Lowe's Whitehead

by Nicholas Griffin

Victor Lowe. *Alfred North Whitehead. The Man and His Work*. Volume I: *1861–1910*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985. Pp. xi, 351. US$27.50.

GOOD BIOGRAPHY IS no easy matter. It requires, in the first place, that the biographer know a good deal about the fields in which his subject worked: for while the works can usually be studied without the life, the life can never properly be understood without the works. It requires, also, the skills of an historian in establishing the facts and in the use and interpretation of documents. Finally, it requires something of the novelist's flair for narrative. For the reader should leave a good biography with a sense of having known the subject. These talents are rarely combined in one author, and good biographies are accordingly quite rare.

Whitehead offers his biographer extraordinary difficulties on all three of the points mentioned above. In the first place, Whitehead had two careers, one as a mathematician, the other as a philosopher. Moreover, the two careers don't mesh in a very helpful way. If one knows Russell's

logic, one can easily get a good idea of his epistemology. But, although Whitehead's first (and to my mind, most interesting) philosophical works owe much to his knowledge of pure and applied mathematics, a knowledge of his mathematical work is a wholly inadequate basis for understanding the process philosophy of his last years.

This difficulty, however, pales into insignificance beside the other two, which combine to form an almost impenetrable barrier to understanding Whitehead as a human being. Judging from the reports Lowe has collected, those who knew Whitehead liked him, admired him, but never felt they'd understood him. He does not figure prominently in the memoirs of his friends. He had, in fact, few close friends; was an infrequent correspondent; rarely talked about personal matters; and didn't show his emotions easily.[1] These facts alone would make it difficult enough for a biographer to present an adequate portrait of the man. But they are made much worse by the fact that Whitehead was not only not a keeper but a quite meticulous destroyer of documents. Hardly any of his correspondence, or that of members of his family, has survived. The destruction of his papers after his death (on his instructions) took in not merely personal memorabilia, but all his working and professional papers as well. The result is an almost complete absence of the sort of information a biographer needs.

In this extremity Lowe's efforts have been little short of heroic. So far as can be seen, he has left absolutely no stone unturned in his efforts to uncover missing information. But all too often the results are minimal or only tangential to his purpose. For Whitehead's long association with Trinity College, Cambridge, for example, Lowe is forced to rely upon uninformative Council minutes, or brief reports in university publications: occasional public traces of an intensely private life. Nor is much further information about these early years of Whitehead's life turned up by interviews with surviving members of Whitehead's family, with old friends and students, or even as a result of Lowe's own personal association with Whitehead. And the published record, beyond Whitehead's own writings, is scant to say the least.

Despite the fact that the book carries constant reminders of the paucity of information about Whitehead, Lowe never stops to consider why Whitehead should have been so careful to cover his tracks (although he does discount the possiblity that Whitehead had something to hide, p. 3). Yet such a discussion might have given us a better understanding

[1] An exception to the last is when he walked out of a Trinity Council meeting after it had accepted the resignation of his friend, A.R. Forsyth, whose elopement with a married woman had caused a tempest among the sherry glasses.

of what Whitehead was like. After all, the most important known personal fact about him is that he took considerable pains to ensure that few important personal facts about him should be known. Whitehead appeared to almost all who knew him as a model of beneficent rationality. There is little doubt that he was a good man; mild-mannered, slow to anger, and free from jealousy. He was reticent and unassuming to a remarkable degree—a most unrancorous personality. Yet Russell, who knew him as well as anybody who was prepared to talk, detected dark passions hidden beneath the tranquil exterior and feared on occasion for his sanity (as did his wife, Evelyn, at least by Russell's account). There are also some surprising major events in Whitehead's life. For example, in 1910 he suddenly resigned his Cambridge lectureship and moved to London (the event with which Lowe's first volume ends). Fourteen years later, at the age of sixty-three, he moved again, this time to Harvard. Events of this kind in Russell's life happened almost every year, but in Whitehead's they stand out dramatically against a background of apparent stability. There seems to have been a current of restlessness and dissatisfaction in Whitehead's life that was very carefully concealed. There is also the episode of his near conversion to Roman Catholicism just before his marriage. He seems ever after to have been uncomfortable when this was alluded to.

One suspects that there was a good deal of self-dislike in Whitehead and that his destruction of documentation about his life and work may have been due to his feeling that his life and work (apart perhaps from what had been published) were not very satisfactory. According to Russell, he used "to frighten Mrs. Whitehead and her servants by mutterings in which he addressed injurious objurgations to himself" (*Autobiography* [London: Allen & Unwin, 1967–69], I: 150), mutterings which Russell himself overheard (Lowe, p. 244). The dangers were likely exaggerated; Russell himself thought later that they were and Lowe concurs. But the tension in Whitehead's inner life was real enough and deserves an explanation; as does his extraordinary reticence. Lowe does not, in this volume at any rate, fully address either topic. Whitehead was an enigma, and he remains one after Lowe's first volume.

The one really useful body of information about Whitehead before 1910 comes to us from Russell. I was surprised at how much of what is known of Whitehead is known only because Russell recorded it. This is true, for example, of Whitehead's brush with Catholicism. The information comes from a variety of sources. Firstly, Russell alone of Whitehead's friends wrote at some length about him (in the *Autobiography* and in *Portraits from Memory*). Secondly, the Russell Archives' collection of Whitehead's letters to Russell (mostly concerned with their collaboration on *Principia Mathematica*) is the only substantial collection of Whitehead letters available. In addition, Russell wrote to others about Whitehead (notably to Alys Russell and to Ottoline Morrell). Finally, Lowe himself was able to interview and correspond with Russell. Not surprisingly, therefore, Russell figures largely in the last third of Lowe's book. There are two chapters on the writing of *Principia Mathematica*. Together they form the best account yet available of the personal aspects of the collaboration. Technical details are largely eschewed in Lowe's account, although they dominate the extant correspondence. In this, as in other aspects of Whitehead's early intellectual development, it seems likely that future research will be able to add to Lowe's account. Nonetheless, the personal story is worth telling, for not only was *Principia* a very remarkable book, it was the product of a very remarkable collaboration.

In addition, Russell is the subject of a third chapter which covers the non-intellectual aspects of his friendship with Whitehead. Lowe is often shrewd in his estimation of Russell. He notes, for example, Russell's need for encouragement and Whitehead's willingness to provide it during the writing of *Principia*. Since all but three of Russell's letters to Whitehead were destroyed we have no way of knowing whether the encouragement was mutual, but it seems likely. In a project of that magnitude one suspects they both needed all the encouragement they could get. On the question of Russell's financial support of the Whiteheads, which took place without Alfred's knowledge, Lowe differs from the account Russell left. According to Russell the money was needed by Evelyn to offset Alfred's extravagance. Lowe believes that this was a story that Evelyn concocted for Russell's benefit, and that it was really Evelyn's extravagance which made the money necessary. This seems entirely plausible to me.

In other ways, also, Lowe believes that Russell was Evelyn's dupe. Russell was doubly deceived in his mystical experience in the face of Evelyn's angina attack on 10 February 1901. In the first place, as might have been suspected given that Evelyn survived for another sixty years despite recurrent heart attacks, the attack of 1901 was not genuine but false angina, an hysterical condition, distressing but never fatal (p. 240). Here Evelyn's deception was presumably not deliberate. However, the impression Russell gained from that attack, that Evelyn's life was (as he later put it to Ottoline Morrell) one of "utter loneliness, filled with intense tragedy and pain of which she could never speak" (p. 241), was, Lowe believes, one which Evelyn carefully cultivated and one by which Russell, in his naïveté, was completely taken in. It is a

harsh view of Evelyn (much harsher than Russell's later view that she "tended to be melodramatic" which Lowe repudiates, p. 243), but not an implausible one. The possibility should not be overlooked, however, that the "intense tragedy and pain" was the invention of Russell's own rather melodramatic view of human relations at this time, and the generally hyperbolical tone of his letters to Ottoline Morrell. At all events, the tragedy and pain made Evelyn interesting to Russell, and she was only too happy to appear interesting. There seems little reason to doubt that she was lonely; she did not enjoy the social role of a don's wife at Cambridge, she found Cambridge itself dull and provincial, and she felt that Alfred neglected her for his work. But none of this amounts to the sort of Romantic desolation which intrigued Russell. That Russell fell in love with her seems undeniable; that she fell in love with Russell seems unlikely. Whether Whitehead knew about it is an open question, but Lowe thinks it probable. Whether they slept together is another open question, but Lowe thinks it improbable. That any further information will be forthcoming on the topic is *very* improbable.

In all this, Lowe's opinions are certainly plausible and have, I suppose, a better chance of being right than anybody else's. But there are in the chapter on Russell a number of outright errors which, unfortunately, raise lingering doubts about the accuracy of other parts of the book. It is disturbing, for example, that Lowe gives the year of Russell's death as 1972 (p. 251n), but other errors are more serious. We are told, apropos *The Principles of Mathematics*, that Russell wrote the "first draft" on his return from the Paris Congress in 1900 and that he "never concerned himself with applied mathematics" (p. 236). What Russell wrote on his return from the Congress was the penultimate draft of the *Principles*; an earlier draft under the same title is in his Archives as well as several even earlier drafts of comparable works under other titles. Moreover, the published book contains a good deal of material on applied mathematics (the whole of Part VII, for example). On p. 226 we are told that Russell found Hegel on mathematics worthless and turned to Kant. In fact, Russell turned to Kant first and then Hegel. He read Hegel in 1896, not before 1895 as Lowe implies. On p. 225 Lowe asserts that in the first year of his first marriage (1894) Russell read Grassmann's "*Ausdehnungslehre*, projective geometry, many writers on non-Euclidean geometry, several *Cours d'Analyse*, and much more". The geometry reading is correct (sixteen works in 1894 and 1895), but the *Cours d'Analyse* came later and the Grassmann in 1896. These errors could have been avoided easily had Lowe paid more attention to the material in the Russell Archives or in the first volume of Russell's *Collected Papers*.

None of these errors are terribly serious in a work on Whitehead, but they spoil the appearance of exemplary scholarship which Lowe gives; as does his habit of quoting material without giving references. When it comes to Whitehead himself Lowe is capable of some odd judgments. To take a minor matter first: In 1943 Whitehead told Lucien Price apropos his student years at Cambridge: "My teacher was a pupil of Clerk Maxwell, who had died only a year or so before, and he, too, was eminent." Lowe devotes a long footnote (p. 99n) to trying to identify the teacher. He thinks it most probable that Whitehead meant Routh, who was his coach, claiming that Routh "was associated in the minds of Cambridge men with his exact contemporary, Maxwell" and that "by some slip their relation could have been transformed in Price's notes to a teacher–pupil relation". But I see no reason why Routh should have been associated with Maxwell; and the fact that they were contemporaries in the Tripos only makes it more unlikely that Maxwell should have been thought to be Routh's teacher. There is in any case a much more plausible interpretation, which Lowe himself mentions: that Whitehead was referring to W.D. Niven, who was Maxwell's pupil, who was eminent, and who did teach Whitehead. The fact that Whitehead referred to "my teacher", implying thereby a special relationship, does not imply that he must have been thinking of his coach. Coaches were usually associated with the routine grind of the Tripos work, students got their inspiration elsewhere. And Whitehead, by Lowe's account (p. 95), got it from Niven who lectured on Maxwell's electromagnetic theory, the topic on which Whitehead wrote his dissertation.

Equally odd is Lowe's view that "the state of mathematics [at Cambridge], and of its teaching, had become quite creditable" by 1880, citing memoirs by J.J. Thomson, Karl Pearson and A.R. Forsyth as evidence. This is belied by his own assertion that the Tripos, which dominated mathematical life at Cambridge, was by 1890 "an object of deserved scorn" (p. 102), by the fact that Whitehead and Forsyth struggled long and hard to reform it, and that the Forsyth memoir cited is thoroughly contemptuous of it. Lowe, in fact, is very much inclined to take a roseate view of Whitehead's education, even when the evidence he cites suggests the opposite. Thus, Whitehead's public school, Sherborne, is described as having "a big happy family feeling" (p. 51), despite the fact that Arthur Waugh in *One Man's Road* described the Junior Common Room as hell. Again, Lowe concludes that "on the whole" the prefectorial system "in Whitehead's time worked fairly well" (p. 49), though Whitehead in his "Autobiographical Notes" said "about half the time it worked badly". The education was, on White-

head's account, "deplorably narrow" (p. 51); but the sanitation (ninety boys and four baths) seems to have been worse: Whitehead missed a typhoid epidemic by two years. About the best thing that can be said with confidence about Sherborne in Whitehead's day is that it was not yet militarized. I'm at a loss to know why Lowe takes such a cheery view of such miserable institutions. Perhaps he thinks that Whitehead could not have turned out as well as he did if his education had been as bad as it seems. But some people triumph even over a public school education.

These complaints notwithstanding, Lowe's book is an invaluable source of information about Whitehead's life up to his departure from Cambridge. It seems unlikely that any significant new information will turn up after Lowe's meticulous search. That Whitehead should remain an enigmatic figure is perhaps inevitable, given the nature of his life and the paucity of information about it. Lowe's first volume will remain definitive. The second is eagerly awaited.

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