

avoided some of the mistakes of post-war social policy. As it is, some future government, provided it has the vision to find the money, will be able to construct its social policy on more reliable foundations.

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## Common Sense?

**Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare.** By  
BERTRAND RUSSELL. *Allen & Unwin*. 7s. 6d.

FOR HALF a century, Lord Russell has discussed the issues of the age with lucidity, detachment, and consistent intelligence. As much as anyone in our epoch, he has been the voice of imperturbable rationality against the disorder, incoherence, and nonsense of life. Once again, in an essay of troubled and urgent argument, he appeals in the name of reason to mankind—this time to come to its senses before it blows itself off the planet.

His argument is brisk and straightforward. Given present policies, we are headed straight—inevitably—towards thermonuclear war. Such a war would be ghastly beyond description. Moreover, any war in the nuclear age would billow up into nuclear war; therefore the hope of escape through developing rules of limited war is an illusion. Even the prohibition of the bomb and the destruction of existing nuclear stocks are no guarantee against nuclear war; as soon as serious war resumed, the belligerents would rush to manufacture the forbidden weapon. The only way out is to end war itself. The political leaders of the world must develop a “new outlook.” The United States and the Soviet Union must begin by making formal renunciation of war. A Conciliation Committee should be set up, composed of Easterners, Westerners, and neutrals, to settle all the outstanding issues between East and West, without, however, disturbing the existing balance of power. Out of this should grow an International Authority which would forever eliminate war, without, however, impairing the rights and liberties of anyone anywhere.

There is little new in this argument, except the elegance (despite a certain repetitiousness) with which it is presented. But the vision is a deeply appealing one, as it always has been. More than that, Lord Russell is surely right when he suggests that something like this is, in the end, what the world must do if it is to abolish war. And he is surely right too in contending that, if we do not abolish war, war will abolish us. Why then does the case he presents seem so curiously threadbare and banal? The reason perhaps is that, for all the air of saying

things of great boldness and audacity, Lord Russell really skips the tough questions. The critical problem is not ends, it is means. As one reads *Common Sense and Nuclear Warfare*, one finds oneself saying: Of course, of course; we hardly need to be told that nuclear war would be a catastrophe or that perpetual peace would be desirable. The problem is not *where* to go but *how* to get there. How, in a world of envy and malice, vested reaction and revolutionary upheaval and raging fanaticism, are we to evolve towards a limited world government capable of suppressing war but not freedom?

Lord Russell's main answer to this question, in so far as he deals with it at all, is reason. As soon as people understand the full horror of the problem, stopping war will seem so much more important than anything else that solution will be almost automatic. Concerning details, he remains vague. In general, he reserves the tough nuts for the Conciliation Committee, though he does make some sketchy and superficial suggestions for Germany, China, and the Middle East. The point is that, given the change in outlook, everything becomes possible.

Many difficulties which now seem insuperable, or nearly so, would disappear. . . . Given a sane and sober consideration of what is involved, this harmony on the problems of nuclear weapons would inevitably [*sic*] result.

The power of reason in producing this happy outcome is to be reinforced by the growing sense of urgency. He supports his optimism by illustrations. If, for example, there were an outburst of rabies among the dogs of Berlin, there would obviously be no problem; Eastern and Western authorities would instantly join forces to extirpate the mad dogs.

Would the authorities of East or West Berlin argue that “the other side” could not be trusted to kill its mad dogs and that, therefore, “our side” must keep up the supply as a deterrent?

If only the world could understand that nuclear weapons created for all mankind the same situation that rabies might create for the authorities of Berlin!

But surely Lord Russell's analogy betrays his argument. Mad dogs may go around biting people, but nuclear weapons don't go around setting themselves off. It is mad people, not mad dogs, which are our trouble; and, when it comes to human beings, diagnosis of madness is a little more difficult and controversial. In an age of ferocious religious wars, like our own, one man's insanity is likely to be another man's ideology. “It is a profound misfortune,” Lord Russell writes, “that the whole question of nuclear warfare has become entangled in the

age-old conflicts of power politics." A misfortune it certainly is; but it is also a fact; and deploring the fact hardly eradicates it. Indeed, the misfortune is precisely the problem. Lord Russell spends too much of his time escaping the problem instead of confronting it.

The clincher in Lord Russell's brief is that, if we do not rapidly reverse our policies and act to bring about world government, then we will move swiftly and inevitably towards extinction. Of course, it is conceivable that he is right. But inevitability is a heavy dose, especially from a philosopher who in the past has looked more sympathetically on the possibility of human freedom. It may be true, as Lord Russell asserts, that "leading statesmen on both sides believe, or profess to believe, that their side might secure a victory in the old-fashioned sense"; but I strongly doubt whether this is so, even of Mr. Dulles, even of Mr. Khrushchev. The arms race may, as he contends, mean an implacably spiralling national expenditure; but it is hard to prove this from the American national security budget, which to-day represents two per cent less of the gross national product than it did in 1954 (and which has even, in real dollars, declined absolutely since Sputnik). It may be true, as Lord Russell says, that "only a constant propaganda of hate and terror will induce populations to accept the burdens involved." It may be true, on the other hand, that such incessant propaganda will only produce boredom and inertia, and that intelligent national leadership, employing calmer and more rational methods, may be more successful in the long run in inducing people to accept burdens. If the arms race continues, Lord Russell writes, "before very long the population in each group will be reduced to subsistence level." Perhaps this may be the result; but certainly there is little evidence of this so far in either the Soviet Union or the United States, where the arms race seems to co-exist comfortably with rising mass living standards.

I do not want to propose an attitude of complacency towards the arms race. But Lord Russell does not help his case by overstating it. He of all people hardly needs to be reminded that history has generally outwitted the fatalists and has proved far richer in possibilities than contemporaries have expected. Personally, I do not think that we are going to do what Lord Russell says we have to do in the time he would allow for our salvation. But I doubt whether this condemns us to obliteration. If we can have resolute and imaginative leadership in the West, we will very likely sustain peace long enough under the balance of terror to bring about a gradual relaxation of tension and suspicion. At the same time, if we never tire of exploration

and negotiation, we may begin to bring certain questions under control—including armaments—through piecemeal agreements. Ideas and attitudes which once terrified people, East or West, will presently begin to seem part of the landscape; new generations will grow up; societies founded in revolution will discover vested interests in stability; systems of international inspection will begin to arouse little more comment than local police; and in time, if each side maintains its strength and morale (and if explosions in the underdeveloped world do not transform the constellation of forces in some unpredictable way), the contours of the crisis will subtly but profoundly alter.

As this alteration takes place, we may well begin to make progress in the direction to which we are summoned by Lord Russell. The question is whether his pamphlet to-day does more to speed us on this course by re-stating the ultimate goal with such urgency than it does to distract us by deprecating the road along which we are most likely to achieve Lord Russell's own purpose.

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## Novels

**The Unspeakable Skipton.** By PAMELA HANSFORD JOHNSON. *Macmillan*. 15s.

**The Little Difference.** By P. B. ABERCROMBIE. *Gollancz*. 13s. 6d.

**To the Islands.** By RANDOLPH STOW. *Macdonald*. 13s. 6d.

**The Common Touch.** By KATHLEEN FARRELL. *Macmillan*. 15s.

**The Fable and the Flesh.** By MICHAEL LEWIS. *Weidenfeld and Nicolson*. 16s.

OF ALL literary leaps, that from straight fiction to comedy seems to me one of the most alarming. Two women make it, and highly successfully, this time, both without any essential change of style, which adds the pleasure of familiarity to the stimulation of surprise. *The Unspeakable Skipton* is comedy at the highest level, where seriousness is part of the humour, and tragedy—its possibility, its implications, at any rate—very close at hand. Skipton, the central figure, and Skipton's way of life, are based on the character and situation of Frederick Rolfe, Baron Corvo, but only in so far as Rolfe was a prototype: Skipton is an individual, a personality in his own right and a rich comic figure on the edge of pathos, as a serious comic figure must always be; and he lives not in Italy but in Bruges, a city whose atmosphere is caught in his

affection and in the sound of its bells, where English visitors are frequent and Skipton, with fastidious reluctance, can emerge (since a man must live) from his neat but threadbare hide-out to fleece them. Through poverty and failure and the squalid ways into which he is pressed to earn his bread, Skipton believes unflinchingly in himself: he has the marvellous mistaken arrogance of the lunatic, that may be the divine self-confidence of genius, as well as a social arrogance that seems somehow not snobbish but endearing, and a background so long believed in, so lovingly embroidered, that he can no longer tell how much or how little of it really happened, or even what the word "happened" really means. The triumph of this portrait is to make us, in a curious way, love him: unspeakable Skipton may be, but he holds one's sympathy, and it is the figures of his victims that appear a lot less likeable, and strangely even more predatory, than he is. A literary quartet on holiday, under the awful jurisdiction of a female playwright, pays his rent in various ways during the short time they stay in Bruges: their talk and attitudes are so precisely caught that between them they seem to embody every figure of the sort one has known; yet the satire is never too local for there is always the large figure and relevance of Skipton—the supranational English Catholic gentleman resident abroad, and all the images it invokes—to spread it, as it were, to other sorts of society, other places and values. Miss Hansford Johnson has greatly extended her range; the accuracy, the enviable exact image, the detachment yet deep humanity with which she views and presents her characters, all remain. And, as I seem to have forgotten in remembering its serious after-effects, it is funny in a way so ribald, so exactly acceptable and absurd, that the laughter it provokes has an after-effect of its own—a kind of internal smiling, a savouring and repetition of good moments.

At a simpler level of comedy is a light-hearted novel by the until now very serious P. B. Abercrombie, about a ravishing girl called Vivian Mudge who spends term-time teaching at a progressive girls' school and the holidays trying to keep an amorous balance between the various men in her life. The all-female atmosphere of the school, where the only male creatures are the visiting music master and the gardener, may sound more exaggerated than it is to anyone who has known the inside of a girls' school; and the staff-room's midnight orgies of steak to offset the vegetarian principles of the headmistress strike exactly the right note of hysterical, alarmed defiance. It has the staid exterior of the best-mannered jokes, and a sureness of touch that looks as effortless as Vivian's beauty, both of which should take Miss Abercrombie far if