

INTRODUCING RUSSELL GRAPHICALLY

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Dave Robinson and Judy Groves. *Introducing Bertrand Russell*. Cambridge, UK: Icon Books Ltd., 2002. Pp. 176. US\$11.95; CDN\$16.99; £9.99.

Until now there have appeared at least 20 short books in different languages with the aim of introducing the life and work—or both—of Bertrand Russell. With the publication of *Introducing Bertrand Russell* written by Dave Robinson, illustrated by Judy Groves and edited by Richard Appignanesi we have the first attempt to introduce the life and thought of Russell with the help of

cartoon-like illustrations and easy-to-follow diagrams. This particular genre of presenting a topic or a thinker started some 30 years ago, but it is not until now that Russell has been blessed with an attempt to present the most important aspects of his life and thinking in this particular way.

After first telling us a little bit about Russell's upbringing and his fear of madness, Robinson in *Introducing Bertrand Russell* uses Russell's passionate search for certainty in mathematics as the starting-point for his description of Russell's philosophical odyssey. The 170 pages are divided into 117 short sections in which the author tries to convey the most interesting aspects of Russell's life and thinking. Starting with the fourth "The Geometry Lesson" and ending 26 sections later with "What is Logic?", where Russell reluctantly admits that "Logic, in other words, is an empty process of linguistic analysis" (p. 43), we get a quick but fair description of the development of Russell's thinking about mathematics and logic.

The rest of the book is much more impressionistic and jumps from one topic to another with Wittgenstein showing up in different parts of the book without being allowed to steal the show. Robinson's intentions have obviously been to give a brief introduction to and assessment of Russell's thinking and political activities, but the book starts with a well-intended exaggeration: "Everyone has heard of Bertrand Russell. He was a great thinker, an agitator imprisoned for his beliefs, and a man who changed Western philosophy for ever" (p. 3).

Unfortunately, far from everyone has heard about Bertrand Russell, but what follows is true. What surprises me is that a person who holds Russell in such high esteem should not be able to get some fundamental facts right. The work on publishing *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* is being pursued at McMaster University in Hamilton and not at some non-existing institution called *MacMaster University in Toronto*.

Russell's famous essay "A Free Man's Worship" was not written and published in 1923 for the first time, but twenty years earlier. Robinson describes it as a "kind of gospel to agnosticism" (p. 143), which is not totally misleading, but by misdating it by twenty years, he creates a very confusing picture of the development of Russell's personal religious beliefs as well as his views on religion.

The section "Russell on Religion" (pp. 142–3) starts with the sentence: "Russell lost his Christian faith at an early age but often admitted to mysterious spiritual longings." This is vague, but it is acceptable.

Then we get to know a little about "a personal epiphany" that Russell had on 10 February 1901. Russell used different expressions to refer to this very important experience of "mystic illumination" or even "first conversion". The balloon contains—as often—a direct quotation from Russell; in this case, the first volume of his *Autobiography*, where he talks about the insights that he gained

from this experience: “that the loneliness of the human soul is unendurable; nothing can penetrate it except the highest intensity of the sort of love that religious teachers have preached.” This description of Russell’s most important “religious”, “mystical” or “spiritual” experience was actually written in 1931.

Robinson seems happily unaware of all these things. The confusion gets worse when we turn to the following section, “No Proof or Disproof of God”, where the first sentence states: “Russell had not lost his faith in Christianity but had long stopped believing in God” (p. 144). Robinson seems to be saying that was true in 1923. This interpretation conflicts with the first sentence of the previous section, which says that “Russell lost his Christian faith at an early age but often admitted to mysterious spiritual longings.”

I could have brought up other obscurities concerning what Robinson says about Russell and religion. Unfortunately they are not limited to his presentation of Russell’s religious views and his views on religion. In the section “Analytic Philosophy” Robinson says: “*On Denoting* didn’t only help to construct a new form of ‘predicate logic’ but to found a whole school of philosophy now known as ‘analytic’ or ‘linguistic’ philosophy.” The terms are not synonymous.

My impression of this and similar books on other philosophers is that you have to know a lot in order to be able to appreciate them. Judy Groves’s illustrations are interesting although there is not much humour in them. The basic problem with this book seems to have been one of poor communication between writer and editor.
