

Russell's election to the Royal Society

One of the first of the many honours that Bertrand Russell received during his life was his election in 1908 as a Fellow of the Royal Society. The Society keeps in its archives all the applications made for Fellowships, and has kindly allowed me to examine the application form for Russell and report its contents here.

I have carefully avoided saying "Russell's application for a Fellowship", for one of the conditions for election, which are summarized on the back of the form, is that the prospective Fellow himself takes no part in the process of nomination and consideration. Russell explained to Philip Jourdain in April 1909 in response to a request for tactical advice: "I am not in a position to say what qualifications the Royal Society expects, having myself [been] so very recently elected. I understand that it is etiquette that a man should not himself take any steps in the matter: apparently it depends upon the chance of some big-wig taking one up".¹

As might be expected, Russell's big-wig was Whitehead; but some other features of the election are more surprising. As is explained on the back of the application form, at least six Fellows were required to support an application, of which at least three had to know the candidate personally. The application could be formally submitted (or "read") at any meeting of the Society. The number of places available and their distribution among the various sciences were determined by the Society's sectional committees. Since the mid-nineteenth century the election of scientists (as opposed to the election of British aristocracy and other More Important People) was made by the Council of the Society at an "Annual Election", held usually in May or June. Normally more applications were made than places were available, so that unsuccessful applications would have to be re-submitted in future years. Apparently this was more or less a formality, but the official process was described in pretty incredible English on the back of the form:

After the Annual Election the Candidature ceases and the Certificate is taken down. The Certificate may, however, on the written request of one of the signers, provided it is received not

¹This extract appears as part of my edition of the Russell-Jourdain correspondence, to be published in 1976 by Duckworth. I finally thought of *Dear Russell - Dear Jourdain* as the main title of the book. Mr. Blackwell and I are grateful to the entries for our title competition; it was announced in *Russell 11* and the entries printed in *Russell 12*.

later than December 31st in the same year, be re-suspended, and the Candidature thereby renewed; and so on from year to year, on such request being repeated, provided always that the same Certificate shall not be suspended for more than five years.

I gather that this physicalistic terminology was employed because originally the applications were *literally* hung up by some means until the elections were decided and then taken down until re-suspension was requested.²

Here now is the text of the application for Russell. To clarify presentation I have rendered all the printed parts of the form in italics and the written parts (all by Whitehead, apart from the signatures) in Roman. I have preserved Whitehead's abbreviations and capitalizations, but I have silently inserted some missing punctuation.

Certificate of a Candidate for Election.

Name. The Hon^{ble} Bertrand A.W. Russell

Title or Designation. M.A. (Camb.). Late Fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge

Profession or Trade. None

Usual place of Residence. Lower Copse, Bagley Wood, Oxford

Qualifications. Distinguished for his researches concerning the Principles of Mathematics and the Mathematical Treatment of the Logic of Relations. Author of the following books: "An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry" (Camb. Univ. Press, 1897, transl. into French); "A Critical Exposition of the Philosophy of Leibniz" (Camb. Univ. Press, 1897 [sic: read "1900"]); "The Principles of Mathematics", vol. i (Camb. Univ. Press, 1903); also of the following memoirs: "Sur la logique des relations, avec des applications à la théorie des séries" (Rivista de Matematica, vol. VII); "Théorie générale des séries bien ordonnées", (ibid., vol. VIII); "On some difficulties in the theory of transfinite numbers and order types", (Proc. Lond. Math. Soc., Series 2, vol. IV); "The theory of implication" (Amer. Journ. of Math., vol. XXVIII); "Geometry, Non-Euclidean" (Encyl. Brit. 1902); "L'idée d'ordre et la position absolue dans l'espace et le temps", (Bibliothèque du congrès intern. de Philosophie, vol iii, 1901, Paris); and of many other memoirs on similar subjects published in 'Mind' and in the 'Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale'.

being desirous of admission into the ROYAL SOCIETY OF LONDON, we, the undersigned, propose and recommend him as deserving that honour, and as likely to become a useful and valuable Member.

Dated this second day of October 1906

From General Knowledge.

Karl Pearson
Robert S. Ball
Edward Divers

From Personal Knowledge.

A.N. Whitehead
A.R. Forsyth
W. Burnside
E.W. Hobson
G.H. Darwin
Henry Head

Read to the Society on the 17th day of January, 1907.

²Compare *The Record of the Royal Society of London* (3rd ed., London, 1912), 160.

The first point of interest is that the application was made as early as the autumn of 1906. Annotations on the form by the Society's staff indicate its passage through the system. It was "suspended" at the elections for 1907, but then (either as a formality or after an explicit request) "re-suspended" for 1908. Russell's signatories were reasonably well represented on the Sectional Committee for Mathematics of that year, for Whitehead and Hobson were two of its six members; the others were M.J.M. Hill, Sir W.D. Niven, A.G. Greenhill and A.E.H. Love.³ The Annual Election for 1908 took place on 7 May.

The second point to note relates to the first, for it concerns the following remark made by R.C. Marsh in his edition *Logic and Knowledge* of some of Russell's articles. In the preface to his translation of Russell's 1901 "Sur la logique des relations ..." he remarked: "It was largely on the basis of this paper and [the] next but one in this collection that Russell was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1908".⁴ As we have seen, Whitehead included the 1901 paper in his statement of Russell's qualifications, but the "next but one in this collection" is Russell's "Mathematical Logic as Based on the Theory of Types", which was published only in May 1908.⁵ However, there are various indications (in the Russell-Jourdain correspondence, for example) that it was written in the summer of 1907, and while no supplementary documents for Russell were submitted to the Royal Society it is plausible that his most recent work was brought to the attention of the Sectional Committee by Whitehead when they met in 1908. Presumably Marsh's remark originated in some form from Russell himself.

The third and last matter we need consider is the Fellows who supported Russell's application. Whitehead, Forsyth and Hobson are the names which would come most readily to mind, since their own work was closely related to his. Burnside, Ball and Darwin are not too surprising, although their interests were rather more distant;⁶ the latter two

³See *Year-book of the Royal Society of London. 1908* (London, 1908), 46. In the Russell Archives there is a telegram from Whitehead dated 28 February 1908 reading "Am delighted at your selection for Royal Society". Perhaps Whitehead had in mind Russell's re-consideration for 1908, or maybe Russell's election had already been decided informally.

⁴B. Russell, *Logic and knowledge. Essays 1901-1950*, ed. R.C. Marsh (London, 1956), 1.

⁵*Amer. J. Maths.*, 30 (May 1908), 222-262. The month may be nominal, as is often the case with journals.

⁶Whitehead's own application form was supported by the other five mathematicians named in these sentences, and also by J.W.L. Glaisher, E.J. Routh and H.F. Baker (all on "Personal Knowledge"). Forsyth was the big-wig, and signed the form on 13 February 1901. The application was accepted in 1903 after two suspensions.

were more involved in applied mathematics, especially in connection with astronomy and meteorology. But the support of the statistician Karl Pearson is a little unexpected, while the signatures of Divers and Head must be quite outside anticipation - especially Head, who signed from "Personal" and not just "General" knowledge. He was a neurologist and brain surgeon who worked for a long time at the London Hospital. He was also a Cambridge friend of Whitehead,⁷ which may explain his support for Russell's application. Divers was a chemist, who after graduation spent many years in Japan. After his return to England around 1900, he became involved in the organization of chemical societies.⁸ Presumably his contact with, or at least awareness of, Russell dates from that time, though there seems to be no obvious connection between them.

Russell does not seem to have been a particularly active Fellow of the Society; indeed, its publications must be among the relatively few to which he did not contribute. Of course, within a few years of election he was largely to abandon his interests in the topics on which his election was based, though not before obtaining from the Society financial support for the publication of *Principia Mathematica*.⁹ But it is perhaps worth putting on record the details of this early honour, and so providing a little more information on the best, though least understood, years of his life.

Middlesex Polytechnic at Enfield
England

I. Grattan-Guinness

Added in proof. A press cutting from the *Yorkshire Post* of 28 February 1908, now in the Russell Archives, confirms his then informal selection (see footnote 3) by announcing that Russell (among others) is "recommended for election" to the Society.

⁷See G. Holmes, "Henry Head 1861-1940", *Obituary Notices of Fellows of the Royal Society*, 3 (1939-41), 665-689, esp. 666.

⁸See J. Milne?, "Edward Divers, 1837-1912", *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London*, Series (A), 88 (1913), viii-x.

⁹See my "The Royal Society's Financial Support of Whitehead and Russell's *Principia Mathematica*", *Notes and Records of the Royal Society of London*, 30 (1975), 89-104.