

# “I NEVER FELT ANY BITTERNESS”: ALYS RUSSELL’S INTERPRETATION OF HER SEPARATION FROM BERTIE

I. GRATTAN-GUINNESS  
Middlesex University  
Enfield, Middlesex EN3 4SF, England  
E-mail: IVOR2@MDX.AC.UK

## I

Bertrand Russell’s personal and intellectual life passed through a most crucial phase in 1901 and 1902, when he experienced three major calamities. The first occurred during March and April 1901, when he and Alys stayed together with the Whiteheads at Downing College Cambridge. Russell’s pleasure was spoilt by the continuing pain suffered by Mrs. Whitehead, with whom he may have been covertly in love: one day “we found Mrs. Whitehead undergoing an unusually severe bout of pain. She seemed cut off from everyone and everything by walls of agony, and the sense of the solitude of each human soul suddenly overwhelmed me” (*Auto.* 1: 146). The effect of this mystical experience inspired his pacifism, his urge to tackle social problems, and his anguish over the loneliness of life.<sup>1</sup>

Russell’s second calamity was his discovery that the class of all classes which do not belong to themselves belonged to itself if and only if it did not do so. He found this paradox during a period of intense work on aspects of Cantorian set theory, developing it in several stages.<sup>2</sup> This may explain his uncertainty over the date: in his autobiography he gave

<sup>1</sup> See the articles by A. Brink and N. Griffin in *Russell*, n.s. 4 (1984): 81–122.

<sup>2</sup> On this progress, see especially I. Grattan-Guinness, “How Bertrand Russell Discovered His Paradox”, *Historia Mathematica*, 5 (1978): 127–37; and J. Alberto Coffa, “The Humble Origins of Russell’s Paradox”, *Russell*, nos. 33–4 (1979): 31–8.

May 1901 (p. 147) but in later reminiscence he stated Spring (*MPD*, pp. 75–6), and twice—surely wrongly—June.<sup>3</sup> Even nearer the time he was no better, giving Philip Jourdain the June date again in 1910 but Spring five years later.<sup>4</sup>

The third and most important calamity was the collapse of Russell's marriage. The process came to his consciousness in the spring of 1902,

when we were living with the Whiteheads at the Mill House at Grantchester near Cambridge.... [S]uddenly, as I was riding along a country road, I realized that I no longer loved Alys. I had had no idea until this moment that my love for her was even lessening. The problem presented by this discovery was very grave. (*Auto.* 1: 147)

"The problem presented by this discovery was very grave": Russell could have said this about any of these three setbacks. Each of them was sudden or at least unexpected; each shattered previous expectations and beliefs; each destroyed a foundation of hope and optimism based on successful personal achievement. The personal anguish over a woman with whom he was secretly in love must have stood like a paradox against his coldness towards the woman who was his wife. The combined effect was decisive on his work and personality, and left in his writings a streak of cynicism and perhaps facile pessimism which has made him in the last decade so much a man of his time.

Russell's autobiography reveals the extent of the impact perhaps more than he intended. For in one section he describes in neighbouring paragraphs the discovery of the contradictions and the loss of love for Alys, and a few pages later he follows a frank description of his unhappy married life over the following years immediately with an account of his failures to solve the contradiction (*Auto.* 1: 144–9). In addition, this trio of calamities corresponds like an isomorphism to the trio of hopes which he stated at the beginning of his autobiography: "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge, and unbearable pity for the suffering of man-

<sup>3</sup> "Some Philosophical Contacts", in *PfM*, p. 26; "My Mental Development", in Schilpp, pp. 1–20 (at 13).

<sup>4</sup> I. Grattan-Guinness, *Dear Russell—Dear Jourdain* (London: Duckworth, 1977), pp. 133, 144.

kind" (p. 13). These striking juxtapositions and stark contrasts may not have been intentional, but they cannot be coincidental.

## II

Perhaps as a personal confessional, Russell started keeping an occasional journal in November 1902, and maintained it until April 1905. On his birthday, 18 May 1903, about the time when *The Principles* appeared, he reminisced over events one year earlier:

This day last year I was ... finishing my book. The day, I remember, stood out as one of not utter misery. At the time, I was inspired; my energy was ten times what it usually is, I had a swift insight and sympathy, the sense of new and wonderful wisdom intoxicated me. But I was writing cold letters to Alys, in the deliberate hope of destroying her affection; I was cruel still, and ruthless where I saw no self-denial practised....

As regards the achievements of the year, I finished my book at the Mill House on May 23.... [On one day in June] came Alys's return, the direct question, and the answer that love was dead; and then, in the bedroom, her loud, heart-rending sobs, while I worked at my desk next door. (*Papers* 12: 22–3)

The effect of the separation upon Russell is well known; but what was Alys's reaction? She never published on the matter; however, in 1948, in her early eighties, she wrote down her recollections. The stimulus was two broadcast talks for the BBC,<sup>5</sup> and she wrote out her memories on the blank versos of BBC script paper. In 1949 she made an addition, perhaps inspired by a third BBC talk. But she only sent Bertie a much shorter statement, in September 1949, which he included in his autobiography along with several of her letters from this period (*Auto.* 3: 46–52):

Bertie was an ideal companion, & he taught me more than I can ever repay. But I was never clever enough for him, & perhaps he was too sophisticated for

<sup>5</sup> In the recollections below she mentions a brace of talks on "Old Fashioned Girls". No further details are known (but see note 6 for the whereabouts of the texts). Alys's other BBC talks include three published in *The Listener*: "Walt Whitman in His Old Age", 38 (9 Oct. 1947): 616; "How to Enjoy Life at Eighty", 40 (11 Nov. 1948): 722–3; "When the Fabians Were Young", 41 (27 Jan. 1949): 133–4. She gave a talk on Tennyson, too. See M. Kearns, "Alys Russell: a Bibliography", *Russell*, no. 10 (Summer 1973): 19–21.

me. I was ideally happy for several years, almost deliriously happy, until a change of feeling made our mutual life very difficult. A final separation led to a divorce, when he married again. But that was accomplished without bitterness, or quarrels, or recriminations, & later with great rejoicing on my part when he was awarded the O.M. But my life was completely changed, & I was never able to meet him again for fear of the renewal of my awful misery, & heartsick longing for the past. I only caught glimpses of him at lectures or concerts occasionally, & thro' the uncurtained windows of his Chelsea house, where I used to watch him sometimes reading to his children. Unfortunately, I was neither wise enough nor courageous enough to prevent this one disaster from shattering my capacity for happiness & my zest for life. (*Auto.* 3: 47)

Russell's comment to her was as follows: "What thee says about our marriage is very generous, and fills me with shame. There is not a syllable in it that is wounding to me."<sup>6</sup> Neither in this text nor in the recollections did Alys refer to Bertie's feelings for Evelyn Whitehead; presumably she had not suspected Bertie's (apparent) covert love for her.<sup>7</sup>

Alys's recollections did not become another BBC talk (perhaps to Bertie's relief), and they remained unknown until 1980, when her great niece Barbara Strachey included an extract in her book on Alys's family.<sup>8</sup> However, the whole text is worth presenting, for it records with great dignity her relationship from the happy time of engagement in

<sup>6</sup> Due to two delivery mishaps, Russell did not acknowledge the writing until his letter of 6 March 1950. The passage is quoted in B. Strachey, *Remarkable Relations: the Story of the Pearsall Smith Family* (London: Gollancz, 1980), p. 312. Russell replaced the relevant passage of his autobiography at about this time.

<sup>7</sup> On this relationship, see N. Griffin's editorial remarks in *SLBR* 1: 218–19.

<sup>8</sup> Strachey, *Remarkable Relations*, p. 219, ref. on p. 330: the extract came from the second paragraph below, from "I was very lonely" to "back his affection." The relationship between Alys and Bertie is described by Strachey mainly in chaps. 10, 11 and 16. The manuscripts of the family were purchased in 1989 by the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana, and are kept as "The H. W. Smith Papers". The recollections are held in Box 17, folder 11 (as is the notebook described in sec. 4 below); the two BBC talks are held at folder 8. A few letters of the time from Bertie are included in Boxes 5–8, which comprise 5,538 letters in all. Box 16, folder 6 contains various photographs, mostly of Alys but also one showing Russell which I included as plate 1 in *Dear Russell—Dear Jourdain*. At the time I could not identify the other figure in the picture; it is now known to be Goldsworthy Lowes Dickinson (*Papers* 4, frontispiece).

The Lilly Library also holds the Desmond and Molly MacCarthy Papers, which include some nice letters from Bertie in Box 1.

1894 to her own calamity of 1911 when Bertie left her for Ottoline Morrell.

### III

The transcription begins with Alys's annotation on the envelope in which she kept the text. Strachey included the passage from "was very lonely" to "win back his affection". Alys's orthography has been preserved, but a few errors of grammar or fact are corrected in square brackets.

#### The Account of My Separation from Bertie 1902–1911

Written in 1948

Addition in 1949

Copy rec[eived] by Bertie March 1950

Chelsea. May 1948. Writing my 2 short Broadcast Talks about Old Fashioned Girls and reading Beatrice Webbs reminiscences of Bertie and myself has brought my early married life vividly before me, & I think I will write down what I remember. But it is a long time ago, & my memory is very poor, & may be mistaken. But there can be no mistake about my utter and entire happiness from Dec. '94 to June 1902. Bertie fell in love with me when he was 21 & proposed to me shortly after his 22nd b'day in May 1894. I fell madly in love with him in return, tho' he was 4½ years my junior, & after some difficulties with his Grandmother, old Lady Russell we were married in Dec. 1894 and went to Holland & Germany for our honeymoon. We returned to Friday's Hill in the Spring until we found a cottage in Fernhurst for £10 a year, & moved in with Bertie's stored furniture. We lived there for several years, & then moved back to Friday's Hill, generally going to a furnished house in Cambridge for the Lent Term every year.

In 1901 or early 1902 we went to the Whiteheads as paying guests at Grantchester, & there I became very unwell & had to rest & have massage. When we returned to Friday's Hill in early April, the Webbs came to us as p.g.s, but I still felt poorly & did the joint housekeeping badly. Finally, I suggested going to my friend Dr. Helen Boyle for a 6 weeks' Rest Cure, Bertie to stay on with the Webbs, or to go back to the Whiteheads. I was very lonely at Brighton, but had long & affectionate letters from Bertie every day, till one day in early June when the letters became cold & formal & unloving. I cld. not believe it & felt very disloyal to our love to even suspect such a change. But when he paid a visit to me at the Home, I found him almost like a stranger. But still I felt it must be some disloyalty on my part, & I was not really prepared for his confession on

my return to Friday's Hill that he had ceased to love me. He had been feeling very tragic (& he always loved tragedy & was a thorough pessimist) while at the Whiteheads, & one day went off for the whole day & came back very late, when they found him (they told me afterwards) desperately miserable & depressed, tho' they didn't know the cause. But during that day he had realized & acknowledged that he no longer loved me. The shock of this statement was so terrible that I almost died, but I managed to keep up outward appearances, & went off to Switzerland with Beatrice Webb for a 3 weeks' after cure. It was simply angelic of her to leave Sidney for so long, but she was homesick for him all the time & I was utterly miserable, it was not a happy holiday. I didn't confide my trouble to her or to anyone, as I felt it was too strange & abnormal, & would injure Bertie's reputation, as well as hurt my pride. There was no other woman involved, & it was not a gradual lessening of affection, but a sudden knock-down feeling that must change again, I felt. I asked Bertie not to break up our mutual life at once, but to try to carry on a common life of mutual interests & pursuits & friendships, & I hoped of course to win back his affection. For 9 years, until May 1911, he made great efforts to be friendly & considerate, & to carry on as if we still [were] a happy couple, but it was a very grim time for both of us. He was, however, working very hard with Alfred Whitehead at his greatest book, *The Principles of Mathematics* [*sic*: read "*Principia Mathematica*"]; & I was absorbed in Suffrage & political work, & was away from home a great deal. I never confided our difficulties to anyone except partially to the Whiteheads, but I think he did, to Gilbert Murray anyhow. I kept wondering what would happen when his book was finished, but I certainly never envisaged that he would fall in love again & leave me, as he did with Ottoline Morrell in 1911. I was utterly distraught by that, & felt I could not possibly carry on my life without him. I cried & cried for many days, & was sunk in an abyss of agony unutterable & unbelievable. Mother died just then, fortunately before our separation, & Logan offered me a home, which I was grateful to accept, & for which I shall always feel thankful to him. But my first years with him were utterly miserable, though he was kind & tender & did his best to distract me. (It was almost utterly unbelievable when he too turned against me 35 years later & wished to turn me out.<sup>9</sup>)

I never spoke to Bertie again, the wound & the suffering were too great, & I only saw him a few times, in the street or at lectures. Also when he lived in Chelsea, I sometimes stood outside his uncurtained window & watched him playing with his children. For years, I had agonising dreams about our separation almost every night, & the writing of this has brought them on again. For I still love him, tho' I cannot approve of his sex behaviour.

I think it was a want of vitality on my part to allow one person to spoil my

<sup>9</sup> On this family battle, see Strachey, *Remarkable Relations*, p. 311.

life, as he undoubtedly did, & I do not feel proud of my constancy. But after one attempt at suicide & failure, I have tried to accept the burden of life cheerfully, & to devote myself to the happiness of others.

Bertie & I were certainly very congenial, in morals & interests, ~~and sex relations~~, tho' I was never clever enough for him. Our sex relations seemed to me utterly satisfactory, but he may think differently in the light of his many subsequent experiences. He was then afraid to have children because of his father's insanity.—I never felt any bitterness towards him, nor any wish for my friends to blame him, & I still love him, I love him devotedly & passionately.

A.R.

#### IV

Alys also wrote notes across about twenty folios of a blue notebook which may have been obtained and used at this time; but their purpose is much less clear.

She quoted letters from him showing that his love was dead, noting from 29 August 1913 that "Bertie is gone—such is men", "intensely self-centered", "He didn't love me, only desired me", "hard and cold and old"; however, before he went "he quite changed, and all his love came back". She then recorded his infatuation of 1914 with a girl-friend of Bertie from Chicago called Hilda Ward, who turned up in London with her lawyer father to stay chez Alys (so it seems) and prepare for her honeymoon. Preoccupied by the Great War which had just started (and maybe with other things), Russell did not want to see her when she came to his flat and shouted at him from outside the door; eventually they moved her to a friend's residence as a paying guest. Later she met others and "wrote some plays and poems which Bertie thought good"; but after that she developed a "spinal disease, which gradually affected the brain."

These details strongly suggest a variant of the case of Helen Dudley, daughter of a Chicago gynaecologist, one of Russell's many conquests of the 1910s; he described this relationship briefly without mentioning her name (*Auto*. 1: 213–14). Even with his newly found enthusiasm of the time for sex, it seems unlikely that there were two such young wronged females from across the water at that time: if Alys wrote this version late in life, she may have misremembered the name. Some details are new, and may be incorrect. Near the end of these notes she returned to her

own relationship to her beloved ex-husband: "I have never given him much, and so cannot complain". She died in January 1951, in her 84th year.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Acknowledgements: for permission to publish these documents, I express thanks to the Lilly Library, Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana. Further advice and information were received from Kenneth Blackwell and Sheila Turcon. Mrs. Barbara Halpern gave her blessing to this publication.

---