens of lectures and scores of articles which accompanied them – won for Russell a renewed renown as an elegant and witty stylist, an accomplished and subtle dialectician, and an unconventional and impatient advocate of confessedly 'advanced' opinion on matters ranging from sexual mores and childrearing practices to foreign policy and economic planning.

The outbreak of the Second World War found Russell in self-imposed exile in America. Angry at the evasions of British foreign and defence policies, disgusted at the unwillingness of successive National governments to relieve pervasive social and economic misery, uncertain whether to raise his children as British subjects, and desperate to repair his financial position, Russell had left Britain in 1938 sullen and pessimistic, settling into short-term teaching positions first in Chicago and then in Los Angeles. Eager to return to Britain with the coming of war in the autumn of 1939, Russell was prohibited from doing so by a British government all too willing to remember his earlier antiwar activities but not to believe his current – and quite genuine – protestations of support for the unfolding conflict against Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. Controversy in New York over his radical opinions concerning marriage and sexuality and in Pennsylvania over a lecture series at the Barnes Foundation soured Russell on America and confirmed his determination to return to Britain at the first opportunity.

That moment came in the summer of 1944. Elected to a fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge arranged by its current Master and his old undergraduate friend, G. M. Trevelyan, Russell happily accepted the gesture for what it was – a handsome amends

for earlier wrongs and an avowed testimony to his continued standing as one of the pre-eminent philosophers of the twentieth century. Russell thus returned not simply to England but to his beloved Trinity, and he did so, moreover, clutching the mammoth manuscript of what would become his most widely read and financially lucrative book, *History of Western Philosophy* (1945).

At Cambridge Russell was warmly received by old friends, former adversaries, and those few students not in military service. With the war's end – followed hard by the Labour Party's triumphant victory and the unprecedented publishing success of *History of Western Philosophy* – Russell found himself lionised. Not expected by the college and university authorities either to teach or to lecture, Russell hurled himself into both with a stamina and enthusiasm astonishing in a man of seventy-two. To his delight, he won a ready and receptive audience. Introductory lecture courses on such subjects as ethics, epistemology, and the fundamental principles of philosophy filled to overflowing the largest lecture rooms Cambridge possessed. Derived in their essentials from his *History of Western Philosophy* (itself largely a compilation of American lectures), Russell's lectures were memorable performances – lucid, witty, irreverent, full of sweeping themes and picturesque asides, and delivered with a verve that at once enthralled his audience and incarnated the moral seriousness and intellectual grandeur of philosophical study. To his listeners at Cambridge and readers across the English-speaking world, Russell quickly came to seem not merely a living connection with Britain's past greatness but a robust embodiment of a western culture that had prevailed over the evils of fascism and vanquished the horrors of Nazism. Russell thus came to be seen not as a gadfly or a renegade, but as an ornament of a triumphant Britain determined to build a wholly new future on the sturdy and enduring foundations of the past. Proclaimed as 'Britain's greatest living philosopher' by the publicists of *History of Western Philosophy*, he was regarded by the educated classes of the Anglo-Saxon world as the only British thinker of this century worthy of a place in his own book.

The decade from 1945 to 1955 found Russell at his most respectable and content. An appreciation of his standing as Britain's