# LOWE'S *WHITEHEAD*: CONTINUED, BUT NOT CONCLUDED

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Victor Lowe. *Alfred North Whitehead: The Man and His Work.* Vol. 2: *1910–1947.* Edited by J. B. Schneewind. Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins U.P., 1990. Pp. xi, 389. US$39.95.

The first volume of Victor Lowe's biography of Whitehead was published in 1985. Lowe died in 1988 without completing the second volume, and it was left to Schneewind, his literary executor, to see it into print. At the time of his death Lowe had completed eleven chapters of the second volume and had made a start on the twelfth. This took the story of Whitehead's life up to his Gifford Lectures of 1927–28 and their publication as *Process and Reality* in 1929. Unfortunately, Lowe did not, apparently, leave much by way of notes or draft for the parts of the volume he did not live to complete, and Schneewind has made no attempt to finish his work. As a result, the present volume, despite the dates given in the subtitle, ends abruptly in 1929, and Whitehead's remaining eighteen years are covered in a perfunctory two-page chronology (pp. 261–2) supplied by Schneewind. The result is galling. Whitehead's last two decades were extraordinarily active, considering his age. Moreover, it was during this time that his fame as a metaphysician was established. Six people, we are told (some accounts say only two), managed to stay the course of the Gifford Lectures (p. 250), yet by the time Whitehead died the process philosophy he presented in them had a substantial following in America. The sociology of this development, if nothing else, is interesting, and an adequate biography would tell us of Whitehead's role in the propagation of his beliefs and the effect the spread of his ideas had on him. These matters, unfortunately, are only touched on in Lowe's incomplete final chapter.

Lowe's second volume begins in 1910 when Whitehead left Cambridge for London. After a year without employment he obtained the first of several posts at the University of London, from which he retired in 1924 at the age of sixty-three only to start another career as Professor of Philosophy at Harvard. In London, despite an almost unbelievably heavy administrative load,[1] he wrote widely on education and published three important philosophical books: *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Natural Knowledge* (1914), *The Concept of Nature* (1920) and *The Principle of Relativity* (1922). In the first two he set out the principles of his epistemology and in the third attempted to derive an alternative to Einstein's general theory of relativity from them, apparently *a priori.* It was an ambitious task and deserves more attention than it has received. Admittedly, Whitehead's theory of relativity was (eventually) refuted, but it's been a long time since epistemological theories packed this much punch. At Harvard he moved on to metaphysics and the philosophy of religion, developing the process philosophy which culminated in *Process and Reality.* In many philosophers the onset of old age is heralded by a burst of publishing activity. Usually this represents either a turning out of old material from desk drawers or else the opportunities afforded by fame for repackaging the work that made them famous. In Whitehead's case, his output was exceptional not only for its quantity—nine books and two dozen major papers after the age of fifty-eight—but even more so for its originality and variety. He continued to find new things to say and even to move into new fields. The fertility of his first five years at Harvard was astonishing—the place does seem to have given him a new lease on life. No one who knew his earlier work would, I think, have been able to predict the turn his thought took after the First World War.

Altogether there is a good deal of philosophy in Lowe's second volume; there are two chapters on the epistemology and philosophy of science of his London period written mainly by L. B. McHenry. This scheme of bringing in outside help for some of the more technical material works well. It's a pity it wasn't used in Volume I to deal with Whitehead's *Universal Algebra*—the most unjustly neglected of all his works. Lowe was, of course, himself an expert on Whitehead's process philosophy and in his second volume he has a long chapter on *Process and Reality,* the last he lived to complete. Unfortunately it comes out a bit jumbled, more a collection of remarks than a systematic exposition. Presumably some of this would have been corrected in revision and some of it might have been improved by the general survey of Whitehead's philosophy that Lowe intended to include; a sort of afterward to his earlier book *Understanding Whitehead* (1962). This final survey was never written and, in its place, Schneewind has included a short personal assess-

[1] It was apparently the burden of committee work that prevented Whitehead from completing Vol. IV of *Principia Mathematica,* the famous missing volume on geometry—in a strong field, one of the most serious losses to learning that can be directly blamed on university administrators. As late as 1930, he was still hoping to complete it.



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ment of Whitehead's philosophy which Lowe published just before he died. Unfortunately this expedient does not give us the sort of view of Whitehead's philosophy that is available from Lowe's much earlier and longer essay for the Schilpp volume on Whitehead.[2] The paper is now somewhat dated, but is still probably the best starting-place for work on Whitehead.

The book concludes with three appendices: a letter from Whitehead to Charles Hartshorne on a miscellany of philosophical topics (I'm not quite sure why it is there); a useful short note on the second edition of *Principia*; and a collection of letters that Whitehead wrote to his son North between 1924 and 1929. These letters are in many ways the best things in the book. They are the only intimate documents of any consequence we have from Whitehead and they give a vivid picture of his daily life, his impressions of America, his worries over his children's careers and his wife's health (not a letter goes by without a report of "mummy's" latest ailment), and occasionally a glimpse of the progress of his own work. They are delightful, warm and affectionate letters. Certainly Whitehead's early letters from Harvard are in marked contrast to the carping and critical ones Russell wrote from there in 1914. Whitehead found almost everything to his liking: the people were "absolute pets", the frame houses "lovely", the dinner parties "delightful", his colleagues "easy to work with" and his students "appealing", even President Lowell (whom Russell hated) was "kindness itself". He was also tolerant where American customs differed from British ones. There is a delightful story (p. 298) of his inviting one of his graduate students and his wife to his home. The couple had a two-and-a-half year old daughter for whom they could not get a babysitter and proposed to Whitehead's "consternation" to bring her along as well. The suggestion would have been unthinkable in Britain where children were rather thoroughly segregated from adult society. But it is pleasant to record that Whitehead accepted the suggestion—remarking only that "the absence of the usual domestic help" produces "a delightful simplicity" in "young Americans from remote places". It must have been hard to dislike him.

It is a great disappointment that Lowe was unable to finish his work. It will not be done again and certainly not by someone with Lowe's persistence in ferreting out information. The difficulties Whitehead caused his biographer by ordering the destruction of all his papers after his death were virtually insurmountable. For the parts of the book he was able to complete Lowe probably did as good a job as possible. The gaps in the present volume are very disappointing. One cannot, I suppose, blame Schneewind for not attempting to finish it himself, though it would have been nice if he had

[2] Victor Lowe, "The Development of Whitehead's Philosophy" in P. A. Schilpp, ed., *The Philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead* (La Salle, Ill.: Open Court, 1991; 1st ed., 1941), pp. 17–124.



tried, or found someone else who was willing to. But it is hard to excuse his treatment of the material that Lowe had already written. His editorial efforts have been perfunctory in the extreme. The one sentence paragraph on page 22 seems not to have been intended as part of the text at all. It has all the appearance of being a note Lowe added to the manuscript as a reminder to himself to incorporate the information on that page. But worst of all on page 93, in a discussion of Volume IV of *Principia*, there is a reference to "Cl _, where _ is a cardinal number", to which the editor lamely adds a footnote saying that Lowe's drawing of a mathematical symbol was illegible. A knowledge of *Principia* notation for cardinals (easily acquired) would enable one to guess that the missing symbol was either "μ" or "ν". But worse still, this was not Lowe's remark but one he was quoting from a letter from Whitehead to Russell. The letter is in the Russell Archives and the "ν" is clearly legible. It seems extraordinary enough that no one would have thought to check it there, but the passage in question has already appeared in print in Martha Harrell's "Extension to Geometry of *Principia Mathematica* and Related Systems II".[3] Sadly, Harrell's exemplary scholarship on the missing volume of *Principia* is not even mentioned anywhere in the volume.[4]

[3] *Russell*, n.s. 8 (1988): 140–60 (at 146).

[4] Research supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.