

## GRIFFIN BARRY

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Harriet Ward. *A Man of Small Importance: My Father Griffin Barry*. Debenham, Suffolk: Dormouse Books, 2003. £10.00. 179 illustrations. Pp. 303. (Ward's memoir is self-published. Write to Dormouse Books, 1 Church Cottages, Cross Green, Debenham, Suffolk IP14 6QF, UK. Postage and packing: UK and Europe £2.00. £4.00 airmail, £2.25 surface. Cheques in foreign currency must include an additional £5.00 for bank charges.)

Harriet Ward, Dora Russell's younger daughter, has written a perceptive, engaging and informative memoir. Her subject is her father, Griffin Barry, a left-wing American journalist who in his youth was a man of great charm.

Griffin was born in Wisconsin in 1884, the son of a newspaperman and his active, resourceful wife Harriet, for whom Harriet Ward was named. Griffin's

<sup>23</sup> See Stephen Toulmin, *The Uses of Argument* (New York: Cambridge U. P., 1958).

<sup>24</sup> Wittgenstein consciously avoided all things political, and thus gave Monk no opportunities to be disappointed by his political interventions. Perhaps this helps account for the preference Monk shows for Ludwig over Bertie.

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brother Richard became a successful journalist. But despite a promising early career, Griffin himself never succeeded in using his considerable talents in a sustained manner. In the 1920s and 1930s his attractive, gregarious nature made him a popular figure in radical, bohemian Greenwich Village and in the artists' and writers' community in Provincetown on Cape Cod, Massachusetts. His friend, the writer John Dos Passos, described him in the early 1920s as a "man who knew everything and everybody. He was the insider incarnate. There was hardly anybody he hadn't been to bed with" (p. 23). By the early 1930s, however, his career took a downward turn and his personal life became painful. Barry always hoped to establish a family with Dora Russell and their two children, but he was never able to achieve this and in 1957 he died a poor, lonely and disappointed man.

Ward has done considerable research to unearth her father's past. Her main source is the correspondence between her father and mother, but she has also used the published works and archives of Griffin's friends and acquaintances. She successfully places Griffin in his milieu: the radical, avant garde world of the 1920s–1940s.

Ward's portrait of Griffin Barry is valuable in itself, but this book is more than a memoir of this "man of small importance". First, it is the author's own memoir, and the Harriet Ward revealed in this book is worth knowing. Ward's central project is not so much to retell her father's life as to understand her own relationship with him, and beyond that, to offer her own perceptions of the complex, difficult, extended family in which she grew up. She herself calls the "Russell–Barry" family "complicated".

The family story begins with the marriage in 1921 of the eminent Bertrand Russell to Dora Black, a brilliant young woman with a First from Cambridge and an academic career in front of her, which she abandoned for the marriage. The Russells' marriage, the birth of their two children John and Katharine, their involvement in Labour politics, and the educational experiment they launched together in 1927—Beacon Hill School—appeared to offer a spectacularly successful example of an intellectual and sexual partnership that dared to be truly modern. In print and on the lecture circuit both Dora and Bertrand Russell challenged conventional attitudes about sex and sexual fidelity; about women's equality; and about the rearing of children.

Unfortunately, this courageous but risky experiment began to unravel at the end of the 1920s. Bertrand and Dora both had love affairs with other people, and while each tried to live up to their ideological support of what we would now call "open marriage", both suffered from heartache, bitterness and jealousy. The occasion of the final rift between Bertrand and Dora was Dora's affair with Griffin Barry, whom she met in America in 1928, and by whom she had two children, Harriet in 1930 and Roderick in 1932. Although initially Bertrand

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accepted the idea of an extended family, and indeed Harriet was registered as his child, in fact he could not carry it off. He quickly became involved with the woman who would be his third wife, and after bitter wrangles, Bertrand and Dora were divorced in 1935.

All this is well known to Bertrand Russell scholars, and Dora Russell has told her side of the story in her volumes of autobiography. But in addition to the adults who created the chaos, there were five children involved in this situation: John and Kate, Harriet and Roderick, and Conrad, Russell's child by his third wife. John, Kate and Conrad are granted some space in Russell scholarship, and Kate has written her own account, *My Father Bertrand Russell*.<sup>1</sup> But the story of Dora's "illegitimate" children by a man she herself saw as a lover who had no lasting importance in her life is given short shrift. Dora does tell her readers about Harriet and Roddy in her volumes of autobiography, and it is evident that she loved all of her children and tried to be the best mother she could to all of them. But Russell never took the trouble to concern himself with Harriet's or Roddy's welfare, even though he played a significant part in their lives, both as their mother's ex-husband, and for some years as the official father of Harriet. Russell scholarship has followed Russell's lead.

Ward offers a contrasting and therefore especially welcome and valuable perspective on this family constellation. As the echo in Ward's title suggests, she is offering a related but quite different story from that of her sister Katharine. Ward's book in no way challenges the views of her older sister, to whose affection and support she pays tribute. Rather, Ward, whose wisdom and even-handedness are evident, emphasizes that each person will bring a unique point of view to the telling of any complex story.

A case in point is her treatment of Beacon Hill School. Russell and Russell scholars have been largely dismissive of this important experiment in progressive education. Dora Russell, on the other hand, quite justifiably presents its strengths. Ward devotes a chapter to Beacon Hill, into which she incorporates fascinating information she has received from adults who were pupils or teachers, as well as her own memories and her use of the archival material relating to the school. For her, while the school had weaknesses, on balance it was a success. Moreover, it offered Harriet and Roddy a refuge from the anger and confusion perpetrated by the parents and parental figures in their lives. Ward mentions that her sister Kate believes the school destroyed the family she and her brother John had enjoyed. But for Ward, "the school provided the idyll which shielded us to a large extent from the parental quarrel raging over our

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<sup>1</sup> New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975; London: Gollancz, 1976. Reprinted, with an Introduction by Ray Monk, Bristol: Thoemmes P, 1996.

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heads" (p. 192).

Ward's book is an indispensable source for anyone interested in the Russell–Barry family or in Beacon Hill School. Indeed, most Russell scholars will profit from reading Ward's work. It is also significant as a family memoir. The book is, of course, about a famous family. Messy divorces and painful childhoods were common in the 1930s, but few such families contained adult members like Bertrand and Dora Russell who not only attempted bold experiments, but through their public activities, including their best-selling writings, were influential voices contributing to debate on these issues. But this book would be valuable even if it were not about a famous family. In recent years, memoir has become a genre with new significance. Historians of the family now recognize that family memoirs can provide an essential source for our understanding of changing definitions of the family in the past and in the present. *A Man of Small Importance* is such a memoir. It deserves to be read and enjoyed by a wide variety of readers.

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