

NIGHTMARES OF EMINENT BIOGRAPHERS

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Ray Monk. *Bertrand Russell*, [Vol. 2:] *1921–70: the Ghost of Madness*. London: Cape, 2000; New York: Free P., 2001. Pp. xv, 574. 31 illus. £25.00; Cdn\$75.00; US\$40.00.

This second volume of biography of Russell completes Monk's largely revisionist account of Russell's life, covering his last fifty years, from 1921 to 1970. That the research and writing of the project as a whole occupied Monk for over ten years is hardly surprising. Russell's vast written output, longevity, huge number of contacts, roller-coaster love-life and considerable philosophical and political activities, to note just some aspects of his life, naturally present the biographer with a daunting task. Previous biographers such as Ronald Clark¹ and Caroline Moorehead,² despite their often engaging styles, tended to bypass the more difficult aspects of Russell's character and to avoid discussion of the technicalities of his philosophy. These were not hagiographic in tone, but in general approving of Russell the man. Yet Clark in particular is scathing about some of Russell's (fleeting) views on women and race, for instance, and readily draws attention to some of the philosopher's more absurd statements. Monk tackles the more troublesome and contrary side of his subject head on, exposing it in way that makes Clark and Moorehead's complaints rather slight. The real problem for any critic and reader of Monk's work is to assess the accuracy of his damning portrait of Russell, as it has become in this second volume.

The second half of Russell's life is bound to seem less enthralling than the first in a number of respects. Instead of life at Cambridge, overwhelming first love, the monumental effort of the colossal *Principia Mathematica* (1910–13), the intellectual wrestling with Wittgenstein, the bold resistance to the Great War,

¹ *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1975; New York: Knopf, 1976).

² *Bertrand Russell: a Life* (London: Sinclair Stevenson; New York: Viking, 1992).

the love of Ottoline Morrell, the brief and passionate friendship with D. H. Lawrence and the formulation of the Theory of Descriptions, we have a vast journalistic output, endless lecture tours, failed marriages, bitter divorces, deteriorating relations with both family and friends, and the extraordinary final years under the influence of Ralph Schoenman. Like Clark and Moorehead before him, Monk spends a hundred fewer pages on this second part of Russell's life. There are reasons for this, of course; most simply that the first part of Russell's life is more interesting, certainly philosophically, but also personally, than the second. In the same way Russell's autobiography is less engaging after the Great War. But in the case of Monk's second volume, another issue arises: the author finds the later Russell a thoroughly repugnant figure, incapable of love, emotionally maimed, colossally vain, and obsessed by fear of madness.

In Volume 1, *The Spirit of Solitude* (1996),³ Monk had already admitted that he found his subject less than endearing, yet his admiration for Russell's achievements, if not so much his personality, was evident. The first volume was a significant biography and important addition to Russell studies because it threw new light on Russell's motives and was solidly based on Russell's own words. Monk looks coolly at Russell's life and philosophy while using much of his writing to elucidate key aspects of a vastly complex figure. The most pleasing aspect of the volume, however, as has been generally recognized and applauded, was the ease in which Monk was able to move from commentary about Russell's life to analysis of Russell's philosophy—something previous biographers had not been able to do. Volume 2 appears to conform to the same plan, but with one crucial difference: the author's lack of respect for his subject is obvious. However, in the preface Monk also states that he is "conscious that other pictures could be drawn in which Russell is presented in a very different light" (p. vii). What are we to make of this admission? Is the implication that other pictures *could* be drawn, but if so, they would be wrong? Or is it the abnegation of the biographer's responsibility—the pursuit of true judgment, to adapt F. R. Leavis's phrase? The problem is that Monk is right about the possibility of "other pictures" being drawn, and this is not merely a theoretical question about the relation of the biographer to his or her subject. All biography is partial representation based on partial sources, but in the case of Russell, the subject's life and writing are so vast that such a partial representation may not be an accurate synecdoche of the whole. Russell's public life is well documented and his private life recorded in thousands of letters and autobiographical writings (though significantly fewer in the period covered by this volume). It seems reasonable to assume, then, that an accurate "Russell" can be drawn. But the

³ *Bertrand Russell*, [Vol. 1:] *1872–1921: the Spirit of Solitude* (London: Cape, 1996).

drawing of a personality, like the assuming of one, is largely a homogenizing process, of making details conform to a whole picture, of tying up loose ends, of saying *this person was like this*. What *was* Russell like in the second half of his life? In Monk's book he is revealed both directly and indirectly as misogynist, misanthrope, homophobe, racist, snob, liar, leech, fraud, madman, fool, egoist, devil, passionate helper of mankind, lover of mankind, anti-racist, loving father, benefactor, genius, comic, sage, adoring grandfather, frightened old man.

In the preface to this volume Monk presents a theory of how Russell's life was determined. He states:

Russell's life seems to have been inexorably drawn towards disaster, determined on its course by two fundamental traits of character: a deep-seated fear of madness and a quite colossal vanity. (P. xi)

This is a rather curious thesis, and it is nowhere really demonstrated in the book. I think Monk is quite wrong on both of these points, leaving aside for the moment the question whether his life *was* a disaster. This does not significantly affect the quality of the biography because these assumptions do not seem to be at the heart of the investigation; Monk certainly comes to conclusions about the dominant traits of Russell's personality and their influence of his life, but he does not demonstrate that vanity and fear of madness *are* the dominant, guiding traits. In the case of the fear of madness, Monk is correct in locating it as a significant aspect of his life, underplayed by previous biographers, but it is only in his dealings with his son John that it actually determines his actions. Even here, Monk shows us a rather cold, seemingly unfeeling man in his over-legalistic handling of his first-born, but underplays the fact that Russell, as his daughter Katharine Tait put it, was "terrified" of John's condition. At a number of key points when some explanation might be given for Russell's behaviour and sympathy expressed for his plight, none is forthcoming.

The second trait, Russell's "colossal vanity", is hardly shown at all. On balance, Russell probably was "a little vain altogether", as Bryan Magee has written, but his vanity, if we accept such a statement, is hardly evident or life-determining. Indeed, Magee added that he was vain "in a vulnerable and lovable way",⁴ suggesting that Russell's vanity was little more than a need for reassurance (as Rupert Crawshay-Williams also intimates⁵). Edith Finch, Russell's fourth wife, on the other hand, stated that Russell was "completely without vanity, except on one subject: his flourishing white hair."⁶ Perhaps a

⁴ *Confessions of a Philosopher* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1997), p. 215.

⁵ *Russell Remembered* (London: Oxford U. P., 1970), p. 43.

⁶ Moorehead, p. 543.

wife might not present a balanced view of her husband, and perhaps it is hard to see vanity as “lovable” and “vulnerable”, but these accounts do show the different partial representations of Russell that are possible. No previous biographer had especially singled out vanity as a negative life-determining force in Russell’s life, and it is hard to see why Monk should have done so. One might cite stubbornness (in his dealings with Dora and others whom he had “cut off” from his life) or the inability to deal with everyday business (in the running of Beacon Hill School or the managing of political action), as most obvious determining traits, but vanity and fear of madness do not seem to be strong candidates. As Monk does not demonstrate his thesis about such traits, we must look elsewhere in the book for his views on Russell. Perhaps the notion of these dominant character traits was tacked on after the volume was completed; in any case such statements show that the author has struggled to make sense of Russell’s extraordinary later life.

In this volume Monk again moves easily from discussion of Russell’s personal life to commentary on his philosophy. One of the first serious pieces of philosophical writing by Russell that Monk discusses is the 1923 paper “Vagueness”, which was published in the *Australasian Journal of Philosophy*. Russell had given a version of the paper at a meeting of the Jowett Society in Oxford in November 1922, attended by the pragmatist philosopher F. C. S. Schiller. In this important paper Russell develops some of his work from “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism”, anticipating later philosophical developments and ironically confirming his own, by stating that “almost all thinking that purports to be philosophical or logical consists in attributing to the world the properties of language” (Monk, 2: 21). This is certainly a central problem in Russell’s philosophy, and indeed in philosophy for a greater part of the twentieth century. Russell’s paper marks the start of serious study of the notion of vagueness, yet Monk dismisses it rather casually, calling it “the weakest piece of philosophical writing that Russell had yet produced” (*ibid.*). Typically, Monk takes the side of an observer or participant—this time Schiller—and chastises Russell for not pursuing the implications of Schiller’s observation that a language free of vagueness would be “wholly unintelligible”. Russell is supposed to have “cheerfully accepted” this consequence as Schiller “retired from the fray”. Monk later suggests that Russell characteristically thought that anyone who disagreed with him at this time was a “mystic” in some way and that he grew increasingly intemperate with his opponents. Schiller recollected:

Russell had rightly diagnosed what was the condition of exactness. But he had ignored the fact that his cure was impracticable and far worse than the alleged disease. Nor had he considered the alternative, the inference that therefore the capacity of

words to convey a multitude of meanings must not be regarded as a flaw, but that a distinction must be made between plurality of meanings and actual ambiguity. (P. 21; quoted from *Papers* 9: 146)

As Russell had spent a good deal of philosophical effort in wrestling with the vagueness of words and trying to construct logical mechanisms whereby ordinary language could be analysed in such a way as to fit an austere logico-mathematical ontology, it is hardly surprising that he did not rise to Schiller’s challenge. But Russell understood perfectly the point that the “cure” was “impracticable”—in certain circumstances. He says:

I propose to prove that all language is vague and that therefore my language is vague, but I do not wish this conclusion to be one that you could derive without the help of the syllogism.... You all know I invented a special language with a view to avoiding vagueness, but unfortunately it is unsuited for public occasions. (*Papers* 9: 147)

Russell’s knockabout style irritates Monk, and as a consequence the author overlooks the importance of Russell’s contribution, which paved the way for work done by Max Black, Carl Hempel and others.

One of the characteristics of Monk’s technique is to support brief, and often severe, criticisms of Russell expressed by people who sometimes only fleetingly knew him. This was used to great effect in Volume 1, where a piece of received wisdom about the philosopher was nicely juxtaposed with a few lines of withering criticism. In this second volume, however, Monk is too quick to praise those with a supposed “keen eye for his faults”. Beatrice Webb’s “especially acute” portrait of Russell in 1921 has him as:

a rather frowsy, unhealthy and cynical personage, prematurely old, linked to a ... girl of light character and materialist philosophy whom he does not and cannot reverence. (P. 4)

D. H. Lawrence, whose attack on Russell’s “perverted blood-lust” is again quoted enthusiastically, is another ally. This piece of vicious invective by Lawrence has always struck me as plain an example of nonsense as is possible to produce. For Monk and Lawrence, Russell’s work for peace and world democracy was at best misguided and at worst a front for more aggressive and violent instincts. Unlike Lawrence, Russell was prepared to work for peace rather than sit around dreaming or considering the “devilish repressions” of others. Even figures of lesser stature than Lawrence are supported in their conclusions about Russell’s character. Paul Gillard, Dora’s lover, is “perceptive” about the consequences of Russell’s philosophy. In Gillard’s unpublished autobiographical novel, *One May Smile*, Russell is portrayed sympathetically, and is admired for “the way in which Basil [the Russell figure] faced up to the barren conclusion to

which his own pitiless logic led him" (p. 147). For once, Monk has found a sympathetic outsider; but the admiration that Gillard displays is filtered through a fictive mode, and Gillard himself described as a "handsome and feckless unemployed young man" (p. 117).

The opportunity to read about Russell's philosophy is often a welcome relief from the rather depressing material on his personal life. But here again the commentary, though excellent in places, is not as illuminating as in the earlier volume. There is, I think, general agreement that Russell's philosophical work in the second half of his career is not as worthy as that in the first. Yet from "Vagueness" and *The ABC of Atoms* (1923) to *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948) and the Introduction to Ernest Gellner's *Words and Things* (1959), there are many important periods that show Russell's attempts to recover philosophical ground from Wittgenstein, the logical positivists and the Oxford "ordinary language" philosophers. Monk is rather less inclined to talk about the philosophy in this volume, but that may be not only because he feels that the later philosophy is not as worthy, but also because the move into technical discussions from commentary about Russell's much more "public" personal life is harder to negotiate. The philosophy is something that Monk has to work hard at to remind us of; just as with Russell himself, who drifted in and out of technical philosophy for most of his later life.

Clearly there were times when Russell could not devote the energy needed to produce really first-class work, the Introduction to the second edition of *Principia Mathematica* being a case in point. Certainly the Introduction is unsatisfactory, for the criticisms of Wittgenstein and Frank Ramsey would represent a wholesale revision of the entire thesis. In discussion with Russell over such revisions, Ramsey wrote in his diary that the older philosopher "doesn't seem to assimilate what you say, only understand it, and out it goes again" (p. 46). To Wittgenstein he told in 1924, "Of all your work he seems now to accept only this: that it is nonsense to put an adjective where a substantive ought to be, which helps his theory of types" (p. 47). As Monk notes, Russell's plans for the second edition were far too ambitious and were unlikely to be realized. There is a difficulty here, I think, with the way that Russell responded to penetrating criticism. He often seemed to acknowledge and accept criticism in some profound and deep-felt way at first, only to harden against it as time passed. In the case of the Introduction to *PM*, Russell had a young family at this time in his life, and was still unsure of whether he was capable of returning fully to such demanding work. As a rule, he always tried to accept criticisms graciously (if they were graciously given), but it is hardly surprising that at that time in his life he could not quite turn his energies to dismantling the theories he had spent ten years developing.

The discussion of *The Analysis of Matter* (1927) shows quite clearly Monk's

attitude towards his subject and his subject's philosophical development. Monk considers the book to be "the culmination of over ten years' thought, and one of the two or three substantial works of philosophy that he published during the second half of his life" (p. 71). It is not clear what the other one or two might be. Certainly not *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (1940) or *Human Knowledge: Its Scope and Limits* (1948), for these are dismissed by Monk (unless the author's "substantial" refers to size). It does not really matter, however, for they receive the same treatment. Despite being a substantial work, *The Analysis of Matter* is a critically neglected book because it is seriously flawed. Monk's brief analysis of its flaws is cogent and perceptive, but his handling of their significance (or lack of significance) is too sweeping. There is a tendency in this second volume for Monk to begin his usual fluent and perceptive readings of Russell's texts, but then quickly to consign them to the rubbish heap. Russell comes across as a latter-day Casaubon, that figure of ridicule in George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, who slurps his soup and wastes his whole life trying to find "the key to all mythologies", while ignoring the important works of German scholars. Because the theory put forward in *The Analysis of Matter*—essentially a neutral-monist interpretation of the subject matter of physics—was subject to severe criticism by Max Newman, further discussion of argument of the work, and Russell's place as a theoretical physicist, is curtailed. Yet the question was far from closed despite such criticism, and the argument between structuralism (championed by Eddington *et al.*) and the new physics continued. As Monk admits, Russell continued to distance himself from Eddington's structuralist position, having accepted Newman's criticism. Russell writes to Newman:

Many thanks for sending me the off-print of your article about me in *Mind*. I read it with great interest and dismay. You make it entirely obvious that my statements to the effect that nothing is known about the physical world except its structure are either false or trivial, and I am somewhat ashamed at not having noticed the point for myself.

(P. 72)

This does not sound like a man possessed of a "colossal" vanity, and indeed Monk admits that Russell received the criticism "graciously". But there is a tendency for Monk to see any criticism of Russell as "devastating" or "perceptive". However, the real issue at this point is how Russell really responds to criticism. The tone and general tenor of this letter to Newman is strikingly similar to others he sent to Wittgenstein (and even Lawrence), when subjected to "devastating" attacks. Russell did not ignore criticism, but nor did he rush out immediately to tell the world and atone for his sins. Rather, he would enter a period of reflection (often depression) followed by a gradual revision of the ideas in question. It is frustrating that on occasion much of the initial idea would return as if the criticism had never occurred: apart from the theory put

forward in *An Essay on the Foundations of Geometry* (1897), and his assumption of the Meinongian theory of objects before the construction of the Theory of Descriptions, Russell rarely completely reversed his philosophical views. He did, however, as is well known, change his mind on certain topics. It is true that Russell is very hard to pin down here. For the most part Monk accuses him of doggedly holding on to out-of-date theories. In some instances this is true; in particular his unceasing attacks on the pragmatism of William James and John Dewey, in whose work he discerns the roots of fascism. Certainly this thesis is wrong-headed, but the kinds of connections he notices constitute an attempt to integrate politics and philosophy in a serious manner. Monk has no truck with this, finding the thesis “almost breathtakingly naïve and implausible” (p. 177). Probably less edifying was Russell’s constant returning to the same issue, recycling in the 1950s material from the 1900s. In his overtly political writing, he did indeed reverse his opinion on occasion, though sometimes denying that he had done so.

Partly inspired by support from Willard van Orman Quine, Russell attempted a return to serious philosophy in 1935 at the age of 63. He returned partly, it seems, to save his sanity from the tumultuous years of his failing marriage to Dora Black. As in his return to philosophy in 1917, following D. H. Lawrence’s attack, he found “extraordinary rest” in “abstract things”. It would have taken extraordinary *energy* and courage to attempt a return to technical philosophy after ten gruelling years of travel, journalism, raising children and, of course, the “devastating” criticism that had been aimed at his earlier philosophy. The paper that marked his return, “On Order in Time”, is formidably difficult, although Monk accuses Russell of merely going through the motions to show that he could still do technical philosophy. Again the work is dismissed because of the later work of physicists and the earlier work of Einstein. But there is more to the paper than Russell’s flexing his intellectual muscles, and relativity—the main argument against the paper—need not be the threat that Monk suggests it is. The argument from relativity suggests that the whole notion of classes of instants is erroneous because time is not a *single* linear continuum. But Russell’s conception of *order* in time does not contradict itself because it deals with local temporality in a psychological context (although this is a problem in itself).

Monk begins to take Russell’s philosophy seriously with the paper “The Limits of Empiricism” (1936). This and a clutch of other reviews and papers over the next four years constitute a remarkable time in Russell’s thinking. A tantalizing meeting between Russell and Wittgenstein over the issues presented in the paper and Wittgenstein’s own developing philosophy, never took place. Wittgenstein had sent Russell a copy of the *Blue Book* and awaited a considered response, but Russell’s response was not Wittgensteinian on the notion of relations. If a relation is not an object, then how can we know it? Russell had

rejected as “mysticism” the Wittgensteinian idea that the truths of logic can be *seen* but cannot be *shown* without contradiction, and developed his own theory based on the idea of “non-demonstrative inference”. In this development he disagreed with both the Wittgensteinians and the logical positivists, who stated that a proposition is only meaningful if there is a method for establishing whether it is true or false. Russell is clearly his own man here, developing an important theory which was to occupy him for the remaining years of his philosophical career, modifying or opposing dominant theories. And Monk, too, is at his best, though the discussion is still a little brief. There are no prejudicial views of outsiders, no impatience with the subject, but honest and engaging analysis of Russell’s return to philosophy. I wish there were more of it in Monk’s biography, and more of it in the second half of Russell’s life.

The culmination of this return to philosophy was the publication of *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* in 1940; but leading up to it are two phases of Russell’s life about which we know very little. The first, at Oxford in 1937, where he gave a series of lectures on “Words and Facts”, sees Russell as something of an outcast in Oxford society, but little else. Monk is at a loss to explain why there is so little information available. There is no indication of whom he mixed with, what they thought of him and what he thought of them. The same can be said for his time at Harvard in 1940 when he delivered the William James Lectures (later published as *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*).

Monk’s discussion of the *Inquiry* is disappointing. The book is described as an extreme example of epistemological solipsism (something which the introducer of the Routledge edition, Thomas Baldwin, also suggests⁷); yet curiously the lengthy quotation Monk uses (pp. 243–4) to ridicule Russell’s position is from *My Philosophical Development* (1959). In a footnote, Monk admits to being appalled that Quine may have considered the *Inquiry* to be Russell’s most important book; but the book is more important than Monk allows, as Ayer has also noted,⁸ if not as important as Quine is reputed to have thought. In it Russell takes on a number of linguistic issues, although the book is, as Monk notes, rather more about knowledge than meaning, and takes on the work of Carnap, Tarski and Wittgenstein as well as that of the logical positivists. There is much to admire in the *Inquiry*: the analysis of the coherence and correspondence theories of truth, of John Dewey’s “warranted assertability”, of indexicals (“egocentric particulars”) and of the psychology of the logical connectors. This most overtly “linguistic” work provides an important context for Russell’s later considerations of so-called “linguistic” philosophy.

⁷ Thomas Baldwin, Introduction to *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth* (London: Routledge, 1996).

⁸ A. J. Ayer, *Bertrand Russell* (“Modern Masters”; London: Fontana, 1972), p. 30.

It is clear that Russell largely misread and misconstrued the work of the Oxford ordinary language philosophers of the 1950s and beyond. His attacks were often vitriolic and sometimes ill-considered. Yet his reply to Peter Strawson's 1950 paper "On Referring" ("Mr Strawson on Referring", *Papers 11*) is clear and incisive. Strawson rightly pointed out that as an account of the definite article in "ordinary language", the Theory of Descriptions was inadequate. But Monk makes more of the "over-polemical tone" of Russell's attack than the details of the argument. Here was a good opportunity for Monk to use his considerable abilities as a philosopher and biographer to throw some new light on this relatively recent controversy; yet the issue is passed over in descriptions of Russell's supposed impatience and ill-temper. The Theory of Descriptions is probably Russell's most important contribution to philosophy; until Strawson's attack it had remained virtually unchallenged for nearly 50 years. Russell's response in the light of developing philosophies, though slight when compared to earlier writings, warrants more detailed discussion, even in a biographical, rather than philosophical, work.

Much of Monk's impatience with Russell is over the philosopher's journalism, attempts at scholarly history and, of course, political writing. It is clear that Russell did write a great deal of trivial, superficial and sometimes just plain silly material for magazines and newspapers, particularly in the 1920s. In many ways journalism brought out the best and worst of Russell. On the one hand his ability to write pithy, witty, ironic and readable text on a vast number of subjects made him a "good read" and much in demand by editors. On the other hand, the obvious shallowness of some of the topics coupled with the relative freedom Russell had in making unsubstantiated claims about subjects on which he was not wholly fit to pronounce, brought out his essential capriciousness. The claims made by Harry Ruja, the editor of *Mortals and Others*, are, as Monk states, exaggerated; but Monk fails to acknowledge Russell's humour and irony, or if it is acknowledged it is only to the extent that it masks a nastier, more vitriolic side of his personality. Indeed, one of Russell's most important characteristics—his humour—is either ignored or labelled sardonic throughout the book. Thus Russell is accused of "bitterly ironic contempt and savage resentment" (p. 128), rather than, at worst, dubious humour, for these snippets of journalistic ephemera. That one of the greatest philosophers of the twentieth century—a man co-responsible for one of the most complex and extraordinary works on mathematical logic—could also amuse readers with speculations about whether women should wear lipstick, is a cause for light celebration rather than outright condemnation, I would have thought.

From the very beginning of his career, Russell wrote on historical and political issues. We must not forget that his first book was not on mathematics or philosophy, but German social democracy; his last, on war crimes in Vietnam.

He was a readable, but not particularly penetrating historian, tending to bypass the niceties of historical detail in pursuit of a grand thesis or (conspiracy) theory—something which he was prone to do in his political writing, too. The position he tended to take, largely of broad historical overview, is one not likely to find favour in the present climate, for it implies a grand, patriarchal, Victorian bird's-eye view of the sweep of history rather than a teasing out of some important historical data. Russell wrote very much within the tradition of "grand overview", which was largely a product of the age of Russell's youth. It is, of course, a precarious position to adopt, implying privileged understanding. Monk does not feel there are any merits in such a position, calling it one of "lofty generality", and he berates Russell constantly for adopting it. However, this is not the only flaw of Russell's historical work; it is "amateurish", too.

The assumed position of lofty generality is one thing when looking at historical climates and changes; it is quite another when adopted towards political issues, and here Monk is closer to a realistic assessment of Russell's faults. Russell consistently managed to ride roughshod over political complexities in order to arrive at a "quick fix" to a problem. He is attacked by a number of commentators, including, of course, the trusty Webbs, for the crude application of logical principles to the illogical world of politics. In this instance the judgment seems correct. What is also rejected, however, is any admission that Russell was trying to work through serious political issues. Monk states:

The general impression one has of Russell's political writings of the 1930s is of a man who, convinced that the world around him has gone mad, is unable to make sense of what is happening. (P. 187)

This does not seem such a crime. But Russell did attempt to make sense of what was happening, and just because it did not fall within certain party lines, does not mean that his arguments were not worthy of consideration. For a man who supposedly hated mankind with a "perverted blood-lust", his admittedly curious contention that Britain should disarm and let Hitler do what he wanted because the Germans, as a civilized race, would soon see the errors of fascism, was remarkably unbellicose. But the attackers want it both ways: they assume that such a thesis is the naïve application of logical approaches and yet they condemn him for being illogical. The point is that Russell attempted to understand the world in the 1930s and 60s and was unafraid to publish what he thought. There are contradictions and illogicalities, ridiculous optimism and appalling pessimism, clear thinking and muddled discussions. Perhaps the most important problem of Russell's character in relation to these issues is his (in)ability to distance himself from positions he had stated, often dogmatically, earlier. He had done this in his philosophical work, most notably in his scornful attack on those who dared to adopt a Meinongian view of objects, and it occurs often in

his political writing. Monk is surely right when he comments about Russell's suggestion that he had "completely forgotten" that he had urged a preventative war against Russia: "This explanation of his denials is a good deal *less* plausible than the denials themselves. Indeed, it is demonstrably false at every turn" (p. 303). The second half of Russell's life was extraordinarily "public", and, when so public a figure constantly expressed his thoughts and opinions in the public domain there were bound to be contradictions and absurdities.

For the most part Monk's comments on Russell's political writing show a Wittgensteinian impatience and condemnation. Very often Monk misses the point of writings such as *The Conquest of Happiness* (1930), *Sceptical Essays* (1928) and *In Praise of Idleness* (1935). For Monk they fall somewhere between bad philosophy and bad journalism. Almost all of Russell's non-logical writings are dismissed as naïve, outdated, implausible and arrogant. Considering the huge amount of work that he did that was not on logic or mathematics, this view amounts to a fairly substantial rejection of Russell as a writer and philosopher. In his search for contradictions and inconsistencies Monk ignores the sensible, acute and sometimes prescient commentary in Russell's social and political works. Indeed, Monk does not acknowledge the role of the essay genre in the exploration of ideas. Russell is one of the great English essayists, and yet he is, for Monk, faintly ridiculous.

Perhaps the most important contribution to Russell studies in Monk's volume is, ironically, not wholly concerned with Russell himself, but with his children and grandchildren. In a recent review Frank McLynn⁹ has complained that Russell "vanishes for pages at a time", as Monk delves into the distressing lives of John, his wife Susan Lindsay, and their children Anne, Sarah and Lucy. Certainly much of the tale makes harrowing reading, but the extent to which Russell was culpable for the unfolding tragedies is still open to question. He clearly became obsessed and terrified in his dealings with John, although at first he made every effort to help him, putting him and his family up at his Richmond house. None of Russell's previous biographers dared enter this territory, and Monk is brave to do so. There are several terrifying and ironic images in this account. The most striking is of Anne, Sarah and Lucy living with their grandfather "in a sort of (modified!) Pembroke Lodge atmosphere" (p. 370), as Dora Russell put it, at 41 Queen's Road. But unlike Russell's early years, the girls' parents were still alive, only kept away in their madness. The haunting irony of Russell's "recreating" his *Autobiography* in that Richmond house is an enduring and desperate image.

Still, Russell comes out badly despite having made a home for his son and

grandchildren and encouraging Susan in her writing ambitions and attempting to keep everyone financially afloat despite his own difficulties and advancing years. Another striking image Monk gives us is of John in a drug-induced coma while his father delivered perhaps his most famous speech, "Man's Peril". It is clear where Monk thinks Russell should have been directing his energies:

Meanwhile, Dora struggled to cope with John, who was never again able to work or look after himself, and Russell got on with the task of saving humanity. (P. 373)

Too much of the blame is laid at Russell's feet, I think. Although Katharine Tait talks of Russell being "a perfect grandfather" (p. 393), trying to maintain some semblance of normality for his grandchildren, claims such as these are always directly quoted without following commentary. It is clear that John and Susan, despite some of their efforts (particularly from John), were totally incapable of bringing up their children, and the "distressing screaming" of the girls while being cared for by them is yet another awful image. Yet, in this biography, by implication at least, Russell is to blame.

Monk's account of the Schoenman years comes closer than any to clarifying the extent to which Russell was aware of what the young radical was doing under the elder philosopher's name, although there is a darkness about the whole relationship which perhaps will never be explained. For Russellians, the Schoenman years make for depressing reading at the best of times, so Monk is not alone here in his highlighting of a number of manifest absurdities in Russell's behaviour. Russell comes out less confused and more hopelessly out of touch in this story, but Monk takes care to guide us through the extraordinary actions and pronouncements of the radical nonagenarian. It is in these last years that the public Russell becomes more extreme and contradictory while the private man becomes increasingly hard to locate. Monk's account of the early development of Russell's relationship with Schoenman is particularly acute, and the parallels drawn between the appeal of the young anarchist and D. H. Lawrence nearly half a century earlier are deftly shown. Like Lawrence, Monk notes, Schoenman is "almost embarrassingly unsophisticated about the actual process of political decision-making, impatient with nuances and prepared to entertain utterly fantastic visions of people being roused to revolutionary activities for purposes that are only sketchily spelt out" (p. 404). Ironically this is quite close to the picture Monk paints of Russell himself when considering his political work and motivations. In the case of Lawrence, Russell quickly saw the naivety of the writer's political stance, and when subjected to a vicious personal attack severed the relationship. In the case of Schoenman no such attack was forthcoming; indeed, Russell was flattered by the American. In Schoenman, then, we have a figure not unlike others who had influenced Russell: passionate, determined and unconcerned with the trivialities of political detail. What separates

⁹ "When Loathing Defeats Logic", *The Independent*, London, 7 Oct. 2000.

Schoenman from Wittgenstein and Lawrence, however, is his ability to bring out those traits of Russell and develop them further. At last Russell had found the “son” he had been looking for; someone not only to carry on his political work, but also to adopt a stance of civil disobedience in ways even more dramatic than he had done in this youth and middle age.

The extent to which Russell himself was responsible for the more extreme views put forward under his name in the mid-1960s has been a recurring issue for biographers. Both Clark and Moorehead take a middle-of-the-road, pragmatic view that Russell probably knew about and approved most of the material issued, but that there were very likely times when the writing was wholly Schoenman’s. Clark reports that “an eye-witness has reported seeing sheets of letterhead with Russell’s signature two-thirds of the way down the empty page” (Clark, p. 637). Monk is much more convinced that Russell was fully aware of most things disseminated under his name, and his thesis is nicely demonstrated in his account of Russell’s “Guevarist years”. Much of the writing about Russell’s work with Schoenman and the Peace Foundation has assumed that the Vietnam War was their key target. Yet, as Monk points out, there was an extraordinary preoccupation with Latin America (particularly Cuba) that is often missed. In focusing on this underrepresented aspect of Russell’s political dealings with Schoenman, Monk is able to bring out the essential contradictions of his thought and character. How could Russell become a Guevarist revolutionary? As Monk notes, the idea is “so implausible that many, even now, refuse to believe that Russell could have uttered such stuff” (p. 455). What is evident, although Monk does not go as far as to suggest this, is that Schoenman had become Russell’s teacher on political theory, something Schoenman himself had stated in the letter of 29 June 1968 mentioned in the “Private Memorandum”.

This, I think, is the key to the relationship, and it conforms to a recurrent pattern throughout Russell’s life. He was always prepared to learn from people, but the fact that Schoenman did not attack him in the way that Lawrence or Wittgenstein had done meant that he was prepared to be influenced for longer and in a more profound manner. But in the end Russell emerges “once more his own man”, having, as always, repudiated the claims of his “enemies” and become his former self. Time and time again we have seen this in the life of Russell. As Monk states in the closing line of his commentary on the Schoenman phenomenon: “It was almost as if the events of the ‘Guevarist years’ had never happened” (p. 479).

Russell had two months to live following the composition of the “Private Memorandum concerning Ralph Schoenman”. Having rewritten his life once more, he was at peace. Yet Monk’s biography ends not with Russell’s death, but with the continuing tragic history of the grandchildren. Moorehead also ended her volume with discussion of the fate of the girls, but it was much more seen in

terms of a Russell family legacy than the legacy of Russell himself.

There are no eulogies at the close, no acknowledgement of the man’s humour, humanity, vitality, wit or suffering. We are left with an image of a man who lived too long, who hurt too many people and who spent too much of life on things he was ill equipped to do. This is very sad. Most journalistic reviewers have merely repeated Monk’s thesis and views with approval. A few, such as Anthony Grayling¹⁰ and Frank McLynn, have defended Russell against Monk’s attack, McLynn’s being a particularly acrimonious piece of journalism. What went wrong for the biographer? It is hard to say, but Monk somehow lost sight of his subject, losing respect for him as a philosopher, political thinker and activist and, of course, as a human being. To become too close to Russell was ultimately a “heartbreaking experience” (p. xi). Taken as a whole, Monk’s two volumes represent an important achievement, a valiant attempt to witness the whole man in all his complexity within philosophical, historical, personal and political contexts. But to read from the first to the second volume is to witness a dramatic downturn in the spirit of both writer and man. What a pity that such an impressive subject and able biographer should end their long journey together in such a way.

¹⁰ A. C. Grayling, “A Booting for Bertie”, *The Guardian*, London, 28 Oct. 2000.