

Book reviews

A daughter's-eye view

Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell*. London: Jonathan Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975. £6.95. New York: Knopf, 1976. US \$17.50. Can. \$16.95 (McGraw-Hill-Ryerson). 766 pp. 63 photos.

We are all very much in Ronald Clark's debt. Few men could attempt the life of a man as varied as Bertrand Russell and even fewer could do him justice. Like Russell himself, his biographer must be well acquainted with philosophy and mathematics, psychology, education and politics, and have a close understanding of recent British history. He also needs a mountain peak from which to survey the events of the last hundred years throughout the world before he can hope to see Bertrand Russell in perspective. A close-up view from the plain cannot help but show both faults and virtues too large. Perhaps it is still too soon to fit Russell into his landscape; we may need the perspective of time to see his place clearly. Nevertheless, Mr. Clark has made a valiant attempt.

Before he began to write, Clark waded through immense quantities of books and articles, reports and interviews, digested their contents and put them in rational order. They are reproduced in his book in readable abbreviation, with enough quotation to give us the real Russell flavour, but not enough to weigh down the narrative. The philosopher, the pacifist, the irreligious moralist, the teacher, writer and fanatical peacemaker are all well represented here.

But that is only the beginning. Innumerable letters to and from Russell have also been read, not only in the Archives, but wherever else Clark could find them. The letters from others, to and about Russell, add a valuable dimension which was lacking in Russell's own version of his life. And of course the correspondence with Ottoline, a running commentary on the long middle period of his long life, is invaluable.

Yet this is still not all. A meticulous professional biographer like Clark knows how to go about collecting his material. He wrote to everyone he could find connected with Russell, asking for information, and many of them he visited. Writing so soon after Russell's death, Clark had the advantage of reminiscences from many of his still living

contemporaries. Though some refused to cooperate and others gave incomplete or biased information, the immediacy of their recollections goes far to outweigh their necessary lack of perspective.

Having amassed a vast quantity of material, Clark faced the problem of selection and organization. Every Russell admirer will quarrel with the choices he has made. Many have already done so. The philosophers complain that Russell's important philosophical work, his enduring claim to immortality, is inadequately treated. Of course it is. But much has already been written about his philosophy by professionals. It is not likely that even such a talented amateur as Clark could have produced a summary that would have satisfied them. He was wise to leave this to the experts and produce instead a more general work which makes Russell's life accessible to non-philosophers. Russell himself, after all, did not devote a great deal of space to philosophical matters in his *Autobiography*, though he did not deny their importance to him, any more than Clark does.

Other specialists will have other complaints. Dora Russell, for instance, reviewing Clark's book for the *Freethinker*,¹ objects to the rather trivial account of Beacon Hill School. So do I. It was more important in Russell's life and in the world of education than Clark seems to realize. I hope that some day someone will write a thorough and sympathetic account of the school, from the theories that began it through the attempt to put them into practice to the sad end forced upon the experiment by lack of money. It was wildly idealistic, like so many of Russell's schemes, and based on a romantic notion of human nature; but it embodied a vision of decency and intelligence which was inspiring to many people. Though I have been among the school's critics, I believe it performed an invaluable service, both to the children who learned there and as what is now known as a "pilot project" for others.

But such criticisms ask the impossible of the author. Clark is not Russell after all. He does not share all Russell's interests nor all his enthusiasms. He seems to me to deal competently with the philosophy (which is not my field), very well with Russell's various university roles and admirably with his political life, both in World War I and in the nuclear disarmament campaign. His account of the CND years is a masterly narrative, clear, coherent and judicious, though no doubt many of those involved in it with Russell might wish for different emphases and detailed alterations.

For readers of *Russell* I do not need to go into the details of Russell's life, nor, I imagine, the particulars of Clark's book. This is more of an evaluation than a review, written for people who are already experts in the field.

Clark begins his book, naturally enough, with a description of the

world into which Bertrand Russell was born. An understanding of this background is essential to an understanding of the man, who remained all his life an aristocratic Victorian, standing in Trafalgar Square in his nineties like a monument to a bygone age. A more than life-size heroic figure of rare integrity and courage - rare in part because it was fed and supported by the lesser lives of many lesser people about whom he really knew rather little. When he spoke, as he often did in his later years, of the incomparably greater freedom of pre-1914 England, he was thinking of his own class. For the poor, that freedom had been non-existent. Yet when he stood adamant in Trafalgar Square, it was not for the preservation of the aristocratic privileges which had made his position possible, but for the right of men to continue to exist. To him, as to most Russells, privilege meant obligation, the duty to provide for others the benefits he himself enjoyed. He believed it could quite easily be done if men would only be reasonable and he felt called upon to teach them to be reasonable for their own good. Clark brings out this aspect of Russell very well in his book, both the *noblesse* and the *oblige*.

Russell agonized over the sufferings of humanity and longed to make all men happy; Clark quotes letter after letter to this effect. But he did not really like ordinary people very much, unless they were intelligent. Birth meant nothing to him and wealth even less; he was never an ordinary snob; only his admiration for intelligence led him into a kind of arrogance he quite possibly did not recognize. He saw nothing wrong with an aristocracy of intelligence and never doubted that the function of education was to educate the most intelligent to the limit of their ability, separating them from the average dullards as soon as they began to be hampered by them. Maybe some day a scholar with a computer will count the number of times Russell praises intelligence and tell us how far it outdistances other virtues. Until then I must rely on my own impressions, a rather unscientific tool.

Perhaps his unawareness of the rarity of great intelligence made Russell oblivious to the ruthlessness of his dismissal of the less talented. "Ruthlessness" is not a word he would have liked to see applied to himself, but it belongs. How else could he have advocated preventive war, no matter how rational such a policy might be? (That he did advocate such a policy, Clark makes abundantly clear, together with all his twists and turns of denial and affirmation. Consistency in pursuit of a goal led to regrettable inconsistency along the route.) Once Russell had convinced himself that an opponent was wicked (which usually meant willing to allow the suffering of others), he would attack with absolute ferocity and small regard for truth. Though he urged rational scepticism on others, he never practised it himself, feeling free to fight

with ruthless joy for any cause he believed to be right. Clark's account of his pacifist activity in the First War and of his campaigns for nuclear disarmament and against the Vietnam War shows him at his happy best in battle.

Russell was ruthless in his treatment of women too. Many people have said that they wished Clark had given less space to Russell's sensational love life - but I doubt that they skipped those parts of the book. Certainly his relations with women have no bearing on the greatness of his philosophy, nor on his contributions to peace and good sense in the world of public affairs. But he also set himself up as an authority on marriage and family life and education, and in this context it is fair to take a look at the practice of the preacher. Was he really as lecherous, libidinous, erotomaniac and all the rest of it as the courts of New York maintained? It seems that he was.

I wish myself that Russell's sex life had occupied a smaller part of Clark's book, but that is because I wish it had occupied a smaller part of his life. I have been truly horrified by the revelations of the book in this sphere. Not because I believe in monogamy, or even serial polygamy, or anything so conventional. But because it is obvious that Russell *used* women in a disgraceful way, as physical, emotional or spiritual hot water bottles, to be turned to for comfort when the world looked grey. His juggling of Ottoline and Helen Dudley, Dora and Colette is disgusting. I would not have thought a man of his integrity could be such a weasel. Nor so insensitive to the feelings of the women he used.

The astonishing thing is that so many women continued to love him after being thrown away like old shoes. My feminist indignation rose to boiling point as I read Clark's matter of fact account. Yet Dora, from whom I learned my feminism, has continued to love him all her life, despite her bitter hurt. An amazing man.

Clark tells us more than we have ever known about Russell's love life and I am sure his facts are all correct. Yet I do not think he has got it right. The material available to him and that withheld from him have led him inevitably into wrong emphases. Russell's correspondence with Ottoline and Colette through so many passionate years was available to Clark, as Dora's and Peter's were not. Of course this is no fault of Clark's; they simply did not choose to have their letters seen, quite understandably. I would not have wanted mine used either. Unfortunately, the lack of documentary evidence of Russell's love for his second and third wives leads Clark to underestimate the emotion. He might have guessed from the letters he has seen that Russell's epistles to these two would be equally passionate, assuring undying love one day

and taking it back the next. I do not believe that Dora and Peter were lesser loves on Russell's amatory scale than Colette. After all, he married them. When he parted from them, the break was more final because the relationship had been more concentrated, and complicated by the strong emotions of parenthood, not because they were less important.

Although Clark does not often venture on interpretation of Russell's motives, probably wisely in view of the complexity of his subject, nevertheless his choice of words and tone of voice inevitably carry judgment. In dealing with Russell's sex life his tone is wrong. Since many of Russell's escapades are as ludicrous as French farce, it is tempting to describe them in jocular terms. But trivializing. Russell was no simple Don Juan. The sharp intellect, the quest for certainty and the kaleidoscope of passion are all of a piece, all part of the same phenomenon. It is not possible to understand Russell the man without in some way grasping the connection. One does not get this understanding from Clark.

Indeed, it seems to me that somehow the real Russell escapes him. The whole life is here in wonderful detail, beautifully organized, decently written, provided with excellent illustrations, references, bibliography and index. But the significance is missing. In Clark's book we meet the professor, the propagandist and the lover. We do not meet the friend, the Russell whose grief at Charlie Sanger's death is one of my early memories. Nor do we meet the charmer, the Russell who brightened every room he entered, the joker, the laughter, the Russell who always seemed to be enjoying life. We meet the private pessimist, the gloomy, morbid, often suicidal product of Grandmother Russell's love. In letter after quoted letter his eloquent despair breaks forth and threatens to overwhelm him, so that we are left marvelling at the fortitude with which he endured so many years of life. We do not see here what made that endurance possible, his fantastic ability to enjoy life. We do not see the jolly red-faced man in shabby clothes whom the children at Beacon Hill loved, the doting, delightful father, the merry man and expert entertainer, the fountain of affection. All the facts of ninety-seven years are here, but the sparkle is gone and we are left with the flat champagne of the morning after. I would not have thought it possible to write a dull book about Bertrand Russell, but in my estimation Ronald Clark has succeeded in this remarkable feat.

The Life of Bertrand Russell is a useful and valuable book, a mine of information new and old, efficiently gathered together and attractively presented. It tells us a great deal about Russell and will be an invaluable source for all who want to know what he did in any of the many fields with which he concerned himself. But the life is missing; we get

no sense of the real man behind the many roles. Russell still needs
a biographer who loves him.

Cambridge, Mass.

Katharine Tait
