

New Hopes Revisited

Andrew Bone

The new edition of Bertrand Russell's book, New Hopes for a Changing World, is introduced by Andrew Bone of the Bertrand Russell Research Centre at McMaster University, Canada, home of the Bertrand Russell Archives. Dr Bone is the general editor of The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell and co-editor of Russell: the Journal of Bertrand Russell Studies. Three related texts and an index have been added to the new edition of New Hopes, a chapter from which follows. This excerpt is from Dr Bone's Introduction.

Russell's political writing at the mid-century is full of foreboding—about the rising nuclear peril and superpower relations poisoned by mutual suspicion. After the outbreak of the Korean War in June 1950, he feared another global conflagration. At a stage of the Cold War arms race when stockpiles of atomic bombs were still meagre, he doubted that a third world war could yet exterminate the human race. But that “might well be the result of the next but one.” In *New Hopes for a Changing World*, published in September 1951, Russell tried to rein in his gloomy forecasting, but without offering a Panglossian prospectus. As he recalled,

I suspected that I had too much emphasized, hitherto, the darker possibilities threatening mankind and that it was time to write a book in which the happier issues of current disputes were brought into relief [D]eliberately, wherever there were two possibilities, I emphasized that it might be the happier one which would be realized.

(Autobiography 3: 31)

At the time, Russell confessed to his friend Gilbert Murray that this optimism was “an act of will, and I could just as rationally proclaim pessimism—not *more* rationally, and, I think, less usefully” (9 May 1951). A seed for his consciously sanguine analysis of present ills and how to cure them may have been planted by Russell's American publisher, Lincoln Schuster. On New Year's Eve 1950 *The New York Times* ran “To Replace Our Fears with Hope”, an article that moved Schuster to congratulate Russell for striking “an affirmative and hopeful

note for mankind at this critical hour in world history” (16 Jan. 1951). Anticipating the buoyant thrust of *New Hopes*, Russell sketched for the newspaper’s readers his “vision of a happy world,”

a world from which poverty has disappeared, where illness is rare and death is seldom premature, where there is adventure for the young and security for the old, where the whole human race, forgetting the age-long habit of mutual slaughter, has become one cooperative family, achieving together conquests over nature and over the darker side of human passions, happy in the disappearance of ancient terrors, no longer oppressed by dark superstitions, but marching on with confident step and erect gait toward ever-increasing happiness and achievement.

To Schuster’s call for him to expand this piece into a “lofty and luminous and yea-saying” work, Russell replied that he was contemplating “a book with some such title as ‘How to Live in the Modern World’, but as yet this prospect is somewhat vague” (23 Jan. 1951). A few weeks later he joked to Schuster that “the title that really attracts me ... would be ‘A Baedeker to the Twentieth Century’” (8 March 1951), before telling Julie Medlock (his literary agent in the United States) that he proposed to call the book, “if the publishers allow it, ‘Common Sense Paradise’” (9 May 1951). Evidently they did not and when Allen and Unwin (his British publisher) were already working on his manuscript, Russell settled on “New Hopes for a Changing World”.

The unifying theme of the book was that humanity was plagued by three kinds of conflict, all amenable to solution: “They are the conflicts of man with nature, with other men, and with himself”, as Russell put it in his own blurb for *New Hopes*. The book’s three parts dissected each source of discord and proposed remedies ... All of this was elaborated with typical Russellian panache as he ranged in time from the prehistoric to the present, in space across continents and even up to an imagined “distant nebula” (p. 40), and in subject matter from science to economics, anthropology, psychology and ethics. Telling anecdotes and vivid potted histories of the family, primitive agriculture and the Bolshevik Revolution, for example, jostle with stirring homilies about the happiness truly within humanity’s grasp.

It would be a “prophetic” work, Russell alerted Stanley Unwin on 27 March, “in the style of [*Principles of*] *Social Reconstruction*”—his first Allen and Unwin book. During the First World War this earlier work had forged Russell’s reputation as a social critic and radical reformer. He wanted *New Hopes* to resonate in another moment of peril ...