

Reviews

Lady Ottoline Morrell's life

Sandra Jobson Darroch, *Ottoline: The Life of Lady Ottoline Morrell*. 317 pp. 32 plates. London: Chatto and Windus, 1976. £6.00. Same edition in Canada \$14.50. New York: Coward, McCann and Geohegan, 1976. US \$12.50.

Carolyn G. Helbrun, ed., *Lady Ottoline's Album: Snapshots and portraits of her famous contemporaries (and of herself), photographed for the most part by Lady Ottoline Morrell*. From the collection of her daughter, Julian Vinogradoff. With an Introduction by Lord David Cecil. New York: Knopf, 1976. US \$12.50. London: Michael Joseph, 1976 [i.e. 1977]. £7.50. vii, 118 pp.

OTTOLINE is the first biography of Lady Ottoline Morrell, the woman with whom Russell had an affair crucial for both of them. We know from Russell's *Autobiography*, and from her *Memoirs*, the importance of their relationship for Russell's emergence as a social thinker with a range much beyond that which he had as a mathematical logician. Less clear is what the relationship did for her. It can be claimed that from 1911 Lady Ottoline brought out in Russell aesthetic and moral sensibilities for which he hardly knew he had the potential. For him the relationship was transformational, a "rejuvenation", as he puts it and not a mere adulterous romantic fling. What then can be learned, from Sandra Darroch's biography, about Lady Ottoline's capacity to so affect a great man? And what can be learned of her own change and growth? Does the biography advance understanding of Lady Ottoline in this and other respects?

For all its recapture of the main events of her life, *Ottoline* does less than might be hoped to interpret the person she was. The biography gives us the public Lady Ottoline especially at Garsington, her country house near Oxford, where from 1915 to 1928 she and her husband Philip Morrell entertained many of England's most important writers, artists, intellectuals and pacifists. Garsington is legendary as a World War I Mecca for pacifists. It is natural that Sandra Darroch should draw attention to Garsington as a cultural

generating point, a sort of extension of "Bloomsbury" with which the Morrells were closely associated. There are rich sources to draw upon in Lady Ottoline's correspondence and memoirs, published and unpublished, together with the many recent reconstructions of Bloomsbury lives. We are pleased to learn more about what Virginia Woolf calls in her *Diary* "such a pass of intrigue and general intricacy of relationship that they're hardly sane about each other."¹ It may not be unfair to say that the public aspect of Lady Ottoline's story awaited only the shaping hand to give it compelling interest. Sandra Darroch shows these Garsington relationships at their most intense and inwrought, and Lady Ottoline is invariably there in their midst.

But was she really so public a person as all that? The answer is that she was--but with a reservation that needs explaining. The expected literati did certainly gather at Lady Ottoline's court, as they congregated at the court at Twickenham Park created by Russell's great seventeenth-century ancestor, Lucy Countess of Bedford. There is much to be gained from the biography by those who want to know more about the literary figures gathered at Garsington. The biography is a valuable guide, enhanced by the plates, though it must be said that Carolyn Heilbrun's *Lady Ottoline's Album* far surpasses these in evocative power. Professor Heilbrun has selected from twelve volumes of photographs in the possession of Julian Vinogradoff and taken by her mother, Lady Ottoline. There is a graceful foreword by Mrs. Vinogradoff and an informative introduction by Lord David Cecil, together with aptly chosen passages from various writers to accompany the plates. Here will be found many surprising and revealing glimpses of the famous at Garsington--sequential shots of an animated Virginia Woolf, two of a quizzical W.B. Yeats in 1935, and of course Russell seeming a little prim in the informal setting, a bit of an outsider even here. The presiding queen herself may be seen in many moods, and these should be studied if we expect to understand anything of her mystery. This delightful book generates an atmosphere beyond what words can do.

To return to *Ottoline*: what, behind the swirl of personalities she attracted, do we learn about the woman herself? We may ask of a biography whether it gives compelling reasons why its subject was as she was. We hope to see the forces shaping Lady Ottoline's essential being, a being part of an intelligible pattern of relationships. Here the biography disappoints by not seeing its subject whole, beyond being

¹Anne Olivier Bell ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Vol. 1: 1915-1919 (London: Hogarth, 1977), p. 79.

simply a sum of encounters. To Sandra Darroch there are many Ottolines, as many as people who knew her. This is a limiting truth. She writes, "Any attempt to reconstruct what Ottoline was like is not a matter of attempting to winkle out from the morass of truth, half-truth, and fiction the supposedly 'real' figure: it is more a matter of trying to catch all the diverse and scattered images at one focus."² Too often attempts to portray the social Ottoline lose the essential subject focus, blurring and making her unreal. Too easily she becomes the outrageous figure some people tried to make of her, though it is no part of Sandra Darroch's purpose to lend support to that. The biographer might have tried harder to find her subject's centre, her "true self" within the "false self" impersonations that we read of and see in the photos. Some such distinction should be made, with the private Lady Ottoline becoming more interested because of it. A few of her intimates penetrated to the suffering person behind the glamorous exterior, though they were not always kind even when they saw the other Ottoline.

It was D.H. Lawrence's opinion that Lady Ottoline was no self-assured great lady, easily moving among her protégés in detached objectivity. He knew of her consuming need for new attachments and, being fearful of capture by such a woman, he mercilessly satirized her as Hermione Roddice in *Women in Love*. Sandra Darroch is good on the sad effect this had. Further she quotes Lawrence's perception of Hermione's deeper being, saying that it shows "one of the main causes of [Lady Ottoline's] unhappiness in her relations with other people"--but strangely makes little more of it. Lawrence's fictional comment on Lady Ottoline is that

She always felt vulnerable, vulnerable, there was always a secret chink in her armour. She did not know herself what it was. It was a lack of robust self, she had no natural sufficiency, there was a terrible void, a lack, a deficiency of being within her.³

Here is the truth about an unhappy inner state, a state that Lady Ottoline does much to convey in the parts of her *Memoirs* which have seen print. (Lawrence did not realize how much of her trouble she well understood, not having read these pages.) This aristocratic lady, a person born to privilege, suffered from acute ego weakness, weakness she sought to overcome by all the talents she possessed. She sought all the help she could get, even when it was not help.

There was thus another Lady Ottoline who could not pose,

²*Ottoline*, p. 253.

³*Ibid.*, p. 193.

just as there was a depressed, sometimes suicidal Russell behind the driving intellect. The other Ottoline is far more humanly significant than the plumed personage who made all heads turn in wonderment. There is an Ottoline who struggled to know and to be known by people who could give release from recurring self-doubt. Lady Ottoline was an inveterate enquirer into other people's affairs because her own were so tenuous; yet by repeated enquiry and reflection she attained a kind of sagacity about relationships. Living with her own doubt about fundamental selfhood cost heavily. Ill health and persistent headaches plagued her. Migraine headaches are generally thought to have a psychological component in unresolved hostile and aggressive emotions the sufferer was not permitted to express in childhood. For these and other symptoms Lady Ottoline was perpetually in search of help from professional healers, some none too reputable. The biographer is entitled to say that this help was as much to ease psychological conflict as to remedy physical ailments.

The extent of help sought and the sorts of persons consulted are worth mention. The "fascinating satyr" Axel Munthe, whose "willing captive" Ottoline became on Capri, was a society doctor specializing in nervous ailments. Lady Ottoline found that she could talk freely to him, but eventually he dismissed her as neurotic and too religious. Then there was a consultation with Professor Beigel in Germany; this man also became devoted to her, but we do not know the sequel. There were punishing physical treatments for neuralgia by a Dr. Combe in Lausanne. Following these were the more helpful consultations with the psychotherapist Dr. Roger Vittoz in the same city, this time a more reliable father-figure who neither exploited nor punished. Strangely Sandra Darroch does not see the significance of Lady Ottoline's many sessions with Dr. Vittoz, whereas her correspondence with Russell reveals how vitally important they were. They were so helpful to her steadiness of mind that when Russell was in the war doldrums in 1916 she urged him to undertake Vittoz's treatment for thought concentration. Vittoz taught use of the will to control wayward impulse, and to some extent he promoted insight into the psychological causes of suffering, if we may judge by his treatise *The Treatment of Neurasthenia* (1911). "How many sufferers have been comforted by being made to understand what they could not themselves explain", he writes.⁴ Undeniably Lady Ottoline sought understanding of her suffering, and it would not have been a long step into Freudian psychoanalysis itself. But Ernest Jones began serious practice in London only in 1913, and it

⁴Roger Vittoz, *Treatment of Neurasthenia* (London: Longman's Green, 1911), p. 114.

is unlikely that Lady Ottoline would have placed herself with such younger Bloomsbury psychoanalysts as Adrian and Karen Stephen or James and Alix Strachey. Psychoanalysis was not yet sufficiently established. She persisted in the less exacting manner of an older generation to try to gain relief from the suffering her life had imposed.

One method was literary. Readers of Sandra Darroch's formulation of Lady Ottoline's experience should look again at the opening chapters of Volume I of her own *Memoirs*. In *Ottoline* the biographer's emphasis is initially upon the "great lady in Bedford Square who managed to make life seem a little amusing and interesting and adventurous ...", quoting Virginia Woolf.⁵ Lady Ottoline's own emphasis is different, her first sentence reading: "My father died in December 1877," that is, when she was four and one half.⁶ This is an important clue to the underlying melancholy of which the writer tries to tell us--a melancholy of the private self which helps to explain the adventuring but fragile flamboyance of the public one. Lady Ottoline carefully delineates the pattern of her early life. It is one of family disruption and unexpected developments which followed upon the death of her father, General Bentinck. The lonely and bizarre life of the girl, Ottoline, at Welbeck, seat of the new Duke of Portland, her half-brother, is certainly noticed by her biographer. Her intense loving attachment to her mother is not. Lady Ottoline closes Chapter One with words about the quality of this attachment, and she gives a skilfully reticent account of the grief brought by her mother's death when she was just sixteen: "As words failed her then, they fail me now, but those looks live on forever." The loneliness that followed is restrained in the telling--no gush, no mannerism in writing of the "terrible void", of the "deficiency of being" these traumatic losses caused. Lady Ottoline was not finished with her parents when they were taken from her. There is no complaint against cruel fate, only a clinging, to her mother especially, and to a tress of her raven hair: "I keep and touch it again and again, with the same undying passionate love."⁷

The *Memoir* continues in Chapter Two with the reorientation period following her loss of mother--tenuous attachments to other family members, compensatory immersion in literature, and especially in religion. "I really grew to live entirely

⁵*Ottoline*, p. 15.

⁶*Ottoline: The Early Memoirs of Lady Ottoline Morrell*, ed. R. Gathorne-Hardy (London: Faber, 1963), p. 69.

⁷*Ibid.*, p. 88.

in a mystic religious world."⁸ This was a world made real by friendship with the remarkable Mother Julian, member of an Anglican order in Cornwall, a mother teaching a life of discipline along with joy in the creation. Lady Ottoline's Aunt and cousins at Ham Common and Mother Julian preserved her from excessive introversion. Yet we see an unsure and unprepared young woman setting out on European travels which would bring unsettling relationships, such as that with Dr. Munthe. Lady Ottoline's own comment is that she was "very late in developing anything like evenness in my character", never perhaps establishing an entirely reliable sense of self.⁹ Her striking appearance, lively mind and emerging romantic ardour led her deeper into the world than she could always manage. It was easy to attract men. This, of course, is the stuff of colourful biography, and Sandra Darroch makes the most of it. She shows that there were early attractions to William Maclagan, Archbishop of York and to Herbert Asquith, both older men. But whatever the erotic tinge, were these not fathers to a fatherless young woman? As Lady Ottoline says of the Archbishop, "I loved the old man. He was rather flirtatious in a mild, fatherly way ...",¹⁰ and of Asquith she comments that, while attractive, his conversation was not enlivening: "I knew he would not and could not care for me in the way I needed to be cared for."¹¹ "Care for" is what a daughter might say about a father. So anxious is Sandra Darroch to put in motion her narrative of the libertine lady aristocrat that she misses the pathos of this and hence a large part of what Lady Ottoline herself is striving to tell us.

Ottoline chronicles romantic attachments and pseudo-attachments. The list is long, tortuous and fascinating in what we learn of both famous and forgotten figures. We hear most about J.A. Cramb, Augustus John, Henry Lamb, Roger Fry, Lytton Strachey, Clive Bell, Siegfried Sassoon and of course at length about Lawrence and Russell--all of them creative people in greater or lesser degree. The nearly forgotten man is Philip Morrell, Lady Ottoline's forgiving husband who waited out her many fluctuations of hope that self-completion might come through others. Could his character not be given sharper focus, his courage and principle (as well as his weaknesses) be fully brought out? It was, after all, an enduring partnership, no simple preview of 'sixtyish, over-stimulated erotic change-and-change-about. Both partners

learned from disappointments and from the ingratitude and malice of others. A close attachment right to the end of life sustained them. Philip Morrell cherished the rare person to whom he was married and, in all essentials, she relied upon him. There was an uncommon depth of loyalty, as his letters to Russell after her death in 1938 show. Their trust is a surprising achievement that merits fuller consideration than this biography gives it.

Sandra Darroch hopes that her biography will gain for Lady Ottoline "added respect and sympathy."¹² I wonder whether its effect is not rather to reduce her to a precursor of sexual "liberation", a false ideal of our times. If this is the effect, it is unfortunate since Lady Ottoline's life is far more humanly significant. Her warmth and her generosity far outshine any hedonistic self-seeking. Ideals of duty and responsibility show through mere hunger for male contact. She was extraordinarily sensitive to the suffering of others, a paramount quality of civilization. Lady Ottoline was quick to sense distress and to try to answer it; many willingly gave her their confidences. The quality of her caring for Vivienne Eliot in her serious mental illness, and for S.S. Koteliansky in his bouts of depression, is rightly commended by Sandra Darroch. Lady Ottoline's horror of war was deeply founded, and she ran the risk of ostracism from family and class by supporting pacifists who resisted conscription. In the midst of exhausting and often fruitless personal searching, she saw that suffering, wherever it is, needs recognition and alleviation. Nothing is more certain about her character than this, something her husband shared. Lady Ottoline could, in other words, respond from an authentic moral core, not merely from the sometimes contrived persona that deceived some. She too was an artist, trying to build strength from weakness, looking for positive results in lives often more lonely than her own, and artifice was inevitably part of this.

In a revealing letter of Philip Morrell's to Russell after her death, trying to persuade him to write a memoir of Ottoline, there is an observation which lights up her whole life. Russell is taken to task for having commended only her "gay courage". To Philip this is a "curiously inadequate description of her." "Her courage", he writes, "indeed was at times marvellous, but it was also very intermittent (chiefly perhaps through her ill health), so that often it failed entirely, and all her life she suffered terribly from timidity and diffidence."¹³ This confirms Lawrence's per-

⁸Ibid., p. 91.

⁹Ibid., p. 112.

¹⁰Ibid., p. 98.

¹¹Ibid., p. 114.

¹²*Ottoline*, p. 12.

¹³Philip Morrell to Bertrand Russell, 28 Aug. 1938.

ception of "a deficiency of being with her"; it gives the measure of her achievement at Garsington and in Bloomsbury, together with suggesting reasons for the excesses of her attempts to make a mark among writers and artists.

Why is this point missed? The simplest explanation is that the material Sandra Darroch saw was not carefully enough meditated to yield this meaning. With so much interest in Bloomsbury, the time was opportune for publication, and *Ottoline* certainly makes a companion piece to Ronald Clark's *Life of Bertrand Russell* (1975). Most British reviewers welcomed *Ottoline* for its additions to the cultural picture of its age. *The Economist's* reviewer called it "definitive" but others were not so sure, with Rebecca West in the *Telegraph*, for example, pointing out certain omissions and distortions. Omissions and distortions there are. Had the correspondence with Russell been given its due, the matter of "lack of robust self", of the over-dependent being she was, would certainly have taken greater centrality. But Sandra Darroch seems to have read these letters to gather quickly the main facts, not noticing their pace and sense of development. This omission vitiates a balanced judgment of Lady Ottoline's most important sustained affair, and it distorts insight into her mind during perhaps its most interesting phase, the intense elevation of hope through Russell from 1911 to 1917. While Russell's are the more brilliant letters, her very different allusiveness comes across when she is read in an extended way. Russell was right to use full letters in his *Autobiography*, though we miss seeing hers. Any direct sense of the interplay of these two persons adds greatly to biographical truth, a truth which extended representations of points of view can only benefit.

From her letters to Russell--filled with idiosyncrasy and often hard to decipher--we begin to appreciate the expansion of her person Russell promoted, together with the illusions they shared. For example, writing on 18 July 1912 she remarks on how very happy she is and that "In spite of all the difficulties, you have developed me so much..." On the 24th of July she speaks of helping him to liberate his "wild beasts"; the letters contain many discussions of liberating aesthetic and religious means by which they both gained strength, though not without contesting fundamental assumptions. Dark forces erupt; there are disagreements, and there is disquiet about the war; in 1916 tension rises over Russell's relationship with Mrs. Eliot. By 1917 the stress was becoming unbearable of maintaining relations with a Russell who had entered an affair with Colette, who was to become his "soul's comrade". In the letters exchanged with Lady Ottoline the issue is over freedom when an attachment,

a seeming commitment, had been formed. Despite the breach of 1917, they never formally parted, a tempered loyalty working on both sides. She complains of the whirl at Garsington "shattering down about me" and "grinning in mockery", but Russell's return makes life seem worthwhile again--if he "holds" her.¹⁴ To hold her is a repeated plea uttered out of melancholy and illness; to be held is the starting point of all confidence. But Russell is a prophet, a primal force of nature, wonderful and magic; she knows he is too much for her to hold, yet nothing less than his energies satisfy. He is beset, she knows, by "obsessions", and there are grievances pushing them apart; but don't they share a common root from which the authentic growth they knew might again spring? Might they not, despite all, enter "pastures new"? She pleads, regretting at the same time that she has too easily accepted his diminishing view of her; yet there has been so much shared. Fear of abandonment, as a child might be abandoned, is acute; self-doubt becomes poignant as the crisis deepens. Without these letters Chapter Fourteen of *Ottoline* lacks the immediacy of living persons in their struggle to be what they think is possible for them. The chapter treats Lady Ottoline's greatest crisis in broad sweeps, not explaining how her emotional fortunes can be represented by relying almost entirely on his letters. There are involved something like 1,411 surviving letters to Russell, which does not inspire confidence that in general Lady Ottoline's correspondence has been used to most advantage.

How is a psychology as intricately structured as was Lady Ottoline Morrell's to be known except through immersion in her own words, loosely offered in the letters but organized in the two published volumes of *Memoirs* which carry us to 1918? Her hopes and fears are indeed moving; her compassion and capacity for friendship are too unusual to be left in passing without asking reasons. No, this is not the definitive biography, only a foretaste of what might be said of this conflicted but bravely adventuring woman at the very centre of modernism in England.

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¹⁴Lady Ottoline Morrell to Bertrand Russell, 19 March 1917.