Obituary

Will Durant, 1885–1981

by David Harley

ON 7 NOVEMBER 1981, Will Durant died of heart failure in a Los Angeles hospital at the age of ninety-six. Unknown to him his wife Ariel had died on 25 October in her eighty-third year. It seems that right up until the very end, the Durants were resolved to do everything together.

Durant was born on 5 November 1885 and hence, like Bertrand Russell, had one foot in the nineteenth century. He was brought up by staunch Roman Catholic parents who hoped that their son would be a priest. Fortunately, Durant was subjected to a rigorous education at the hands of the Jesuits who, as in the case of Voltaire, developed his intellect at the expense of his faith. He rebelled and adopted radical socialist ideas. In 1912, Durant took a teaching position at the Ferrer Modern School where he met and fell in love with one of his pupils—Ariel Appel. Despite her fifteen years to his twenty-seven, they were married in 1913. In that same year, he enrolled at Columbia, in time to hear Russell lecture the following spring. Twelve years later he recalled Russell as follows: "He impressed one, in 1914, as cold-blooded, as a temporarily animated abstraction, a formula with legs."[1] In 1917, after having been examined in Greek philosophy by no less a figure than John Dewey, Durant was awarded a doctorate.

From 1914 to 1927, Durant augmented his income by giving two lectures a week at New York's Labor Temple. It was through his contacts there that he met Emanuel Julius of the Haldeman-Julius Press, who commissioned Durant to write a number of booklets on the lives and opinions of eminent philosophers. These appeared in 1923–25 as part of the Haldeman-Julius Blue Book series. In 1926 the eleven booklets were gathered together and published as *The Story of Philosophy*—a work which included a chapter on Russell and whose record sales made its author independently wealthy. For the remainder of his life, Durant's main project, in collaboration with Ariel, was the writing of *The Story of Civilization*. The first volume of this massive undertaking appeared in

1 *The Story of Philosophy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1926), p. 519.

1935. It was forty years later when the eleventh and final volume saw print.

As one of the century's foremost popular educators, Durant's impact upon this age cannot be minimized. His desire to humanize history and philosophy for the average reader was accomplished by presenting historical and intellectual figures as real men and women rather than as abstract entities, pawns or manifestations of rigid historical laws. He sought to elevate individual contributions to culture and, like Russell, believed in the ability of individuals to actively shape the course of history. Durant's writings were a vehicle for the expression of these beliefs and for the promotion of an awareness and appreciation of man's true wealth—culture. Together with Russell, he believed that the minds of men and women should "mirror the universe" through an extended awareness of both space and time. The narrow and exclusive concern with the "self" not only limited the human being; it was also seen as posing a threat to the continued existence of civilization.

Durant and Russell met in 1927 when they debated against each other on the topic,"Is Democracy a Failure?" Their performance was such a success that during Russell's 1929 lecture tour another debate was staged on the issue, "Is Education a Failure?" Despite some of Russell's views on marriage, Durant greatly admired him and teasingly referred to Russell in one book as the "Bad Boy of England, scandalizer of all continents, and prospective terror of the House of Lords",[2] and in another as a "charming apostle of despair".[3] In 1948 they met again in Wales. Recalling that encounter, Durant wrote: "Bertrand was now an earl, but there was nothing lordly about him except the confident consciousness of having a mind that moved like a deadly laser among the shams and delusions of his time."[4]

Like Russell, Durant was one of those individuals who seem to get better with age. His mind was lucid and penetrating until the end. Though loving life, he faced death with reserve: "I accept death as a necessary clearing of the way for fresh life; like style is the removal of the superflous."[5] Durant's final years were heaped with honours including the Pulitzer Prize for *Rousseau and Revolution* in 1968 and the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1977. The peace of mind he would otherwise have enjoyed was broken by a growing awareness that civilization was on the verge of a nuclear disaster.[6] The temple of civilization that he had served and worshipped was, he believed, about to collapse. Despite his many accomplishments, Durant retained a genuine humility. Shortly before his death, he wrote to me:

> What an intolerable egoist I've been thru most of this century! I marvel to find myself now still free from jail and asylums, and amiably tolerated by three generations of unpremeditated offspring. Life has always forgiven my blunders, and smiled at my supposed wisdom. My conclusion is, Be tolerant with all, for they have been merciful with you.[7]

When asked about Russell and their friendship, he replied: "He was always a stimulating mind. I treasure his memory. I'll join him any minute now."[8] He has.

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[2] *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Williams & Norgate Ltd., 1933), p. 106.
[3] *The Pleasures of Philosophy* 5th ed. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1964), p. 38. Durant discussed Russell's views on marriage in Chapter 3 of *Adventures in Genius* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931).
[4] Will and Ariel Durant, *A Dual Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1977), p. 273.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 404.
[6] Durant to David Harley, 26 March 1981.
[7] *Ibid.*, 17 March 1981.
[8] *Ibid.*, 19 March 1981.