

SELECTED LETTERS

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Nicholas Griffin. *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell*, Vol. 1: *The Private Years, 1884–1914*. London: Allen Lane the Penguin Press, 1992. Pp. xxi, 553. £25.00; C\$47.99; US\$35.00.

Nicholas Griffin has done an admirable job of selecting and explaining the letters in this first volume. It is amazingly to his credit that he manages to be so well acquainted with and to understand so well a world so remote from his own. In the whole volume, I found only two small points on which to augment his knowledge. If he had looked up Shakespeare's poem about greasy Joan, which we all know in part, he would have solved for himself the mystery of Marian's nose, referred to on page 93. It was red and raw from the cold, as Russell's always was from sunburn in the summer—and usually peeling besides. And on page 217, perhaps a more esoteric mystery: Milligan is a game of patience played with two packs of cards, which I have seen him playing with a special small set capable of being spread out on a small table. My only other quibble is that I think perhaps Griffin is a trifle too hard on Grandmother Russell, who may have been less calculating and more sentimental than he supposes. That she was not above emotional blackmail is clear from Russell's letter to Alys of 17 August 1894:

I went to my Grandmother, and found her on the sofa in her sitting-room. We embraced in silence for some time and then I looked at her sadly with tears in my eyes and she said "Well I'm worse than you thought I was"; not with an air of triumph, but of mild reproof for my heartlessness in having felt so little anxiety. She besought me to consent to an absence; she says everybody who comes thinks it strange I should not be here when she is so ill, and that both thee and I are suffering in reputation in consequence. She gave repeated assurances (which I didn't need) of her absolute unselfishness in urging my home-duties; she really does care only about my moral welfare, which she feels to be imperilled by such neglect. (P. 98)

Awful stuff, yet I think she may have rather been seizing any weapon that came to hand than laying deeply cunning schemes; but this is only opinion and I would bow to Griffin's greater knowledge of the facts. His analysis of Evelyn Whitehead's "attacks", their effect on Russell and his relations with

her, on the other hand, I found enlightening and quite the best thing I have read on the subject.

Some other fine items must be singled out for special mention. First, the generous tribute to Russell's integrity over Frege on page 245. Russell

had spent five years working in almost complete isolation on the *Principles* only to find, when it had gone to press, that much of what was best and most original in it had been anticipated by Frege. Yet, even in his private correspondence, he never gave so much as a hint of any concern about his loss of priority, but only his delight at having found a thinker with similar ideas. It required an integrity beyond the call of duty to add to the *Principles* an appendix drawing attention to Frege's work and generally to do what he could to make it better known.

Griffin's editorial work is for the most part admirably dispassionate, always informative, sometimes speculative, occasionally critical; but when the occasion warrants (usually over professional matters), he is unstinting in his praise.

Russell's comments about *The Principles of Mathematics* in his letters seem absurdly modest. The book was undoubtedly a work of genius; in some ways, the greatest thing he ever wrote.... [I]t offered not merely a new philosophy of mathematics but a new way of doing philosophy. Yet Russell had set himself impossibly high standards and his disappointment in the book was genuine. (P. 273)

Yet he is robustly critical of Russell's decision not to leave Alys, but to embrace pain and duty for reasons that are by no means clear (p. 247). And to quote only one of his drily perceptive comments: "Like many lonely people, he cultivated a rather self-conscious sensitivity to the troubles of others" (p. 253).

On the grand affair with Ottoline also Griffin's running commentary is enlightening and astringently sympathetic, seeming to understand both sides. For instance:

Still more important for Russell in 1911 was Ottoline's passion for intimacy. Since his mystical experience in 1901 Russell had been anxious to pour out his soul to whoever might understand it. With women he had been most successful in this when they were safely on the other side of the Atlantic, for he was still restrained by a restrictive social code on sexual relations and even more so by his own puritanism. Ottoline, considerably more daring in these matters than Russell at this time, was able to overcome his scruples, and her kindness (which he had observed during the election campaigns of the previous year) encouraged his initial "timid advances". (Pp. 346-7)

This at the beginning and, much later, when things were going badly wrong: "At the very moment that Bertie was wailing most loudly that he had fallen

over a precipice and was doomed, he retained enough self-possession to start looking for ways to climb back up." (In this case, brief flirtation with another woman, p. 470.) Later, and more sympathetically: "Through January there is a curious, almost somnambulistic, quality to his letters: on the one hand, he comments in a detached way about his unhappy love; while, on the other, he reports on the progress of his work with relish" (p. 485).

More about Griffin's editorial skill and wisdom is sure to appear in the course of this review, but it seemed necessary to expound on it in some detail because nearly all the reviews I have read neglect it almost entirely, plunging at once into the epistolary maelstrom of Russell's emotions which makes up the bulk of the book.

One last regret: in all books of letters like this I want to see the other side also. I know that it would be impossible in this case, since not all the answers exist and the book is quite long enough without them; but still I wish we could have heard more from Alys for instance, than the tantalizing bits here quoted. Ottoline, of course, can and has spoken for herself, but we have never heard enough from Alys.

Having in effect asked for more, I must now confess that my immediate feeling on reaching the end of this volume was how appalling that this is only a selection. What a torrent of words came out of Russell, first to Alys and later, even more overwhelmingly, to Ottoline. One wonders how he had time for anything else. Yet the letters show that he carried on an active social life, taught and entertained students, wrote learned papers (even books), went to conferences, took an active part in politics, went on long walking tours, and always read voraciously. He often complained of exhaustion and no wonder; only a man of prodigious energy could have kept up such a pace. "I am frightfully busy", he wrote to one of his lady correspondents in 1908, when he was working on *Principia*.

On average days I do 9 or 10 hours' work at my book—on other days I have various jobs. For instance on Thursday, after doing 1½ hours at my book I had to go to London. In the train up and down I read the proofs of the French translation of my book on Leibniz practically the whole time. In London I had a Women's Suffrage Committee ... and then I had to go to the Royal Society to be admitted as a Fellow. I got home at 8, and after dinner I had to write an article and several letters on Women's Suffrage, and a critical letter to Graham Wallas about a book of his I have been reading in MS. (P. 320)

My second reaction, arising out of this, is that the letters give a rather distorted picture of Russell. Perhaps the witty entertainer and energetic public man did not so often get into the letters, crowded out by the inward, anguished self-absorbed prig. One could wish he had sent more letters to

Helen Flexner, to whom he wrote a lively account of his first dreadful public meeting as a Women's Suffrage candidate in 1907 (pp. 313-14); or to Lucy Donnelly, recipient of his account of a dinner to meet Bergson in 1911. At this dinner "Shaw made an amusing speech explaining how glad he was that Bergson had adopted his (Shaw's) views, and expounding how Bergson thought we came to have eyes. B. said it wasn't quite that way, but Shaw set him right, and said B. evidently didn't understand his own philosophy" (p. 400). He did not often write so amusingly to the ladies close to his heart, who were most often showered with protestations of undying love or outpourings of guilt and grief when things went wrong.

The professional philosopher is not much in evidence here either, but that is by choice. There are, says Griffin, a good number of letters in the Russell Archives on his philosophical work, but

most of them are so technical that to have included them in greater numbers would have made this a book for specialists only. I have included a couple of examples of some of the less technical of the letters on the foundations of mathematics. The matters they deal with were at the centre of Russell's life at the time and to have omitted all reference to them would have been a serious distortion. (P. viii)

This decision seems to me right, even though it makes for some difficulty in understanding the man. The muddled and passionate writer of these letters is hard to reconcile with the razor intellect we admire even when we do not understand. (Russell was himself aware of the conflict, writing to Ottoline in 1911: "My instinct has *never* felt what I said today, but my reason kept urging that it *must* be so and I couldn't see how to get out of it.... It is difficult to me to understand a mind so genuinely unaffected by argument as yours", he wrote, in memorable understatement, but "I see now how I misjudged with my reason" [p. 406]. Amazing what love will do even to the keenest of intellects.)

Even a non-professional reader must be interested by Russell's various comments on his philosophical work, which he spoke of sometimes as a comfort, sometimes as a sort of slave-driver, sometimes as an important contribution to knowledge, sometimes almost in the terms of inspiration that artists use. "To me", he wrote to Helen Flexner,

pure mathematics is one of the highest forms of art; it has a sublimity quite special to itself, and an immense dignity derived from the fact that its world is exempt from change and time.... The only difficulty is that none but mathematicians can enter this enchanted region, and they hardly ever have a sense of beauty. And mathematics is the only thing we know of that is capable of perfection; in thinking about it we become Gods. (P. 224)

In contrast, looking towards the end of his work on *The Principles of Mathematics*, he wrote to Alys that the end

will not give me any feeling of elation, merely a kind of tired relief as at the end of a very long dusty railway journey. The book will be full of imperfections, and will raise innumerable questions that I don't know how to answer. There is a great deal of good thinking in it, but the final product is not a work of art, as I had hoped it would be. (P. 234)

To Ottoline, almost ten years later: "I wonder whether you know and understand the odd sense of dedication that I have towards Philosophy. It has nothing to do with reason, or with any deliberate judgment that Philosophy is important. It is merely what I *have* to do. I often hate the task, but I cannot escape it—and of course at bottom I don't wish to" (p. 385). It had its rewards, however, both public and private. From the meeting of the International Congress of Mathematicians he wrote to Ottoline:

I find it excites me and gets hold of me to think of seeing so many people interested in mathematical philosophy—my interest revives and the scent of battle stirs my blood. The love of power is terribly strong in me. I can't help reflecting that all these mathematical philosophers have different thoughts from what they would have had if I had not existed. But of course the real thing that makes an occasion of this kind feel important is the sense one has of scattered missionaries of truthful thought, each fighting a rather lonely battle, all coming together and finding encouragement in their common purpose. (P. 437)

On a more elevated plane, in a letter to Ottoline about her belief in God, which he was struggling to share: "Truth is the one [mystery] I have mainly served, and truth is the only one I *always* feel the divinity of. This has made me get things out of proportion and rather repress other worship in myself, so that I have grown starved and thin" (p. 410). One of his many apologies to Ottoline for being the man he was.

One last and fascinating quotation, from 1914, to Ottoline:

The sheer delight of clear vision as to the problem of matter makes the whole world look bright. It is odd: To see clearly after being long puzzled is one of the god-like things in life. I suppose what makes people philosophers is finding it intolerably painful to be puzzled and correspondingly glorious to see clearly. It is like surveying from a hill-top a country strewn with battlefields where desperate victories have been won against what seemed irresistible odds. (Pp. 483-4)

With such a passion for clarity, no wonder he found the confusions of ordinary human life hard to take. He goes on to say, in a flourish of triumph and ambition:

It really is a glorious thing to give understanding of things never understood before—to subdue a new province of the wild world to the empire of thought. It is worth being mad and hateful and filling oneself and others with pain if that is the price one must pay. Merely to write down what I have in germ in my mind about matter will probably take me the rest of my working life. I have a vast synthesis in my head, bringing together what had seemed discrepant facts from physics, physiology and psychology; and if I can fully succeed, it will be in the end as definite as the multiplication-table. It may turn out to be a better piece of work than any I have yet done. But it will want health and energy and a terrific driving-force. My work really is creative in a very high sense, because it consists in bringing scientific method and demonstration into regions where hitherto there has been nothing but conjecture. (P. 484)

The manifesto of genius—and I say that without irony, even though he did not achieve the whole vision; it is such a marvellous statement of the artist's compulsion. Realizing how it must sound, he goes on to say: "Forgive all this boasting—it is really the things I see, not my part in them, that I find intoxicating."

The public man we all know so well from Russell's later life is not much in evidence in this first volume. He was brought up, as he himself often said, to a tradition of public service, but chose instead the life of a philosophy don; perhaps at first, in part, as rebellion against his grandmother's expectations. It is amusing to discover that as a young man he was something of an imperialist, defending the Boer War to Couturat and telling him that "If you had read anthropology books, you would know what a truly savage country is, and what are the benefits which result from civilized government. I wish that every part of the world were governed by a European race—it doesn't matter which" (p. 200). (Though he changed his mind later, he tended all his life to speak of "savages" and "Chinks" and "the wild man of Borneo" and I suspect he believed in the inferiority of their intellects though not of their rights.) The immediate and total change of his opinions was brought about by the shock of Mrs. Whitehead's sudden suffering, turning him in a moment into a peace-loving anti-imperialist. The mystical experience of that moment was crucial, transforming the suppressed misery of his early years into an agonized identification with the sufferings of mankind that remained with him always.

For the most part, though, his early political life and thoughts are what we would expect of the son of his parents and the grandson of Lord John Russell: women's suffrage, universal suffrage, free trade, liberalism and fairness, to all of which one would devote a decent amount of time in a not too busy academic life. When he stood for Parliament in 1907, he did not expect to win; and when he immersed himself in the campaign of 1909–10, he knew it was only temporary. Only the outbreak of war in 1914, touching the per-

manently raw nerve of suffering within his soul, drove him to commit his whole self to public life and abandon academic pursuits for who could say how long.

One of the fascinating mysteries of Russell is the curious combination of optimism and pessimism in his mind. Superficially, to those who knew him in his public life, he was a cheerful, witty, energetic, brilliant and hopeful man. To friends who knew him better he might show the underlying despair: "We are all like lost children, crying in the night for home and love" (p. 254). The two aspects are as incapable of combining as oil and vinegar, as incompatible as his intellect and his passions, to touch on another anomaly. That he was aware of this himself is evident in many of his letters to Ottoline, when he was struggling to please her by being altruistic and hopeful rather than sharp and gloomy. "I am filled with utter love and longing for service—to bring happiness, to bring relief from pain—oh if I could. I hate the furious persecutor in me—but he is terribly vital" (p. 407).

He had a vision, he wrote to Ottoline, which seemed to "show that even this life here on earth may be supremely good—that if men would cease their strife and greed, heaven might be here around us" (p. 414). But there was always another vision, equally insistent, and in this vision

sorrow is the ultimate truth of life, everything else is oblivion or delusion. Then even love seems to me merely an opiate—it makes us forget for a moment that we draw our breath in pain and that thought is the gateway to despair. I don't see the slightest reason to believe this, yet recurrently the belief overwhelms me—quite as often when I am happy as when I am unhappy. It is this belief that often makes me frivolous—the world seems too terrible for seriousness. (P. 414)

But, as always, he tried to marshal his moral forces to combat this weakness: "Pessimism is really a form of self-indulgence, and loosening of one's hold, and a failure to care for what is important. The difficulty is to meet it with something equally serious, sincere, and fundamental. I think only religion can really do this; but those who have never known the despair can hardly know what religion saves us from" (p. 414). Later, when he had given up Ottoline, he also had to give up the vague consolations of religion and look for comfort in the eternity of the stars. Perhaps the less gifted of us are less split and thus less tormented; Russell's sharp intellect could always see through all false hopes—and did so—reducing the ordinary man who housed it to gloom and despair. And yet at bottom, surely, was a stubborn optimism that kept him toiling at intellectual and public labours through all the troubles of his immense long life.

I have been putting off dealing with the heart of the book, Russell's relations with women, the dark underside of his greatness. Losing his mother at

an early age and growing up under the thumbs of neurotic Aunt Agatha and puritanical Grandmother Russell was not, of course, a good preparation for harmonious relations with the opposite sex. He was apt to fall headlong, believing that this one woman would provide the haven of bliss his lonely soul was seeking. Disappointment could make him unkind; as, in a different way, could lack of seriousness in his lighter dalliances. But most of that comes later. Here we have first the callow youth, the prim young Englishman bowled over by the emancipated young American. One is reminded of Henry James's free young ladies, though in their case freedom generally led to disaster in encounters with sophisticated Europeans, which is hardly what happened here. Alys was "young and happy and blooming, and full of simple unself-distrustful kindness" (p. 384). She seemed to him "a kind of free force of nature—she was at her best in very primitive things, bathing, paddling in streams, talking to children by the wayside—a sort of wind from the life of unconscious nature" (p. 436). (This was a kind of woman who held a special appeal for him: he wrote of my mother in his *Autobiography* that "bathing by the moonlight, or running with bare feet on the dewy grass, she won my imagination ... completely" [2: 97]). Russell in 1893 was far from a free force of nature, brought up as he had been to rigid self-control and absolute selflessness in the pursuit of duty, to which had been added his own need to keep his thoughts to himself. He described his life to Alys as "the dreary years when I believed all life to be a misery and even death a doubtful relief", a life which asked "the difficult patience ... that expects no reward except the doubtful and temporary consciousness of having done right" (p. 39). He was absolutely bowled over by love, but soon found that its path did not run smooth.

To begin with, there were all the usual conventional obstacles to the free meetings of young men and women: a mere tea party could lead to an engagement and a meeting once a month with occasional letters in between seemed all that propriety could allow. This before Grandmother Russell marshalled her forces against the pair. The saga of her opposition has been told often enough, but what struck me here, reading the letters as a family member, was the similarity of his stance between Alys and his grandmother and, later, between Ottoline and Alys and, much later, between my stepmother and me when we disagreed most bitterly. On the one hand, the powerful angry woman to be appeased; on the other, the object of love to be cajoled and persuaded to patience for fear of the other. He could be surprisingly frightened of women once they grew angry. But in the end he won and married his beloved and expected to live happily ever after. How sad it is, knowing the outcome, to read these outpourings of undying love, assurances that, though she may change, he never will. Poor Alys! Like Dora later, she

was slow to be talked into love, reluctant to take the plunge but then slow also to let love go, once having been charmed into submission. Though he suffered shame and guilt over Alys for many years, he may never have known how it could hurt when his affection was turned off like a tap.

In light of Russell's later life and reputation, his puritanical early attitude to sex is rather entertaining. He seems genuinely to have thought that love without sex was nobler, that it would be easy to resist sexual desire;

Whatever my faults, I am not sensual.... I don't believe caring with me will take the form of being more strongly tempted: on the contrary, I have found love antagonistic to temptation: where nobler things are consistently in one's thoughts, a more base physical satisfaction seems so very mean and contemptible. (P. 54)

And where a modern young man in exile from his love might write of kissing (or other physical expressions of love), young Russell writes of "impure thoughts" or indulges in theoretical pronouncements: "I feel how insufficient a purely spiritual love without physical companionship is for a person who is not devoid of human feelings" (p. 116). One wonders how people with such attitudes managed to enjoy themselves after marriage. Marie Stopes was necessary indeed!

Matters were quite different in the famous affair with Ottoline. After nine or ten years of miserable abstinence with Alys, he fell utterly and absolutely for Ottoline in a moment, convinced that this overwhelming sexual desire must be true love. "I did not know I loved you till I heard myself telling you so—for one instant I thought 'Good God what have I said?' and then I knew it was the truth. My heart spoke before my brain knew—and then love swept me on in a great flood and lifted me to the heights" (p. 353). And indeed it turned out to be true love—perhaps partly because the feeling was always stronger on his side than on hers. "Dearest my whole soul is flooded with joy," he wrote,

your radiance shines before me, and I feel still your arms about me and your kiss on my lips. You have become to me something holy; my touch will be gentle because I reverence you. Our love shall be always sacred, and I will give you a devotion worthy even of you. You have released in me imprisoned voices that sing the beauty of the world—all the poetry that grows dumb in the years of sorrow has begun to speak to me again. (P. 353)

Poor man, how unaware he was of the workings of his own desires—and, I must say, of the kitsch quality of his prose.

Now he was passionately eager for sex and she was the one holding back, wanting to live on a more spiritual plane—and perhaps also put off by his bad breath. The letters to Alys are painful to read because one sees the woo-

ing, the love and then the slow rejection and one cannot help but pity her. Those to Ottoline, in their thousands (mercifully not all here) are painful for quite different reasons. Here is the brilliant philosopher so overcome with love that he struggles constantly to deny and distort his powers of reason in order to accommodate her high-flown ideals. Then the brain breaks through and scolds and he must apologize, driven by his love to deny his mind. "You know that I have to contend against years of habit and the whole tendency of my work to understand your way of reaching your beliefs. I don't know what made me break out today. I think it was the pain of longing to agree with you completely." (P. 408). "I do most fully understand that you are quite truthful in your religion. But I do wish to share things of the intellect with you—it would be to me a very maimed relation if I did not keep on trying to make you understand things which I think very important.... I think you don't quite understand why I make myself dry and cold when I want to think. You know that where human passion is involved—as for instance between you and me—one seems to see most clearly when feeling is numbed" (p. 410).

As Griffin says, "the differences between Ottoline Morrell and Russell are striking and a serious love affair between the two of them might seem improbable" (p. 346). As indeed it does, and in many ways regrettable, at least when seen from this side only. She was not good for his professional work, charming him into flights of semi-religious thinking which did not at all suit his mind, and conjuring from him effusions of noble emotion which are embarrassing to read. He describes the conflict in a letter of January 1912, coming down on the side of love and religion and against his kind of philosophical work. Even I, a non-philosopher and a devotee of the personal life, cannot help a feeling of distress when I read these mental contortions.

Religion, it seems to me, ought to make us know and remember these immeasurably better things [that seem to come from another world], and live habitually in the thought of them—as you do, to a much greater degree than most even of the very religious people. I have hitherto only seen the greatest things at rare times of stress or exaltation. In the summer [seeing Ottoline every day] I lived with the vision—when I got back to Ipsden it faded because of my work. When it is strong, the kind of philosophical work I do seems not worth doing; and so when I have to do this work, the vision fades. That was why I hated going back to the work so much—it was like going back to prison. But if I could embody the vision in my philosophy, I should not have this conflict. (P. 413)

Unfortunately for him, the vision and the philosophy proved ultimately incompatible; though it is our good fortune that the philosophy turned out to be more durable. As Griffin perceptively observes, when things went finally wrong between Russell and Ottoline, "it was as if his intellect were an

automatic safety device that had switched on of its own accord to absorb his interest and thus protect him from an emotional state that was too disturbing to be endured for long" (p. 485). He was fortunate to have such a device; many of the victims of his love were less well provided.

The volume ends with the imminent arrival of poor Helen Dudley, whom he had seduced in Chicago. She sailed from America on 3 August 1914, expecting to be met and cherished and even married to him. But the war intervened, driving personal matters out of his mind—or was that just an excuse? He wrote to Ottoline about her, assuring her that it would make no difference to his love for her: "I know that when H.D. first comes, if I go away with her, it may *seem* for the moment as if you had grown less important to me; but I know that will only be a superficial appearance, and won't even *seem* so when I see you again. I know too that there is no chance of any success in my relations with her unless you and I can remain as we are" (p. 520). How could any man be so utterly blind and selfish? On top of this, when poor Helen arrived, he had the unmitigated gall to dump her on Ottoline, with the suggestion that she should not discover "what you and I are to each other" (Clark, p. 240).

Griffin's volume ends with this, but I do not feel I can end my review on such an utterly negative note, so I will wind up with a few of his delightfully acid comments on the United States, written to Ottoline during his 1914 visit there.

America produces a type of bore more virulent, I think, than the bore of any other country. (P. 496)

President Lowell, the head of Harvard, is an intolerable person—a deadly bore, hard, efficient, a good man of business, fundamentally contemptuous of learned people because they are not business-like. (P. 497)

I couldn't *bear* to be here long—it is a soul-destroying atmosphere—no patient solitary meditation, but quick results, efficiency, success—none of the lonely hours away from mankind that go to producing anything of value. (P. 500)

Friday I dined with the Münsterbergs—*awful* people—and all their guests *horrors*. The ugliness of the faces along the table made me almost unable to eat—fat, stupid, complacent, without any redeeming trait of any sort or kind. I find myself *thirsting* for beauty to rest the eye—any kind of visible beauty. I did not know how much I should miss it. It makes me parched and dry. As I think of Cambridge Mass., I find I have an intimate horror of every corner of the place—it all screams at one, like living always with the screech of a railway-engine. (P. 506)

There speaks the arrogance of a Cambridge don and the loneliness of an exiled lover. I wonder if he still hated it as much in 1940, when I found it a

very happy place, though granted it is not beautiful.

I end with these quotations, not out of any anti-Americanism, but because they are entertaining and well written and show an aspect of his impatient intelligence and aristocratic self-confidence not always in evidence in what he writes. I could go on for pages more about his ideas, his activities, his thoughts on children and education, which began very early, even in his letters to Alys, but enough is enough. The thing to do is to go out and buy the book and read it for yourselves, with admiration for the dedicated skill of its editor.

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