

## Book review

Dora Russell, *The Tamarisk Tree: My Quest for Liberty and Love*. Toronto: Griffin House, \$20.75; London: Elek/Pemberton, £5.95; New York: Putnam's, \$9.95. 304 pp. illus.

Most autobiographies are read because of the reader's interest in knowing more about the author. Perhaps regrettably, many people will read Dora Russell's *The Tamarisk Tree* because they want to know more about Bertrand Russell. Those whose primary interest is in Dora's first husband will not be disappointed with the amount of attention he receives. There is much here that has not been told in full before - much that Russell later forgot or minimised, of joy shared, of domestic happiness, of ideals held in common and aims worked for together. There is, too, far more than Russell gives in his autobiography (and even than Ronald Clark gives in the new biography) on the disintegration of the marriage: Dora Russell's account is detailed, legally specific and, as one might expect, intensely personal. Indeed, it is almost shockingly different in emphasis from the child's-eye view of the same events presented so movingly by Katharine Tait in her new book, *My Father Bertrand Russell*.

Yet although my wish to read *The Tamarisk Tree* also stemmed from my interest in Bertrand Russell, I find myself made horribly uneasy by the way his presence dominates it. I enjoyed so much the first fifty pages, where Dora Black establishes her own identity with charm and strength. I was, as I suppose one is, captivated by points of resemblance between her childhood environment and mine - the thirty years of English history which separate us must have come before the rate of

social change reached exponential proportions. But far more than that, I was moved by her potential as an able young woman in the early twentieth century. One sees vividly how limitless seemed the possibilities, now that the barriers were breaking down or could, with courage and conviction, be ignored. Dora Black saw woman's horizons widening not only in the obvious political sphere, but in every direction: intellectual, social, sexual. She was not merely a suffragist but also fully a feminist. Not unaware of how far women still had to go, she and her contemporaries were yet shielded from the knowledge of how long it would take them to get even a small part of the distance. They rode on the crest of a wave of optimism: all things were possible to those who used reason.

Dora Black was the product of the same liberalism which informed Bertrand Russell's youth. The naïveté of a view which held that reason could alter the world at a stroke, doing away with irrational emotions as well as with long-established custom, was surely something she and he had in common, although the purity of his faith in reason was considerably clouded by the time they met during the First World War. Like him, she had cast off political liberalism, and had moved sharply to the Left, going farther and remaining more extreme in her socialism than he had ever been, except perhaps for a brief period in 1917.

When Russell first enters the story, there is no immediate change of direction. They seemed well suited, with so many shared beliefs and aspirations, with the same disbeliefs in conventions and similar courage in the face of disapproval. Both saw parenthood as fulfilling and expected to make a new career in it together. But the world they had to live in was not so changed after all. Dora Black had to give up all thought of a career at Girton College, Cambridge, to go with Bertrand Russell - for her, this was true whether or not they married. She sacrificed her career when she went to China with him; it is evident that she thinks she may have sacrificed something even more important when she agreed to marriage. This immolation of principle, and suppression of her will to his, should have been sufficient warning to them both that a shared faith in rationality would not answer all questions for them. What in fact they were doing was to throw away the old charts and set forth in strange waters, in absolute but misplaced confidence that the instrument (a compass called "reason") in which they put their faith would show them both the same shoals and the same safe channels and enable them to steer a course which would at least be safe from outright wreck. Both believed sex, love, marriage and parenthood had all to be redefined, but they made an unwarranted assumption when they supposed this to mean that both of them would draw the new lines in the same places, and that without constant dialogue. Dora Russell shows an understanding of the part played by failure to communicate (p. 234), although she does not seem to recognize that it would surely have been too late to "open up an honest discussion" when the crisis was upon them. Their expectations of each other's tolerance of extra-marital adventures should not be labelled irrational: they may more fitly be described as emotionally absurd - whatever explanations both indulged in, it was at the level of feeling that their demands were extreme and failure probably inevitable.

In the *Life* (chapter 14), Ronald Clark writes as if Bertrand Russell married Dora Black only to beget children. The marriage ceremony had certainly been submitted to at least in part to legitimize the heir, but many of the components of a deep relationship were there, and I see no reason to doubt that the early years together held much that was joyous and fulfilling. Russell had longed for a secure and lasting relationship as much as he had desired children.

After the breach took place, Bertrand Russell's second wife became for him just a past incident, almost a past mistake. For her, the effect of the break-up was far different. Katharine Tait, their daughter, has written:

When their marriage of love and high ideals came to an end and she was left with nothing, she felt hurt and abandoned. Sometimes I feel her real life stopped at that point, with everything since a backward-looking "if only", an attempt to relive and change and understand those years with my father.

I agree with this almost completely: it is what makes the story told in *The Tamarisk Tree* so profoundly disappointing to me, and Dora Russell's life so tragic. She was married to Russell for only twelve years, yet her account of the almost sixty years of life lived since she met him turns on him instead of on herself. We get some impression of her strength and limitations, some grasp of the importance to her of her thoughts on education and socialism, and a glimpse of the originality of some of her own ideas. Yet I would put the effective ending of her real life in one sense even earlier than does Dr. Tait: from the time of her marriage, or possibly even when she gave up her career to go to China with him, she seems to diminish in her own view of herself. Reading the painful account of the break-up and divorce I found myself longing for it to be all over so that I could learn of some rebuilding of the Dora Black of the early chapters; but instead I found her defining herself in terms of other men, and always harking back to the relationship with Russell.

Russell, I am convinced, did not want to destroy or absorb the women with whom he had relationships. I have thought a great deal about why in fact he sometimes did so and often came near to doing so, and I do not believe that sexism was a significant element. Dora claims (p. 291) that "Bertie did not really believe in the equality of women with men", but when she goes on to say "the male intellect was the object of his admiration and reverence", one can see no solid justification for the inclusion of the word "male". Certainly "whenever he found outstanding minds in his pupils, he befriended them and furthered their interests", and undoubtedly the state of women's education then, as now, ensured that the women whose minds were educated enough to interest a Bertrand Russell were far fewer than the men in such a happy position: but when he found a woman pupil of distinction (for example, Karin Costelloe Stephen and Dorothy Wrinch) he was as interested as he was in a comparable male pupil. Dora Russell's comment on his "supreme cultivation of the intellect" may have more force. In spite of a sometimes passionate desire for closeness, Bertrand Russell remained most of his life remote from the ability to touch the earth and the people who walked on it beside him.

*The Tamarisk Tree* is a courageous, generous and moving document. One can well understand both the reluctance and the need to write it: I would like to hope that perhaps the writing helped to exorcise the ghost of those twelve years at long last. I found the reading uncomfortable - I did not want to see the relationship between Bertrand and Dora Russell, with all its richness and potential, leave them both in the end - as I think it did - diminished.

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