

AN EPISTOLARY BIOGRAPHY

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Nicholas Griffin, ed., assisted by Alison Roberts Miculan. *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell*. Vol. 2: *The Public Years, 1914–1970*. London and New York: Routledge, 2001. Pp. xix, 660. Prices in 2006: £45.00 (pb £16.99); US\$80.00 (pb US\$30.95).

With the publication of the second volume of *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell*, Nicholas Griffin has completed a work of impressive scholarship. The first volume¹ came out in 1992 and contains 240 letters, the second 388 letters. The Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University hold between thirty and forty thousand of Russell's letters. Griffin does not claim to have looked through all of them, but apart from our editor he has probably read more of them than any other person. This provided him a unique perspective on Russell of which he has made the best. The letters have been intertwined with extensive commentaries and supplied with informative footnotes amounting to approximately 150 pages in the first volume and 200 pages in the second. Together with the prefaces and the introductions, they supply us with an epistolary biography of Russell that covers most aspects of his life.

There are some differences between the first and the second volume due to the availability of letters. In the first volume there are many letters to Russell's first wife, Alys, and his lover, Lady Ottoline Morrell. Griffin writes in the preface to the second volume that these touched on almost everything that was important to Russell, which made it unnecessary to look for letters elsewhere. The letters to Ottoline continued their pace until 1916, but he kept on writing to her until she died in 1938. Griffin relies heavily on these letters up to her premature death. When Colette O'Neil came into the picture in 1916, she took over Ottoline's role, but Russell's letters to her are not quite as revealing as those to Ottoline. The Russell Archives have close to 1,900 letters to Ottoline and 800

¹ Reviewed by Katharine Tait in *Russell*, n.s. 12 (1992): 211–22.

to Colette, and they contain much information for anyone interested in Russell.

For the second volume Griffin has therefore been forced to search further afield for letters. At the same time there are many more letters to choose from. Another complicating factor has been the variety of Russell's interests after 1914. Before the First World War Russell had mainly devoted his energy to logic and the foundations of mathematics. When the war broke out, he channelled his energy into anti-war work. After the war his interests grew in many directions, as did the number of correspondents. Towards the end of his life he returned to political activism; still, his correspondence in the 1960s covers a wider range of topics than at any other time.

Given the variety of Russell's interests, Griffin had to decide which interests should be included. This must have been a difficult task, but Griffin argues convincingly for why he has excluded letters directly related to Russell's involvement in world government organizations, letters concerning the Indo-Pakistani border dispute and technical letters about philosophy. He has also excluded—although not totally—letters concerning religion, people he had known earlier, events he had been involved in and opinions he had held. Some topics had to be excluded due to the lack of suitable letters. In spite of all these restrictions, Griffin has been able to produce a most interesting, if not complete, epistolary biography.

The book is divided into six chapters: (1) War (1914–18), 93 letters; (2) Children, Companionship, and Joint Work (1918–27), 45 letters; (3) Starting a School and Ending a Marriage (1927–35), 57 letters; (4) Marriage, Poverty, and Exile (1936–44), 46 letters; (5) Respectability at Last (1944–54), 64 letters; (6) Peace (1955–70), 99 letters. The titles and the periods are aptly chosen and give a good hint about the major projects in which Russell was involved. As can be deduced from the number of letters given for each chapter, Griffin devotes most attention to the first and the last chapters.

So far my own research on Russell's life and work has been concentrated on the periods ending with the onset of the First World War and the very last years of his life. This means that there is a lot of information that is totally new to me, and I have benefited much from Griffin's informative commentaries and footnotes, which are characterized by an "obsessive fascination with details" (p. xiii) and often spiced with a sly sense of humour, which makes for fun reading.

There are more than 110 recipients, most of them women. There are 68 letters to Ottoline, the same number to Colette (the last one was sent just half a year before Russell died), 31 letters to Dora (his second wife), 27 to daughter Kate and eight to Edith (his fourth wife).² Apart from his mother, grand-

² Russell's letters to his third wife, Patricia, are under his embargo until 2009.

mother and first wife, these were from an emotional point of view the most important women in his life, and although there are many interesting letters to men from all walks of life—from an old childhood friend to Albert Einstein—it is in his letters to these women that he is most personal and revealing of his inmost feelings. Considering the limitations of this review, I will concentrate on his letters to these women in search of traces of his “philosophy of life” as it developed over the years.

In many ways Russell’s life has the quality of a Greek or Shakespearean tragedy. Although he had one of the sharpest minds of his time, that did not make him immune to the follies of a man with very strong passions. Ever since that famous bike ride at the turn of the century, when he realized that he was no longer in love with Alys, until he married Edith Finch 50 years later, his relationships with women were intermittently very complicated and caused him much emotional suffering.

There are three themes that keep recurring in the letters: love, happiness and truth (and money, but I will not say much about that). In *What I Believe* (1925) he summarized his philosophy of life, saying that “The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge.” He might as well have said: “The happy life is one inspired by kindly feelings (or kindness) and guided by veracity”, which are words he often used in his letters. If we add “justice” to these, we have the major elements of his philosophy of life.

He sought happiness and wrote about it, but apart from a few happy years with Alys and almost twenty happy years with Edith, his relationships with women probably caused him more suffering than joy. Although he had a warm relationship with his daughter, his relationship to his two sons, John and Conrad, and John’s children caused him much suffering. To his great joy he was reconciled with Conrad at the very end of his life, but his failure to establish a good relationship with John must have been a source of much pain. However, altogether Russell considered himself a lucky person and would not have hesitated to live his life all over again, if that had been possible (*Auto.*, 1: Prologue).

In *Principles of Social Reconstruction* (1916) Russell provides the outline of what he calls “a philosophy of politics”. The book, which is based on public lectures he gave in the beginning of 1916, can also be seen as the presentation of a wider philosophy of life. More or less like Plato and Saint Paul, he sees man as consisting of three parts; instinct, mind and spirit. He says that: “All human activity springs from two sources: impulse and desire” (*PSR*, p. 12). He also says that most impulses can be divided into “possessive” and “creative” impulses. These distinctions can be combined with what he has to say about kindly feeling and veracity and used as instruments in assessing how successful Russell was in applying his own philosophy of life. As we shall see, his strong libidinous impulses often came into conflict with his high estimation of veracity.

This was definitely the case with Helen Dudley, with whom he started an affair while visiting the US just before the outbreak of the war. Helen was soon on her way to visit Russell and had high hopes for a life together. But now the situation was totally changed for Russell. Since he was determined to speak up against the war, he could not afford a scandal, so he decided that, in spite what he said to Helen earlier, she had to be sacrificed. Russell involved Ottoline, and we can follow the twist and turns of this story through his letters to her.

Russell found himself in an ethical dilemma that was not easy to solve, but he was much helped by his recent conversion from believing that “good” and “bad” referred to objective qualities to seeing them as subjective projections on reality. He called his new theory “the emotive theory of ethics”. I see a connection between this theory and Spinoza’s determinism, which Russell accepted, at least in theory. He explained his views in a letter to Helen Flexner (#248, 16 November 1914): “It is not good to hate even the wicked, even if oneself is virtuous; and I think wickedness and virtue are barbaric notions, savouring of Yahweh and the Inquisition. People act according to their natures, just as stones or planets do. A stone which falls on your head is inconvenient, not wicked.”

If I understand him correctly, he is saying that people are not ethically responsible for their thoughts and actions, and there is no real difference between good and bad; things just happen. He certainly did not sound as if he believed this, which might appear inconsistent, but it really is not, because he could not really influence his own reactions either; they were the result of his nature. He could not stop moralizing. This might appear to be a strange theory, but it makes sense.

In February 1915 Ottoline took Russell to see D. H. Lawrence, and soon they started work on a common project to create a new philosophy or religion. In a letter to Ottoline (#258, 21 June 1915) he tells her about his latest meeting with Lawrence: “We talked of a plan of lecturing in the autumn on his religion, politics in the light of religion, and so on. I believe something might be made of it. I could make a splendid course on political ideas: morality, the State, property, marriage, war, taking them to their roots in human nature, and showing how each is a prison for the infinite in us. And leading on to the hope of a happier world.”

By September the ill-fated collaboration with Lawrence had come to an end, but Russell continued on his own and delivered his “Principles of Social Reconstruction” lectures. The resulting book contains what I consider to be a first outline of Russell’s philosophy of life—something that he would work on for the rest of his life as an alternative to traditional religious views.

A practical consequence of his views concerning the war was that he started to work for the No-Conscription Fellowship, which was an organization helping the conscientious objectors. It was theory put into practice, and he soon

found himself swept up in the enthusiasm of people committed to peace. This would become a major part of his philosophy of life. But there was a price to pay: he was eventually dismissed from teaching at Trinity College and had to spend a few months in jail.

It was through his work for the COs that he got to know one of his greatest loves: Lady Constance Malleon, who used the stage name Colette O'Neil. Although Griffin explicitly excluded letters regarding religion, the topic is touched upon directly in some letters, and Russell's often complicated relationship to God and religious matters is indirectly revealed through his semi-religious use of words like "God", "The Infinite", "love", "sin", "wicked" and "sinful".

One of my favourite letters regarding Russell's religious struggle is one he wrote to Colette on 21 October 1916 (#279), where he writes:

The centre of me is always and eternally a terrible pain—a curious wild pain—a searching for something beyond what the world contains, something transfigured and infinite. The beatific vision—God. I do not find it, I do not think it is to be found—but the love of it is my life—it is like passionate love for a ghost. At times it fills me with rage, at times with wild despair—it is the source of gentleness and cruelty and work, it fills every passion that I have. It is the actual spring of life within me.

Although the intensity of his religious struggle diminished with time and was replaced by a strong ethical commitment that he expressed through his political work, it remained an undercurrent in most of his undertakings.

Russell, however, had two objections to Colette. One concerned a lack of deep seriousness, what he called "religion", which he found in Ottoline but could not find in Colette. The other was that she was not likely to fulfil his dreams of becoming a father. He had to wait until after the war was over before he met a young woman who was prepared to give him what he most wanted. Her name was Dora Black, and she would become his wife and companion for the following fifteen years. They had met in 1916, but it was not until the middle of 1919 that they started a relationship. For a short time he hesitated, and the conflict between love and veracity put him in some awkward situations, but in the end he decided for Dora. Love, it seems, led Russell to be less than veracious even to himself.

Dora was a feminist and a strong-minded woman, who really was against marriage and for free love, a theory she shared with Russell and which, on the whole, probably caused them more pain than pleasure. Russell got an invitation to visit Russia, and originally the plan was that Dora would accompany him. In the end he told her she could not go with him, so she went on her own. He hated what he saw, and she loved it. This difference of opinion almost ended their relationship, but Russell had received an invitation to go to China and

asked Dora to come with him. She accepted, and they patched up their differences and went off together.

The letters in Chapters 2 and 3 give a vivid picture of a fruitful early relationship that produced two children, the establishment of a school, lecture tours to the US, several books, but that ended up in a catastrophe for everyone involved. The underlying cause for their misery was to a large extent their adherence to the theory of free love. When Dora conceived a child with another man in 1929, Russell acted stoically, although in his concurrent book *Marriage and Morals* he clearly stated that he was against extra-marital affairs when children were the result. The old conflict between love and veracity is there in that he persuaded himself that there was still hope for his marriage. But it was quite obvious that Russell was not going to tolerate the situation in the long run.

Early in 1930 he finished *The Conquest of Happiness*, in which he presents a Spinozistically inspired philosophy of life as a guide to a happy life. His own life was far from happy at this time, and he was about to start a new relationship with a much younger woman. Of all his relationships with women, the one with Patricia Spence, called "Peter", would probably cause him more pain and suffering than any other, and it is almost hard to understand that a man of his age and intelligence would be unable to foresee the problems a very neurotic woman almost forty years younger could cause him. But Russell was a true believer in romantic love and was obviously prepared to take a risk.

In the summer of 1931 Russell and Dora rented a house in the south of France where they and their two children together with the father of Dora's third child and Peter spent three months together. That must have been a strain on everybody's nerves, but it seems to have passed harmoniously enough. The most important things that happened there were that Russell started work on his *Autobiography* and that both Dora and Peter became pregnant. It is obvious from Russell's first draft that he was not a happy man and things would get worse.

We can follow the development of the ensuing fights concerning the terms of a divorce, custody of the children and many other issues in the letters. It is in many ways depressing to see, as Griffin puts it, "... how two intelligent and high-minded people can be reduced to arguing about buttons" (p. 327). It turned out to be too much even for Russell, and by the end of 1934 he had a mental breakdown.

In spite of Russell's reluctance to marry such a younger woman, who probably would leave him for a younger man sooner or later, they did tie the knot on 18 January 1936. In the beginning there were times of happiness, but these became rarer and rarer.

Russell had for some time tried to get back to doing serious philosophical work and started to look for an academic position. In the meantime it looked as

though another great war might break out. At this point Russell wrote *Which Way to Peace?* in which he totally misjudged Hitler's intentions and suggested that the path of absolute pacifism was the best way to ensure peace. It was published in England, but his American publisher refused to take it. It is the only book by Russell that never has been republished.

Many of Russell's friends got involved in finding him some kind of a suitable job, which turned out to be a difficult task. On 15 April 1937 Conrad Sebastian Robert Russell was born, and the need for a steady income became an issue of major concern. In the fourth chapter we get to follow Russell's search for a job that took him to the University of Chicago, UCLA, and CCNY (or so he thought, but the last appointment was stopped by the religious bigots led by Bishop Manning and assisted by Mayor La Guardia, who feared he would lose the Catholic vote if he did not stop the appointment).

Besides his financial problems and personal troubles Russell was deeply alarmed at the way the war was going in Europe. He now realized that he had misjudged Hitler, and in June 1940 a public recantation of his prewar pacifism was printed in the *New Statesman*. Apart from this he did not write much about the war as long as it was going on. Things would change after the Americans dropped their atomic bombs on Japan. That certainly triggered the same kind of feelings that motivated his activities during the First World War. At the time he had to try to solve his financial problems. John and Kate were also in America finishing their educations, and for that he also needed money. But how would he get it? Through the help of John Dewey he got in contact with a rich, eccentric American, who was running one of the world's finest privately owned art collections, which he housed at his Barnes Foundation in Merion, Pennsylvania. Dr. Barnes gave Russell an offer he could hardly refuse. He was hired for five years to teach one course, given once a week, on the history of philosophy to students selected by Barnes.

This was a stroke of luck, and Russell killed two birds with one stone: at the same time as he collected a good salary, he continued work on *A History of Western Philosophy*, which would solve most of his financial problems for the rest of his life. The book would also catch the attention of the Swedish Academy, which nine years later would cite it as one of the major reasons for awarding Russell the Nobel Prize for literature (see note 3).

Before the Russell family settled down in Pennsylvania, Bertie stayed in Boston until the end of the year while he gave the William James Lectures at Harvard. They were published as *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*, which was Russell's first properly philosophical book since 1927. While his work on *A History of Western Philosophy* progressed well, his relationship with Peter and Dr. Barnes did not, who wanted to break the contract. Kate had come from California and started at Radcliffe, while John was at Harvard. Peter not only

caused problems at the Foundation, she also made it difficult for Russell to have a natural relationship with his daughter. This he brought up in a letter to Kate (#461, 16 December 1943): “You and Peter no longer like each other, and that makes family relations difficult. But I do not want to lose touch with you, at any rate as long as we are both in America, so I must try to see you apart from the family. You and I can get on with each other very well, provided we do not attempt to include Peter...” It seems that Peter was desperate enough to use any means necessary to exert her power over her husband.

After more than five years in America, the Russells were eager to return to England. The problem of how he would live when he got back had been solved by his old college, which offered him a fellowship and invited him to lecture there if he wished. What an uplifting experience that must have been, considering what happened thirty years earlier! Griffin writes: “Russell was never more widely acclaimed as a public figure than in the years immediately after his return to England. Honours, financial security, public esteem, political respectability all came his way” (p. 403). These culminated in the Nobel Prize in 1950.³ There was, however, still one big problem spelled “Peter”, which forced Russell many times to compromise with his high esteem for veracity. He tolerated her dominating ways but continued in less open ways to meet and correspond with people she didn’t like.

In August 1945 the world passed into a new era when the devastating effects of nuclear power became known. As Griffin says: “[it] added a vast new dimension of horror to the world situation. It also transformed the remaining twenty-

³ The caption to the photograph of Russell receiving the Nobel Prize for literature from the hand of the King of Sweden is in error. It says “for *Marriage and Morals*”. I wrote to Griffin about it, and his answer was: “I forget now how the captions to the photos in *SLBR2* were written, but you are right in thinking they are not by me.” The Swedish Academy’s Anders Österling’s official grounds for awarding Bertrand Russell the Nobel Prize were stated in his presentation of Russell for the prize:

“With his keen and sound good sense, his clear style, and his wit in the midst of seriousness, he has in his work evinced those characteristics which are found among only the elite of authors. Time does not permit even the briefest survey of his works in this area, which are fascinating also from a purely literary point of view. It may suffice to mention such books as the *History of Western Philosophy* (1946), *Human Knowledge* (1948), *Sceptical Essays* (1948), and the sketch “My Mental Development” (in *The Philosophy of Bertrand Russell*, 1951); but to these should be added a great number of equally important books on practically all the problems which the present development of society involves.” (*Nobel Lectures, Including Presentation Speeches and Laureates’ Biographies; Literature: 1901–1967*, ed. Horst Frenz [Amsterdam: for the Nobel Foundation by Elsevier, 1969], pp. 449–50)

Marriage and Morals was, like most of Russell’s popular books, quickly translated into Swedish, but I do not think it caused much of a stir in Sweden. It was his *History of Western Philosophy* that really made the difference. For anyone interested in Russell and Sweden, I can only refer to my own article, “Russell’s Influence in Sweden”, *Russell*, n.s. 5 (1985): 169–74.

five years of Russell's life" (p. 410). Now the slumbering angry prophet in him was awakened, and he felt an moral obligation to do what he could to prevent human kind from exterminating itself.

The topics of love, knowledge, the meaning of life and religion often turn up in his letters to his daughter, whose struggles as a young person in many ways mirrored those of her father. His answer to her regarding her fears of Hell reveals his own understanding of what God values most, which happens to coincide with his own preferences. The letter was written in December 1946 (#476). "As for fear of Hell, I suggest the following hypothesis: God values veracity above all other virtues, and has refrained from giving us evidence of His existence; therefore He will damn all those who believe in Him, as having sinned against veracity." If Russell is right, he and other agnostics who refuse to believe something without good reason have nothing to worry about, and as a matter of fact *they* are the truly religious rather than those who believe and obey out of fear of punishment.

The last 230 pages of the book (Chapters 5 and 6) contain much of value for anyone interested in Russell's last crusade for justice and peace. We get to follow the development of his views concerning the relationship between Russia and the United States, the history behind the Russell–Einstein Manifesto and the Pugwash Conferences which grew out of it, the establishment of the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament, the Committee of 100, the Cuban missile crisis, the Sino-Indian border dispute, the founding of the Bertrand Russell Peace Foundation, and his work for political prisoners and his campaign for the Soviet Jews, which are not very well known.

Since I am working on a book about the Russell Peace Foundation and the International War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm and Roskilde in 1967 (also known as the "Russell Tribunal" or the "Vietnam Tribunal", which has inspired all subsequent international peoples' or citizens' tribunals including the last one concerning the war in Iraq), I have particularly benefited from the last section both with regard to the selection of letters and Griffin's commentaries and footnotes. There is, for instance, much about the enigmatic Ralph Schoenman and the part he played in Russell's life, which disproves the rumour that the young partisan came to dominate Russell. Griffin has saved me a lot of work and given me ideas for further research for which I am most thankful. And there is much else of general interest. For instance, we get to know a little about how his papers ended up at McMaster University.

On the personal side we learn about the painful divorce from Peter, his troublesome relationship with John and his family and what happened to Kate with her religious struggles and romantic adventures. We also can follow the development of his relationship to his fourth wife, Edith Finch, and all the happiness it brought. In a letter to Colette (#557, 7 June 1960) Russell wrote:

“After many storms my life has reached a peaceful harbour, except for public affairs. My wife Edith has an extraordinary capacity for affection and makes me very happy.” This was said by a man who was soon to turn 90. In the light of the happiness he experienced with Edith, I will add that his life in many ways reminds me of a Greek tragedy but with a happy ending.

My favourite letter relating to philosophy is one to Robert E. Egner in response to his inquiry about Russell’s views on existentialism (#605, 20 October 1966). Russell was in his 95th year and wrote the draft by hand: “I am sorry, I still hold the same view on existentialism, but I have no wish to express it publicly, as I greatly admire Sartre and some others of the group. You will find the gist of my disagreement in *Principia Mathematica* Vol I, *14.” Griffin’s footnote is short but illuminating: “The section of *Principia* which gives Russell’s theory of definitive descriptions, where the existentialist view that existence precedes essence is reversed.” Russell’s reply can also be used as evidence against those who believe that he had abandoned realism and accepted a linguistic interpretation of logic and mathematics and that he was not playing with a full deck as he aged.

In comparing Griffin’s two volumes of an epistolary biography with Ray Monk’s two volumes of an ordinary biography, there is no doubt that Griffin’s work is of far greater value from a scholarly point of view. Griffin is admirable in his attempt to be fair and neutral in his commentaries. Where Griffin supplies facts and important contextual information, Monk gives us his own prejudiced psychological interpretations and ethical evaluations that are often interesting but that most of the time reveal his underlying negative attitude to Russell. I am sure that Griffin does not approve of everything that Russell said and did, but he has left it up to the reader to decide the ultimate value of Russell’s personal qualities, his importance as a philosopher and the relevance of his political activism. For these reasons I am sure that Griffin’s books will be used and referred to by many scholars long after Monk’s books have lost their appeal.
