

WHAT DID COLETTE KNOW AND WHEN DID SHE KNOW IT?

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It has been several years since Kirk Willis's article appeared in *Russell*.¹ When I first read it, I thought how could Constance Malleson ("Colette O'Neil")² have believed that Russell had died from pneumonia? Willis takes her at her word (p. 8, n.4). I have finally decided to delve deeper, building on the evidence that Willis presents on the published reports of Russell's death.

I

The reports of Russell's death first surfaced in Japan on 29 March 1921.³ From there the news spread to the United States where stories appeared in such newspapers as the Philadelphia *Evening Bulletin* on 21 April. Next the reports began to surface in Britain on 4 May but only as rumours; the British press was far more sceptical than the American. Willis reprints the account from that day's *Manchester Guardian* and notes that the rumours appeared elsewhere.⁴ The last rumour of his death was printed on 8 May.

Russell's brother Frank quashed the rumours with his letter to *The Times* of 11 May (although the *Times* had never reported them). He noted that the rumours had "caused much distress" to his brother's "numerous friends". Willis prints Frank's letter in full (p. 12). His denial of his brother's death was picked

¹ "Russell and His Obituarists", *Russell* 26 (2006): 5–54 (esp. 6–13).

² Lady Constance Malleson, who was always called by her stage name of Colette, had been in a relationship with Russell since 1916.

³ Telegraph cables laid on the ocean bed allowed news agencies to send transoceanic communications; clearly, they weren't always speedy.

⁴ In the *Daily News*, *Daily Herald*, *Daily Express*, *Daily Chronicle*, *Daily Mirror*, *Daily Graphic*, *Evening Standard*, *The Star*, *Newcastle Daily Journal*, *Edinburgh Evening News*, *Glasgow Bulletin*, *Liverpool Echo*, *Liverpool Weekly Courier*, and *Sunday Express*.

up by other British papers, including the *Pall Mall and Globe*, *Evening Standard*, *Daily Express* and *The Nation*. Frank had been contacted in mid-April. On 29 April 1921 he wrote to his brother:

The American Associated Press rang me up about ten days ago to ask if it was true that you had died on 29 March in Japan. I told them that I thought it was very improbable first because you wouldn't do such a thing, secondly because you weren't in Japan, thirdly because I should have heard if you had, and fourthly because if the news came from America there was a prima facie presumption that it was untrue. (RAI 730)

Frank contacted the Chinese Legation who made inquiries for him. Subsequently he was informed that Russell had been ill with pneumonia but was recovering; at that point Frank wrote his letter to the *Times*. He had also contacted Ottoline Morrell for information. She later wrote to Russell on 30 May: "We have all been wondering if you were really alive. Your brother ... asked me if I had had any news of you or your death—but I could tell him nothing. I only fear you may have been very ill as I imagine there must have been something to give rise to this horrid rumour ... especially I feel this as I have not heard from you for some time."⁵ There is no evidence to indicate that Frank got in touch with Colette. It would make sense if he had because he knew that Russell would have been writing regularly to her and vice versa.

C. P. Sanger also was aware of the rumours and did not believe them either, writing to Russell on 2 June: "How kind of you to write and to say kind things. Until there was a false rumour of your death I never really knew how very fond I am of you. I didn't believe the rumour, but the mere idea that I might never see you again had never come into my mind; and it was an immense relief when the Chinese Embassy ascertained that the rumour was false."⁶

II

Colette, however, did believe that Russell had died. At least that was what she always said. In *After Ten Years*, she wrote that she went to Paris after a tour that ran from Easter to "midsummer".⁷ At a hotel on the Rue de Vaugirard she "had news of a death" which "broke" her. She does not tell her readers who died. One of the things that stuck in her memory from then was "a white china dish with pale blue rings; the cherries were real: more real than anything that had happened before or has happened since."⁸ There is nothing in the book to indicate

⁵ RAI 710.082740.

⁶ RAI 710.055420.

⁷ I.e. either 21 or 24 June (*Oxford English Dictionary*).

⁸ London: Jonathan Cape, 1931, pp. 154–6. In her unpublished revisions to *After Ten Years*, she replaced "of a death" with "that B.R. had died in China; I did not know that

that this death did not occur. An account of the death can also be found in the editorial matter of the typescript of her letters to Russell, edited by Phyllis Urch. The account relates the event in similar fashion, although who died is no longer kept secret.⁹ Colette did not record when or how she found out he had not died. Decades after the event, in a letter of 21 May 1949 to Elizabeth Crawshaw-Williams, she wrote: “It is so odd the way inanimate things get printed on one’s mind ... the blue plate of red cherries I saw in the Quartier Latin the day the French newspapers said that Bertie had died in China—twenty-eight years ago—and both pictures equally vivid.”¹⁰ The letter to Elizabeth appears to indicate that she was in France by 21 May. The French newspapers *Le Figaro* and *Humanité* have been checked; no report of Russell’s death could be found. No relevant newspaper clippings are to be found in her papers.

Of course, a memoirist’s recollections are subjective. For example, her recollection of her role as Helen in *The Trojan Women* in *After Ten Years* omits important details. And Colette was also a writer of fiction, encouraged by Russell. Her first published short story, “The End”, appeared in *The English Review* in 1919 using the pseudonym of Christine Harte.¹¹ She worked on a collection of her letters with Russell using imaginary names and addresses for them both. The texts of the original letters were “improved” to make them more literary; dates were also changed. She sent the “book of letters” typescript to him in China; while there he decided against publication of any of the more personal letters.¹² Before that she had begun working on completely fictional letters which still had some echoes from her own and Russell’s lives. She published under her own name “Letters: Posted and Unposted” in *The English Review*.¹³

Colette was in England at the time the rumours and denials were being published. There are two postcards in the Russell Archives postmarked 6 May 1921.¹⁴ One postcard is from Colette and Clifford Allen to Russell, sent from Gloucester with the message: “love from us both”. The other has no message but is in Colette’s hand. Both postcards were addressed to Russell c/o Thomas Cook and Son, Shanghai, even though Russell was in Beijing and had been for several

the news was untrue” (RA). The original passage is quoted in her “Fifty Years: 1916–1966”, in Ralph Schoenman, ed., *Bertrand Russell, Philosopher of the Century* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967), p. 23. Yet she states in introducing the quotation that she wrote it “then”, i.e. in 1921, not a decade later in *After Ten Years*.

⁹ Urch–Malleon typescript, p. 481.

¹⁰ RA3 Rec. Acq. 501h.

¹¹ [No. 29]: 235–8. Reprinted in *Russell* o.s. nos. 21–2 (spring–summer 1976): 25–7.

¹² RA .200713, 6 Nov. 1920.

¹³ A series of seven articles, beginning in September 1920: vol. 31 (Sept. 1920): 261–6; (Oct. 1920): 320–6; (Nov. 1920): 425–30; (Dec. 1920): 500–5; vol. 32 (Jan. 1921): 26–30; (Feb. 1921): 142–6; (March 1921): 244–7.

¹⁴ RA3 Rec. Acq. 596, documents .200804l, .200804k.

months. On 18 May Colette was still in England. She and Clifford Allen sent Russell a birthday telegram: “many happy returns”. It is stamped 18 May 1921.¹⁵ There is no indication it was sent from France; “Londonsub” appears on the first line of the telegram.¹⁶ It is odd that she and Clifford Allen would have sent a perfectly normal birthday telegram—if they had known of Russell’s illness, they should have inquired about his health, but they did not. Thus it is *possible* that the two of them, although they were in England during all the press reports, read nothing and heard nothing of the rumours from friends or Frank.

III

Russell wrote to Colette from China on 27 April 1921 to tell her that he was still alive. The letter is written with a shaky hand in pencil. He told her: “This is the first letter I have written since my illness with my own hand—it is difficult.... My illness was a strange experience.”¹⁷ Other letters followed on 7 May, 16 May and 25 May. Colette supposedly did not receive his first letter until 10 June 1921.

The first letter that Colette wrote acknowledging his illness and its effect on her is dated 5 June 1921, written in Paris. She was there to see both Sybil Thorn-dike and Miles Malleon act in *Macbeth* at the Odéon. It is one of the few handwritten letters from her to Russell that survives—presumably it remained in his possession and was never returned to her. The letter makes no mention that she ever thought him dead. Written from the Rue de Vaugirard, she said:

Allen writes that he has heard from Dora¹⁸ and that you have been very, very ill ... my thoughts have been of you day and night; that I have passionately prayed for your safety. At first I would not face the possibility of your illness, but like some monstrous deformity, some hideous thing, the thought of it grew and grew, insanity feeding on uncertainty, until now, I know that this unbelievable nightmare has happened, is true. Yet even now, I know nothing but that you have been terribly ill. There are still three whole days before I shall know any more than that. (RA1 710.052471)

Its envelope is addressed to Shanghai with “forward if necessary” written on the top—the letter was sent on to Japan, and there is a label with Russell’s Over-strand Mansions address in Battersea, London obscuring other addresses. What was going to happen in three days is not clear, but this is possibly a reference to

¹⁵ The telegram itself was from the Eastern Extension Australasia & China Telegraph Company Limited, Shanghai Station. Again, it was addressed c/o Thomas Cook, Shanghai.

¹⁶ RA3 .200969.

¹⁷ RA3 .200734.

¹⁸ Dora Black (1894–1986), who had accompanied him to China and who became Russell’s second wife in September 1921.

when forwarded mail would arrive. Was she not able to telephone Frank immediately upon receiving Allen's letter?

The second letter was written on 10 June. It exists only in its edited typescript form, like most of her letters to Russell. There are often great discrepancies between these typed letters and the rare original ones that survive. She wrote: "Your faintly pencilled letter [of 27 April] has come; and I'm filled with such overwhelming thankfulness to know that you are through the worst and are recovering. I feel that nothing in life or death can ever touch or shackle me again. I've looked into death, yours and my own; and now that the worst of the misery is over—the whole nightmare of this doomed year—I only want to forget it." She doesn't think he will get this letter until he is back in Battersea.¹⁹

On 14 June,²⁰ Russell wrote: "It was nice of you to telegraph about my health ... Dora is going to have a child (due about November) ... we are both very glad of it." The telegram one would expect about his health had finally been sent. The matter of Dora's pregnancy would have huge repercussions for Colette. Upon his return from China, Russell met with Colette on 28 August at the Ship Inn in Weybridge where she was staying. The next day he wrote to her about how painful their meeting had been, but that the first priority in his life was his coming child and he would be living with Dora.²¹ There are five original letters from her at this time as well as a typed, edited one.²² In the first, 28 dated August,²³ she asked if she could write to him sometimes. In a second, 29 August,²⁴ she offered him whatever kind of love he wants. In a third, 31 August,²⁵ she wrote that she cannot desert him and she will wait for him as long as he lives. In an undated one²⁶—it is unclear where in the sequence it fits—she wrote: "When you talked of death, I felt that though it was I who ought to be feeling dead, it was you yourself who were accepting death while I went the way of life." She ends: "In past times you tore our love with jealousy—now you try to drug it—but you will not succeed...." In the last letter in the group of original letters, 1 September,²⁷ she was at the Lyceum Theatre, thanked him for his letter²⁸ and urged him to be happy. The typed letter of 30 August ends: "I shall not write again, you are not to write to me." Not only did she lose him, she lost her

¹⁹ Letter no. 323; Urch–Malleon typescript.

²⁰ RA3 .200740.

²¹ RA3 .200749.

²² RAI 710.052474, 710.052475, 710.052476, 710.052477, 710.052478 and no. 325 in the Urch–Malleon typescript.

²³ RAI 710.052474.

²⁴ RAI 710.052475.

²⁵ RAI 710.052476.

²⁶ RAI 710.052477.

²⁷ RAI 710.052478.

²⁸ Presumably RA3 .200749.

passion for acting as well, writing in 1929: "Stage ambition went out like a snuffed candle when I was at Weybridge in 1921",²⁹ although there was no mention of this at the time. He was the one to make contact again, writing her in October 1925³⁰ asking if they could be friends. She responded, asking him to tea with his son.

IV

For four years, he had in a way been dead for her. Did her literary imagination transform this into his literal death? As she wrote above, she saw his spirit die at Weybridge. And she talked of her own death on two occasions. Or did she live in England unaware of the rumours of his death only to find out in Paris newspapers which printed reports already categorically denied in *The Times* on 11 May? There is evidence that she left England unaware of the death rumours; there is no evidence to support what she describes actually happened in Paris. In fact her letter of 5 June, which concerns his illness, appears to contradict her later account. My feeling is that the lady cannot always be taken at her word.

²⁹ RAI 710.052486 to Russell, 12 Dec. 1929. Colette's theatre career had begun at the Duke of York's in the West End of London in a French play in 1914. She had a crisis about her acting ability in 1919 over her role as Helen in *The Trojan Women*. She left the West End and spent much of her later career in touring companies. But in the autumn of 1921 she was appearing as Mrs. Otherly in *Abraham Lincoln* at the Lyceum. She finished that engagement and went almost immediately into another West End play. Her career ended in 1932 with a tour of the Middle East in a company led by Lewis Casson and Sybil Thorndike. Russell generally had a negative view of acting as a profession.

³⁰ RA3 .200753.
