

BIOGRAPHER AT LARGE

WITH London a month away behind him, Alan Wood came to see *The Listener* on one of Wellington's blazing, windless, almost unbelievable days. As soldier, war correspondent and author—centre of a controversy about the groundnut scheme, biographer of J. Arthur Rank and historian of British films—Mr. Wood has spent a busy time in the last 14 years or so in the world of everyday affairs—the sort of life most of us would envy. But seeing New Zealand for the first time on a business visit that lasted only two days, he was envious and enchanted as he compared Wellington with London and his own native Sydney—spoiled, he said, since the harbour bridge destroyed its easy ferry-boat rhythm.

Still only just past 40, Mr. Wood is a big man with a strong, serious face and a surprisingly boyish laugh. From an interviewer's point of view he is friendly and at ease—and yet a little disappointingly untalkative when you ask him to tell you about himself. Perhaps his very last remark explains this, for after telling us of his research for some years on the work of Bertrand Russell, and about his meetings with the great English philosopher, he confessed that his interests were becoming "more and more academic and less and less practical." Academic interests are something he shares with other members of his family, for he is a son of Professor G. A. Wood, of Sydney University—where Mr. Wood himself began his studies—and a brother of Professor F. L. W. Wood, of Victoria University College. Mr. Wood told us that after leaving Sydney he was at Oxford—Balliol College—where he was President of the Union in 1938. In the early part of the war he was a gunner in the Royal Artillery and later an intelligence officer in the Middle East. A tour of his homeland with a British Press delegation in 1943 was followed by work for the *Daily Express* as a war correspondent in China, with the Canadians in Normandy, and with the 1st Airborne Division at Arnhem and the Rhine crossing. After he was wounded towards the end of the war he went to Australia for a year and on his return to London became head of the information division of the African groundnut scheme.

"I was stationed in London but went out to Africa from time to time," Mr. Wood explained. "When the scheme had been going about two years I could see it was obviously a complete fiasco, so I thought it a bit too much when Mr. Strachey, who was Minister in Charge, told the House of Commons that it was going to be far more profitable than originally estimated. After that I resigned. At that time there was also a scheme for growing sorghum in Queensland, which lost, I think, about three-quarters of a million pounds."

Mr. Wood wrote a book about the groundnut scheme, and, as he had been in an official position, followed the regular procedure and thought he should get permission to publish. He submitted the manuscript to Mr. Strachey who agreed to its publication when certain alterations had been made. Later, however, he apparently changed his mind and threatened that there would be a libel action

if the book appeared. "At that," said Mr. Wood, "my publisher also changed his mind about it, and I had a lot of trouble with the book before it was eventually brought out by Sir Stanley Unwin through one of his companies, John Lane, the Bodley Head." As many will remember, *The Groundnut Affair* caused a considerable stir when it did appear.

An earlier book by Mr. Wood, *Bless Them All*, which was published over the pen name "Boomerang," had been critical of some aspects of the army, and *The Groundnut Affair* was followed by *Mr. Rank*, a study of J. Arthur Rank and British films. Yes, Mr. Wood agreed, the film industry was quite another world, all a bit fantastic; and to illustrate he quoted Mr. Rank's overdraft, at one time something like £15,000,000.

How did he come to write that book? "Well, I'd always been interested in films, and I gathered most of the material by just talking to people, going down to the studios and that sort of thing." His first meeting with Mr. Rank was when Castleton Knight was making *Theirs is the Glory*, a film about the Battle of Arnhem which Brian Desmond Hurst directed. "I appeared very briefly in it and also helped a little on the script," Mr. Wood said.

Other books Mr. Wood has written include *Flying Visits*, which is about his travels, and a novel, *Herbert*, and more recently he has shared with his wife the work of editing the memoirs of Lord Grantley, under the title *Silver Spoon*. He has also broadcast occasionally for the BBC and the ABC. One current concern, apart from his work on Bertrand Russell, is a life of Chester Wilmot, the well-known broadcaster and author of *The Struggle for Europe*, who was killed last year in a plane crash. "I didn't know him terribly well but kept on meeting him," said Mr. Wood when we asked about him. "For a start he was in the Melbourne University debating team, about the time I was in the Sydney University team, though I don't think we ever debated against one another. Then we were together in Normandy—he was with the British Army—and when I was at Arnhem he was with the Guards Armoured Division which was trying to join up with us." Mr. Wood told us that Wilmot quarrelled with General Blamey when he was a war correspondent and was expelled from New Guinea. Then he managed to get himself accredited with the BBC. That sort of thing, he said, happened again and again. "He was an argumentative man, a man of terrific drive. He always thought he was right and the other fellow wrong. As he generally was right, it didn't make him popular." When we asked Mr. Wood what he thought of Wilmot's theories in *The Struggle for Europe*, he explained that his book was really about Wilmot the man, and he didn't feel qualified to give an opinion on his theories. But from what others had told him he thought what Wilmot had said about Churchill's awareness of the danger from Russia was probably right basically, though it was doubtful



ALAN WOOD A.P.S. photograph
From groundnuts to cloud-capped Bertrand Russell

whether Churchill realised the danger quite as early as Wilmot believed.

His spell as a correspondent in China in 1944 had given Mr. Wood some pretty definite views on the Eastern situation—for one thing he said he had always thought that Communist China should have been recognised earlier, and that she should be in the United Nations. "When I was in China, Chou En-lai was a kind of Chinese Communist Ambassador in Chungking with Chiang Kai-shek," he said, "and after I got back to London I urged that we should have someone with the Chinese Communists as well as with Chiang, in the same way as we had someone with Tito. I'm convinced that if we had done that our relations with the Chinese Communists might have been as friendly now as with Tito. However, General Carton de Wiart, who was Churchill's personal representative in China then, refused an invitation to visit the Chinese Communist areas."

Mr. Wood said he had not met Chiang at the time he was there, and unfortunately he had missed most of the Indian leaders, too, on his way back to London, as at that time most of them were in jail. But he had met Gandhi's son and had had quite a long talk with Mr. Jinnah. Commenting on India's part in world politics, Mr. Wood said that Bertrand Russell was one who keenly supported the view that the initiative in breaking the cold war should come from India, and that only neutrals could do it.

When we suggested that the number of English groups who visited the Soviet Union from time to time seemed to point to a reasonably open-minded attitude towards Russia, Mr. Wood said that people in Britain had always been ready to look at things in Russia. As for relations between Britain and the United States—he considered this for some moments before he said: "There's a sort of underlying uneasiness about it. There's a feeling that we're the junior partner and may be dragged into something with America. And when Mr. Attlee, for instance, says that we shouldn't be dragged in — well, it's always popular to say that we should be more independent of America." But people

in Britain, he added, felt they had been more or less driven to dependence on America by the Russian attitude. At the end of the war there had been a tremendous friendliness towards Russia.

As a writer, Mr. Wood naturally takes an interest in the state of book publishing in Britain, and when *The Listener* sought his opinion on the current position he pointed out some interesting relations between this and the changed political situation. After remarking that it was becoming increasingly difficult for young authors to get their books published, even though enormous masses of books were still coming out, he went on: "There seems to be a tendency to play safe. Penguins, for instance, who before the war were publishing a lot of topical political books, seem now to be going in more for established authors; and Gollancz, who were doing the same, are reprinting a lot of American best-sellers. One reason for the change, I think, is that there's not nearly as much interest in politics as before the war. People felt then that the question whether there was a second world war depended on decisions taken in Downing Street, but they feel that the question whether there'll be a third world war will depend on decisions in Moscow and in Washington. In other words, while British literature and philosophy are still important, there's a feeling that British politics are not so important."

Nearly an hour had gone by and Mr. Wood was all but due at another appointment, but before he rose to go we asked him to tell us a little more about the research he has been doing on the philosophy of Bertrand Russell, and to give us an impression of a man known only to New Zealanders through his books and broadcasts.

The more substantial fruit of his research, he explained, would be a study of the development of Russell's philosophy and the influences which had shaped it. Mr. Wood has been doing this at Oxford, and he has given Oxford University Extension lectures in philosophy. A more popular work will discuss both the philosophical and political ideas of Russell against a biographical framework. In his work on these books Mr. Wood has found Bertrand Russell extremely helpful—and, he added, extremely modest. "In doing a job of this sort you naturally try to get hold of as many letters as you can," he said, "and in many cases I've found that people Russell has written to—D. H. Lawrence, for instance, and the philosopher Wittgenstein—did not keep his letters, while he has kept theirs. I think that's a definition of modesty—that you keep other men's letters." Russell, said Mr. Wood writes ("I think now he usually dictates") with astonishing facility. His works which Mr. Wood has read in getting together material for his books amount to something like 10,000,000 words—"apart from *Principia Mathematica*, his greatest work, written with A. N. Whitehead, which is all in symbols."

Mr. Wood said that though he thought Bertrand Russell was now doing little original work in philosophy, he engaged at times in great arguments with adherents of the Oxford School. "At 82 he's a remarkable man, still full of energy," he said. "A little while ago my wife and I went with him and his wife to the theatre, and then to our home for supper. It was about one in the morning when I drove them home, and all the way out to Richmond where Russell lives he was explaining to me in full vigour why he reacted against Hegelian philosophy in the 1890's."