

TWO BEST MOMENTS IN THE BERTRAND RUSSELL ARCHIVES¹

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The author describes two outstanding moments in his work with Russell's archives, over a period of 52 years, from readying them for sale in London to curating them at McMaster University. The highlights were being hired for the Russell Archives at McMaster and adoption of the correspondence catalogue by the University Library from its maintenance and development as a post-retirement project.

A short 50 years ago I was no longer employed by Bertrand Russell's literary agent but was still working in the Russell Archives in London. I was pursuing my bibliography of Russell, thanks to a Canada Council grant. The news came that William Ready, University Librarian and Professor of Bibliography at McMaster University in Ontario, had purchased the Archives. Panic-stricken, I redoubled my efforts to research the Archives for bibliographical leads. I intended to pursue them on my own, for I could not assume I would see the Archives again. Then I had my interview with Mr. Ready and was hired to be archivist. Presumably it was because I knew the Archives, having worked on the files, the large catalogue² and Russell's *Autobiography*, and because I could eventually offer the Library a completed bibliography.³ That was a first best moment in the Archives because it meant there would be more days in the Archives. After a few years I was made Russell Archivist. I've been reappointed for the fourth time to the honorary position.

Ready was keen to make the Archives widely available. My motivation was comprehensiveness. I had spent a lot of time in the British Library and elsewhere and had discovered hundreds of writings by Russell that weren't in

¹ Revised from a speech at the opening of Russell House, the new home of the Bertrand Russell Archives and Research Centre at McMaster University, 22 June 2018.

² FEINBERG, ed., *The Archives of Bertrand Russell* (1967). It was followed by BLACKWELL and SPADONI, *The Second Archives of Bertrand Russell* (1992).

³ See *B&R*, with HARRY RUJA (1994). The volumes are unnumbered companion volumes of the *Collected Papers*.

his previous bibliography. As a result of majoring in English Literature and Philosophy I was familiar with and admired edited collections of famous authors' public writings and private correspondence. I got to know of institutes based on authors' own archives but not limited by them. Here, in my new job, was an opportunity to grow a collection that would strive to include everything Russell had written, whether represented in his manuscripts, correspondence, variant editions of his books, or periodicals.⁴ It was correct to suspect there were many more such writings awaiting discovery in other institutions or private hands. I devoted graduate theses to Russell's epistemology and ethics, although my goal was not to teach but to understand him better. Writing these helped me become a better research guide to the Archives. Finding new documents takes hard sleuthing, best exemplified by Carl Spadoni when he was Assistant Russell Archivist. There is joy in reading a new manuscript or Russell letter—like the new letter that fell into our laps on June 19th—and seeing how it fits into his life and thought as a whole. After Ready, John Slater and I had done some collecting and planning for an edition, President Harry Thode signed a letter to Lord Russell proposing the *Collected Papers* series.⁵

Eager to publicize the Archives (the *Russell* journal is descended from his newsletter idea), Ready was also keen on publishing a full catalogue of the correspondence. It has finally come about electronically with BRACERS. I had laid detailed plans for this item-level calendaring in a library school paper, but it didn't get going until computers reached desktops and Charlotte Stewart, head of Research Collections and subsequently University Librarian, directed me to start the project. Ready had wanted the Archives to be able to provide documented answers to all manner of questions on what Russell discussed, believed and advocated. Some of that was achieved in BRACERS.⁶ To attempt topical access requires Russell's curator to read his writings. I want indexes and electronic access to his text as much as anyone, but understanding Russell's ideas and their philosophical, mathematical, political, historical, literary and biographical backgrounds helps immensely in dealing with researchers. A humble archivist cannot keep up with Russell's wish, "I long to know all human life and all history and everything", as he told Lady Ottoline Morrell in 1912;⁷ but the time spent reading him is not wasted professionally.

A second best moment in the Archives was, therefore, not when Elizabeth Ramsden Eames connected six consecutive *Monist* articles with the missing chapters of the *Theory of Knowledge* manuscript, when Andrew Brink, Nick

⁴ See my "The Future of the Bertrand Russell Archives" (1976).

⁵ The letter is dated 29 October 1969 (RA3 Rec. Acq. 1,343).

⁶ See my "BRACERS (III)" (1995). See also my "Doing Archival History with BRACERS" (2003).

⁷ Letter 563, pmk/2 Sept. 1912, Morrell papers, U. of Texas at Austin; copy in RA3 Rec. Acq. 69.

Griffin, Richard Rempel, John Slater and I received news of a major SSHRC grant for the *Collected Papers*, or when Bernie Linsky and I simultaneously recognized three recycled half-leaves of the manuscript of *Principia Mathematica*;⁸ rather, it was when University Librarian Vivian Lewis agreed to the migration of BRACERS to a Library server. After trained staff had moved on, the Bertrand Russell Archives Catalogue Entry and Research System had become my retirement project, later assisted by Sheila Turcon and with David Blitz helping to put it on the web. Still on an ancient mainframe, the database could have been about to die, or at least cut loose from its Library moorings with the mainframe's decommissioning in 2014. Now at 131,600 records of individual letters to, from and about Russell, and with thousands more to be entered from the Russell Peace Foundation accrual called "Russell Archives 4", BRACERS is capable of much more than an annotated record of what we and other institutions have. It has space for digitizing the original documents. It could handle the bibliography, manuscripts, tapes and photographs. It can store sizeable quantities of text. Indeed, researchers should have a single place in which to search, not only our holdings, but Russell's words generally. The Russell Research Centre's project of *The Brixton Letters* is an integrated outgrowth of BRACERS. The *Brixton* standards will be applied to the *Collected Letters* project. Digitizing, transcribing and annotating the correspondence will have three benefits: remote access for researchers, conservation of the originals, and searchability of the text. Publishing a record of the holdings will surely lead to discovering even more Russell documents—a fourth benefit.

Until the documents have all been found and made accessible, I hope there will be future Russell Archivists who won't rest in this inviting new facility appropriately designated Russell House.

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⁸ "New Manuscript Leaves and the Printing ... of *Principia Mathematica*" (2005).