

The Religion of the Machine Age. Dora Russell. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1983. Pp. 267.

Describing *The Religion of the Machine Age* is a task involving a journey through history, concentrating on Western civilization. The main thesis of the book is that a crisis has been building up all the while that men have had sole control over the development of human consciousness.

Dora Russell is still alive and is now in her early nineties. She is the daughter of English aristocrat Sir Frederick Black, and she took first-class honours at Oxford in 1915 or 1916. Visiting both America and Russia after graduation, she was struck by the fervour which industrialisation was generating in both places. She and Bertrand Russell, her first husband, published a book called *The Prospects of Industrial Civilization* in 1923. After a year in Peking with him, she began a book with the title of *The Religion of the Machine Age*, but only completed the first chapter, "The Soul of Russia and the Body of America."

This chapter contains the kernel of her thoughts, which grew and matured over the next fifty years, so that when the book was finally begun again in the 1970s, she decided to preserve the original chapter which she had written at the age of twenty-six. In the early chapters of the completed work, she discusses the work of Lewis Mumford, who wrote about the gross dependency of humankind on machines; this was and still is a concern of hers. When she wrote the first chapter in 1922, she had hope that the ideals of the Russian revolution could be combined with the great industrial progress of the United States. Fifty years later she was disillusioned. The rest of the book is an attempt to analyse why it did not turn out that way, and a call to women to reshape industrial progress according to humane values.

Ms. Russell had centered her postgraduate work in the 1920s on eighteenth century thought, as she became passionately interested in humanism and the right to be happy. She has added to that the concerns of socialism, feminism, and atheism, in this book. She tries to show how men (as opposed to women) have persistently throughout recorded history cut themselves off from the path of integrated human development. This happens because of their obsession with science and religion, leaving their emotional faculty stunted.

In answer to a critic who recently reviewed this book with some skepticism, saying that the themes were out of date, she replied that society still has not responded to the kinds of challenges her book raises.¹ She argues in *The Religion* that war and the prospects of World War III cannot be erased

while men run society on competitive lines, and not on cooperative ones. The exclusion until recently of women from decision making may mean that mankind (men) is irreversibly destroying its ability to show compassion. The reader with no special sociology background is likely to find the last five chapters, which discuss twentieth century people, much more persuasive, enjoyable and easy to understand than the first very dense two-thirds of the book.

Chapter eleven contains extracts from a 1920 letter (which an editor refused to publish) which are worth quoting to illustrate her commitment to socialism and social justice:

the time will come when it is universally recognized that oppression in the interest of economic inequality is as absurd as oppression in the interest of some particular belief about God and the future life.... It is capitalist industry that is the persecuting religion and its central dogma, the importance of private property and wealth. (201-202)

Concluding this chapter, she looks back from the 1970s to the period of her greatest hope, the 1920s and 1930s, and writes:

In those twenty years between the wars, there was in England—and also elsewhere in Europe—a creative spirit of belief and hope...which could have responded to the inspiration of the Bolsheviks had it not been frustrated by the power and profit-seekers on the one hand, and the dogmas of the machine-worshippers on the other. (202)

The thrust of *The Religion of the Machine Age*, then, is that machine worship has corrupted our values, and perhaps these values are being lost forever. Ms. Russell backs up her claim by looking at male consciousness before and after machine technology and examines how worship of a deity has gradually given way to worship of industrialism and money. She is glad to see organized religion disappearing, but deplores what appears to be taking its place. The intellect in men works alone, she says, and instincts and emotions are now regarded by them as untrustworthy and inferior. This is causing much strife at the personal and international level.

The themes which support her thesis include many strands which are interwoven to show how male consciousness has been shaped. (Unfortunately there is no corresponding discussion of female thought.) Two main themes traced through history are, firstly, how ideas and emotions connected with family life were shelved away to give full rein to intellectual impulses, so that mathematics and astronomy were empha-

sized early on by men. The second theme, tied to the first, is the "male flight from the body" which is the term she employs for men who reject sex and love as essentially unhealthy—and the consequent refusal to allow women a place beside men. The Middle Ages, with most formal learning carried on by monks who "suffered sensual deprivation," concentrated on the development of practical inventions. Her conclusion is that the intellect "in this barren state and alone" began to make the first real machines.

In support of this statement, she refers to the invention of the astronomical clocks of the fourteenth century, the impact of which she describes:

The coming of the clocks in Europe had far-reaching consequences. It led to a gradual departure from living according to natural time from dawn to dark; it marked an overriding by the rational, secular viewpoint of the religious strand in human consciousness.... The Greek Orthodox church, indicating a considerable difference between religious opinion of East and West, refused to place clocks in its churches, regarding it as blasphemy to divide eternity. (94)

According to Ms. Russell, one aspect of the Industrial Revolution, well on its way by the end of the eighteenth century, was the development of Reason. The effort was to try "to make sense of a universe apparently created by an impersonal power.... Only nature was there to answer mankind's queries." (164) Chapter nine mentions the mixed eagerness and antipathy towards the machines which were spreading over the countryside, bringing ruin to the old way of life and forcing women and children to work in the mills. As time went on, rivalry and the spread of competition between European countries brought about the Boer War and World War I. Finally, the workers "adapted to regularity and fast moving machines...and adopted the habit of suppressing emotion." (189)

While I am willing to accept Ms. Russell's main thesis, I have difficulty accepting the evidence she presents for it. Her style in places moves imperceptibly, if rapidly, from fact to opinion. The reader is rushed along through her logic, some steps of which she skips explaining, and is presented with conclusions which do not seem supported by the evidence given. For her, "the intellect" is wrenched from the body, but inextricably embedded in a morass of jealousy, suspicion, and competition. For example, in chapter five in a discussion about the limitations of the intellect, she seems to argue that if you exclude the body from your experience, the intellect is left

to work in isolation, and only in the case of mathematics is this a sensible way to operate. She asserts:

What the theologians and philosophers did not realize is that mystical longings and aspirations are born first of all from the body, not the soul. Together with and through these emotions, the creative imagination comes to life. Without these, in total isolation, the intellect, except in mathematics, has limitations almost prohibitive of creation. (111)

Because monks must be cut off from their bodies and because creativity comes from the body, monks cannot have creativity. Her point is clear enough. But where does this soul come from?—a serious question; she has not previously introduced the term and it is not clear what she means by it. She seems to be saying that machines have been invented by the intellect operating in isolation. The only way men could invent machines was to isolate the intellect. But can the intellect in fact work in isolation?

Although Ms. Russell seems to believe that men have succeeded in disembodimenting their intellects, it does not seem to me that individuals can, in fact, separate the intellect and work with that alone. If we look at the work of men who actually existed (rather than an abstract "intellect"), surely we would see that, however crippled and cut-off men have become, they are still affected by relationships in the real world. To take a prosaic example, as Fred C. Kelly's study *Miracle at Kitty Hawk; the Letters of Wilbur and Orville Wright* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Young, 1951) shows, the pioneers of flight had a companionship between them which made their work possible, complementing each other's talents—physical, intellectual, spiritual and emotional. Although neither of these brothers married, their mother and sister were a big part of their lives, and the family bond was always strong.

The structure of Ms. Russell's book follows eight thousand years of Western civilization in a chronological sequence, with roughly a chapter each on her first thesis; early man (women get about a paragraph each chapter, generally on how badly we were treated) in Babylonian times; the Greeks; the Romans; medieval man; sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; nineteenth; and twentieth century social thought occupies the rest. Chapters two to four are difficult to follow because assertions are made which are not backed up by internal evidence, and this part reads like a text book. There is, for example, the assertion that children were not important in the Athenian world of the first few centuries before Christ. Her early work, *In Defense of Children* (1932),

might cover this gap, because she was a great advocate of human and civil rights for women and children and an innovator in education, but it is not cited here. Assertions run through *The Religion of the Machine Age*, and one does not like to rely on brief statements which are not supported by footnotes. On the other hand, her bibliography is important, and many works of a sociological nature are brought in to good effect. It is a pity that the impression given to the reader is that an equally extensive background is required to comprehend this book, so it is not a book for the Arts undergraduate.

To sum up, there is a complex web here of politics, religion, sociology and science which can be unravelled with great effort. The reward is uncertain, however, because the scope of the book is too wide to be treated in sufficient depth in the space of two hundred and sixty-seven pages. The thesis about male consciousness dominating economic and social development is plausible, but there is not enough evidence to support it in this book.

NOTES

1. Nicholas Walter, review of *The Religion of the Machine Age* in *Times Education Supplement*, 25 May 1983; and Dora Russell, "Redundant Race," letter to the Editor, *Times Education Supplement*, *ibid.*

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The Life and Times of a Respectable Rebel: Selina Cooper, 1864-1946. Jill Liddington *London: Virago, 1985.*

Women's history has come to seem to me like a large blank canvas, on which some outlines are drawn, from which we have been obliged recently to erase some of the very few preexisting lines drawn by traditional historians (as too ugly, too pretty or just inaccurate) and on which we are now joyfully seeing small and large areas being filled, one after another, in vivid colour and startling detail. Gradually, more and more of the pieces are linking up, and the whole, though often stark, and still far from complete, is becoming a useable context into which we can fit ourselves, gaining understanding and strength to apply to the present human condition.

Jill Liddington's life of Selina Cooper is a splendid contribution to this canvas. The research done by Jill Liddington and Jill Norris for the earlier book *One Hand Tied Behind Us* was groundbreaking, the results gratifying not only (I am sure) to the authors, but to all of us who had come across hints

of the existence of the working-class women's suffrage campaign, which had completely dropped out of history, and which they now revealed in convincing detail. Selina Cooper featured in that story but it was only when the book was going to press that Mary Cooper. Selina Cooper's daughter, came up with a newly-discovered gold mine of materials which made this biography possible and inevitable, although indeed a great deal of research remains to be done. Liddington's research is such an exciting story in itself that it would be easy to stay with it to the exclusion of the book's content. I resist the temptation because that content is so satisfying; this, despite the fact that indeed it is as researcher that Liddington most excels. Uncovering an immense amount of detail on an important subject previously unknown to history is a heady business, and it is extraordinarily difficult to accept the bulk of what is found as essential to one's own understanding but not necessarily to be incorporated into the finished work in any except the most summary form. I happen to know that Jill Liddington had considerable trouble reducing her manuscript to the present 455 printed pages (exclusive of notes), and I hope that this heroic reduction is sufficient to ensure that the book will be seen as one to be read, not merely as one to be consulted, though it is that as well.

Here is new or added light on childhood in the westcountry, child labour in the Lancashire textile mills, early local socialism and the Methodist connection; the Women's Cooperative Guild; the textile unions; the Social Democratic Federation; the Independent Labour Party; the Cooperative Holiday Association; the women's suffrage campaign locally, nationally, in the Trade Unions, within the Labour Party and among women; women's entry into local government; responses to the first world war; the birth control question; interwar women's politics; working-class experience of the Depression; the question of married women's right to work; and women's opposition to fascism and war.

Here, too, is the very personal story of a remarkable woman, not typical of any group, though sharing the experiences of many. Selina Cooper was one of those rare creatures who does not take anything for granted, does not go along with anything just because that is the way it has always been, stands firm against opposition, and causes what disturbance is necessary but no more. Jill Liddington's empathy with her subject and the vividness of Mary Cooper's memory give us moments of extraordinary insight into the experience of women seventy-five to a hundred years ago; only such detailed history can do this for us. We may read the statistics on early childhood deaths, we may know that women were beginning to trickle into local government, we may be aware of the drive for self-education among the workers: all of these