

## Fact and Fiction

*B. Russell*

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This is a motley collection of various articles, speeches and lectures, as well as some rather silly concoctions. The most interesting are auto-biographical, and those reminiscences are chosen for the introductory part. Russell as a child and emerging adolescent was captivated by books to an extent he would never be in later life. This is hardly surprising. To be introduced, without any prior acquaintance, to the most original minds ever to be published, is if anything a heady experience. No wonder that you are being carried away with bursts of enthusiasm which will not be sustainable. The young Russell was very much taken by the emotions expressed by a Shelley, and although he in more mature years would be skeptical, the original love, although deprived of its initial freshness, nevertheless retains nostalgic traces of it. Likewise Ibsen was also a favorite, although he has become deeply critical of the attitude that any rebellion, no matter what, against prevailing mores and opinions is a good thing. This is a romantic attitude of great seduction, yet fundamentally flawed. What remains of Ibsen when deprived of his vision. Maybe not so much from a moral and philosophical point of view; yet of course as a craftsman there is still much to admire. Turgenev has fared better, although in him there is much of the romanticism of revolt, but a tempered one. Turgenev was never a fanatic, as a westerner he is immune to the Slavophilic visions of a Dostoevsky, nor did he strive for sainthood as did Tolstoy, and this has in the eyes of many Russophilic readers reduced him to a second rater. Apart from those particular influences, Russell also expounds on the teaching of history (which he thought was too nationalistic and whig dominated) and of mathematics, which made the intellectually deepest impression, instilling in him a passion, not to say obsession, with truth.

Russell is a commendably lucid writer. This has its obvious delights and advantages, but also some perhaps quite not so immediate drawbacks. Drawbacks not so much for the reader as for the writer himself. While a more obscure writer, while losing his audience, may still retain an illusion of profundity imparted to his fleeing readers, which may in his eyes more than compensate for the loss of their attention; an engaging limpid writer may reveal himself as naive. Lucidity almost always comes with simplification, and although that is always aesthetically pleasing it may be exasperating for the engaged reader. The simple remedy against war to discourage nationalism by changing the teaching of history strikes me as rather naive based on the mistaken identification of your own interests and impulses with those of the general public. Russell is and was a bookish boy, and much of his worldview and much of what he considers valuable in life comes through books. This is not the case with the general public, whose encounter with history may leave little mark except a general confusion of dates and inexplicable actions. To be fired by history, even of a nationalistic bent, would at least have opened a door to subsequent reflection. On the other hand Russell is also well aware of this chasm. Education, he warns his audience of the 50's, is not something you may expect that everyone could profit from. The 'egg-heads'

should not be deprived of an arena in which they can shine, normally being so despised. Elitism in education is a very good thing, opinions fifty years later espoused with even more passion by a Tony Judt.

In his later years Russell was passionately involved in the struggle against weapons of mass destruction (the very terminology is to be found in his writings of over fifty years ago). How petty do not the differences appear between Communists and Capitalists when the physical survival of mankind is at stake. He deplores the short-sightedness and stupidity of governments, and their antiquated notion of victory, which no longer makes any sense. The threat of nuclear annihilation was very much dominate during my childhood and young adulthood. Pessimistic predictions of a mutual annihilation before the end of the millennium were legion. They all seemed so persuasive, yet apart from a general sense of alarm, they had little consequence as to daily life. The dangers are by no means dispelled, even after the end of the cold war, yet they no longer play any role in the public mind, those fears of doom have been replaced by the threat of terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, as well as by the spectacle of Global Warming. The thermonuclear holocaust never came to pass, at least not within the time-span predicted for it. Perhaps the public should be somewhat forgiven for their skepticism of Global Warming, no matter how convincing the arguments are. Wolf has been cried so many time, and the confident predictions of experts have come to shame. This has of course no impact on the truth or falsehood of such predictions, only on the public attitude towards them.

In short the pieces he wrote against nuclear proliferation and war may now seem a bit dated, his concerns and righteous voice, somewhat grating. On the other hand the public awareness he helped to promote, may nevertheless have had some political impact.

Facts and fiction. Russell also tried to write fiction, and here he fails spectacularly. One wonders why. He does not lack any skill in literary composition, apart from the oft lauded lucidity of his prose, the initial volumes of his autobiography are literary masterpieces, and few books read in my youth, made a deeper impact on me. Yet when he tries to loosen his imagination, it turns out to be peculiarly barren. None of the fictions which are presented in this collection denies the harsh judgement. One gets the impression that for all his quest for the welfare of man, he hated mankind, and that in his fiction he could give vent to a rather sterile hatred by trying to portray bottomless evil. Was he evil himself or was he merely horrified that he may be? His purely fictional attempts invite psychological speculations rather than engagement.

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