

Reviews

FRANK RUSSELL: A WHOLE FROM THE PARTS

WILLIAM BRUNEAU

Educational Studies / U. of British Columbia

Vancouver, BC, Canada V6T 1Z4

WILLIAM.BRUNEAU@GMAIL.COM

Ruth Derham. *Bertrand's Brother: the Marriages, Morals and Misdemeanours of Frank, 2nd Earl Russell*. Stroud, Gloucs.: Amberley Publishing, 2021. Pp. 351. 40 illust. £24.05; CDN\$50.02; US\$39.95 (hb). ISBN: 978-1-3981-02835; 978-1-3981-0284 2 (ebook).

Hermes (Mercury in Roman usage) was the god of writers, boundary-crossers, and thieves.¹ Biographers might thank Hermes when they “borrow” another’s life for a short while, crossing psychological and logistical boundaries to write that life. Hermes may provide the inspiration, but his adepts must do the composing, travelling, and ... thieving.

Ruth Derham’s biography of Frank Russell is within the hermetic tradition, bar the larceny. She gives an integrated picture of Frank, filling in the blanks left by his autobiography, *My Life and Adventures* (1923). That autobiography is a study in discontinuity, 348 pages in 36 chapters. He salts his commentary on the folly of humankind with shorter discussions on the follies of Frank Russell.

Frank’s education had been planned by his parents, John and Kate Amberley, on radically liberal lines. There was to be no religious practice or instruction. Even as a small boy, Frank (and Bertie) would have freedom and the right to learn from experience. Frank was given a tutor who agreed on these essentials. Frank quickly acquired a taste for personal liberty.

This happy circumstance would not last. Frank’s (and Bertie’s) mother, Kate (née Stanley) (b. 1842) and sister Rachel (b. 1868), died in 1874. “Johnny,” the children’s father (b. 1842), died in 1876. Frank was eight years old when his mother and sister died, ten years old at his father’s death. Bertie

¹ ALLEN, *Hermes* (2018), esp. ch. 1, pp. 23–38. Allen suggests that the list of Hermetic professions could be extended indefinitely, but surely would include biographers.

was three. Frank knew his parents well enough to remember them as persons, not just exemplars of family tradition.

Frank thought his taste for technical inquiry and experiment was stimulated by the natural environment of Ravenscroft, not just by the happy accident of his having two freethinking parents.² “I think I must always have had an engineering kind of mind because, although I was only eleven when I left the place, for twenty years afterwards I could have drawn accurately every part of the house and every path and landmark in the grounds.... Chemistry I think I must have almost entirely taught myself [as a boy] from a text-book called “Harcourt and Madan”... although of course we did have science lectures of a sort both at Cheam and at Winchester” (*My Life*, pp. 2, 330).

With the death of his parents, original plans for Frank and Bertie’s education went out the window. Now Frank’s (and Bertie’s) grandparents took on parental duties. The reduced family moved in 1876 from Ravenscroft near Trelleck to Pembroke Lodge in Richmond, London.

After the death in 1878 of Frank’s grandfather, Lord John, Frank was sent (1878) to Cheam preparatory school and then to Winchester (1879–83). Derham writes that “[t]he structure and hierarchy within [Winchester] was logical to Frank. The warden was responsible for business and the prefects for discipline, leaving the masters free to teach without the additional burden of having to police the boys” (Derham, p. 42). Under the prefect system, junior boys were *fagged*, “ordered to do chores for seniors and ... punished for not doing them.” School activities typically occurred in communal fashion. The school did its best to dominate the mental and social lives (all Winchester boys were boarders).

It was paradoxical that Frank’s beloved Winchester, his permanent spiritual home, should simultaneously embody deep structure and intellectual freedom. The paradox suited him. Derham presents the paradox well but doesn’t entirely explain it.

Derham argues, as did Frank, that he was shaped by the structure of Winchester School (the prefecture) and, even more, by friendships he made while there. Of those friends, Lionel Johnson (1867–1902) was likely the most influential. Frank was impressed by Johnson’s achievement but even more by Johnson’s “purity of mind” and purpose.

Then as now, Winchester was an elite destination for boys from great British families and the higher reaches of the civil and military services. Few social barriers stood between boys who had intellectual, artistic, or athletic interests, since they had so much in common. Frank’s links with Johnson were lasting and sincere enough that Frank would in 1919 edit and arrange for the

² See especially TURCON’s “Ravenscroft, 1872–1876” in her *The Homes of Bertrand Russell*; also “Pembroke Lodge, 1876–1894” in *The Homes*.

publication of a group of Lionel Johnson's Winchester letters, seventeen years after Johnson's early death.³

Derham says Frank was a middling student at Winchester. Yet he had enduring, idealized relations with Johnson and other Wykehamist friends—for literary and intellectual reasons. There was more to Frank than met the casual eye or indeed his own eye. According to Frank, there were also “mystical” reasons, possibly of the kind Bertie later described in “The Free Man's Worship” (1903).⁴

Frank did well enough in Latin, Greek, French, and English to pass pretty easily the entrance examinations for Oxford in 1883. He had intellectual friends, decent classics, and stubborn energy. Did Plato and Homer mean something to Frank other than routine translation or simple construal? In debate, was Frank at all influenced by Cicero's example? It was usual in classics forms in the 1890s to memorize whole sections of the Catilinian Orations. We know from Christopher Stray and others that classical studies were supposed to shape minds, to make philosophers and kings.⁵ Did Winchester curricula and pedagogy have these ends in view? We know they did, but how did Winchester live up to the classics' promise? Derham gives clues, but perhaps more could be done on this front.

Which came first, school or family? Questions of this sort have long stimulated biographers and shaped their books, particularly with the rise of the new social history and the popularity (however temporary) of psychobiography in the 1990s and the early aughts.⁶

But after Winchester came one of Frank's misdemeanours. In May 1885, after two happy years at Oxford, Frank was sent down from Balliol College. North Americans would say he was “suspended”. There had been a disagreement between the master of Balliol, Benjamin Jowett, and the young Frank Russell, then finishing his second year in the Arts course (Derham, pp. 56ff.).

Although hard evidence is wanting, it seems Frank may have invited and allowed a longstanding Winchester College friend, possibly Lionel Johnson, to stay overnight with him in College. Under Balliol rules, that invitation was unacceptable except with Dr. Jowett's advance permission. Frank was, as

³ [FRANK RUSSELL, anon. ed.,] *Some Winchester Letters of Lionel Johnson* (1919). Frank knew Stanley Unwin, the publisher, from the war years. From 1916, Allen and Unwin were Bertie's usual publisher in Britain. Frank had dealt with Allen and Unwin during Bertie's 1918 imprisonment. The 1919 contract for *Some Winchester Letters* may have grown out of those wartime dealings. See also DERHAM AND GREEN, “A Winchester Letter of Santayana: a New Letter to Lionel Johnson” (2019).

⁴ B. RUSSELL, “The Free Man's Worship” (1903); 4 in *Papers* 12.

⁵ STRAY, *Classics Transformed* (1998); McCULLOCH, *Philosophers and Kings* (1991).

⁶ T. SCHULZ, ed., *Handbook of Psychobiography* (2005); SMITH, “Biographical Method” (1994), pp. 286–305; BENASSAR, “La biographie, un genre historique retrouvé” (2003); and SHEETS-PENSON, “New Directions for Scientific Biography” (1990).

always, stubborn. He and Jowett parted ways.⁷ Nevertheless Frank said many times that his two years at Oxford were the happiest and best of his life. He left, returning only occasionally to the city but not to the University of Oxford.

This is a scant outline of the Frank–Jowett dust-up. Derham’s attention to details of these events yields two chapters and several thousand words. But in so doing and writing, she has cleared up some of the fog that settled over these Oxford events almost as soon as they occurred.

The same is true *a fortiori* of Derham’s lengthy descriptions of Frank’s and his wives’ later involvements in various divorce courts. Readers may occasionally feel lost in detail. The divorce court chapters are long.

Yet given the importance to Frank of those legal proceedings, and considering how little we know about the workings of the British court system 125 years ago, Derham is right to be leisurely—and detail-oriented. Her writing is accessible, her sense of humour laudable. Derham’s book begins with a four-page description of the precise physical layout of the 1901 jury organized in the House of Lords to adjudge Frank’s guilt or innocence of the charge (bigamy). The decision to put this story at the front of the book reminds one of the French phrase *crever l’abcès* (lance the boil). Derham knew Frank’s marital problems would be front-of-mind for many readers: better to portray the mechanics of the matter as vividly as possible, saving the explanatory bits for later (as it turns out, in chapter 19, “A Jury of His Peers,” pp. 226–32).

Derham’s points still stand: family and education explain Frank’s psychology, motivation, and *modus operandi*, like his three marriages and two divorces.

Frank was the political result of the union of two families. Both were committed to reform, however different their temperaments. Frank and Bertie agreed on this reading of family history. There were the patient and vaguely mystical Russells, Lord John at their head. Then there were the many members of the Stanley clan, noisy and in a hurry.⁸ Most (but not all) of Frank and Bertie’s uncles, aunts, and cousins were impatient with outdated tradition, allergic to received dogma (religious dogma especially), pluralist and liberal, yet anxious to make their views prevail in politics and practice.⁹

In these ways, Frank and Bertrand were alike. They saw themselves as complementary, even during long spells when they had no reason to collaborate on public or private affairs. Bertie saw himself as a Russell,

⁷ DERHAM, “‘A Very Improper Friend’: the Influence of Jowett and Oxford on Frank Russell” (2017).

⁸ For this family background, PREST, *Lord John Russell* (1972) remains an outstanding source. It is still the best biographical authority for Lord John and succeeds partly because of its closely detailed description balanced by judicious explanation. Machinations of high Victorian politics are as interesting on p. 421 as they were at p. 1.

⁹ Among Frank Russell’s Stanley uncles and aunts was Henry, about whom see GILHAM, “Britain’s First Muslim Peer of the Realm” (2013).

temperamentally speaking, and Frank thought he was mainly a Stanley, stubborn, willful, over-insistent on his rights, but aware he was not alone in the world. Ruth treats Frank's difficult marital history as evidence that the child was the father of the man.

After Oxford, Frank had not yet reached the age of twenty-one and had to rely on the trustees of his inheritance to provide him with funds to cover a planned trip to the United States. He received £400, enough in 1885 to pay for travel from Britain, thence across the northern USA and back on a southern route, accompanied by his last tutor. Derham provides the first clear map (p. 76) I have seen of this journey. At one point in this American trip, Frank made the acquaintance of George Santayana, the influential Spanish philosopher then in early career at Harvard. Santayana would soon return to live permanently in Europe, continuing as Frank's close friend and writing three insightful chapters about Frank in his autobiographical *Persons and Places*.¹⁰

Within a year of his return, Frank had purchased a steam-driven yacht—the *Royal*—and carried out sailing trips (autumn 1887 and later) from safe harbour in England to the Mediterranean and back via the French canal systems. Frank was in an adventurous mood, and after he passed his twenty-first year of life, he inherited first about £20,000 (as did Bertie), but also, as the eldest Russell son, the Irish estate that would accommodate his “adventures”. In 1903 he sold that estate for £31,800. Using those funds, Frank made further investments in the Globe & Phoenix Gold Mining Company of Rhodesia (£2,000 a year for his work as a director) and in the Humber [Motor Vehicle] Limited Company (Derham, p. 252). His income was enough to enable reconstruction and renovation of Telegraph House, Frank's beloved getaway country estate in the Sussex Downs.

We come to Frank's second major misdemeanour. Frank was sentenced in the summer of 1901 to three months' imprisonment in H.M. Holloway Prison for “felonious bigamy”. His imprisonment affected his life as Bertie's 1918 imprisonment in Brixton Prison did his. In 1918, when Bertie found himself in jail for his work as a leader of the movement for conscientious objection to military conscription, Frank was one of Bertie's regular conduits for letters and communications with the outside world.¹¹

But Frank's imprisonment resulted from a legal “accident”, not because he acted on high moral principle (except the principle that one should be able to divorce a spouse for mutually agreed reasons). Frank wanted desperately to be divorced from his first wife, Mabel Edith Scott (1869–1908), following ten

¹⁰ SANTAYANA, *Persons and Places* (1987). Cf. DERHAM, “Ideal Sympathy? The Unlikely Friendship of George Santayana and Frank, 2nd Earl Russell” (2018).

¹¹ For the Brixton letters and other communications, and Frank's involvement, see BERTRAND RUSSELL, *The Brixton Letters* (2018), online only.

years of legal trouble and expense. Frank and his future second wife (Mollie Somerville) travelled to Nevada to reside for six months, planning to obtain a Nevadan divorce. Frank and Mollie could then marry under Nevadan law. Soon after his return to Britain, Frank was arrested for bigamy. Under British law, his Nevadan marriage was binding but not his Nevadan divorce. He was not only living in sin but living bigamously. His trial had to be conducted in the House of Lords with a jury of his peers. The whole event was covered extensively in the press. In the public mind, this was Frank's second memorable misdemeanour.

Because they were Russells, Frank and Bertie were not undone—professionally speaking—by their conviction and imprisonment. Frank continued as a member of his London clubs and as a peer in the House of Lords. Bertie was offered but did not take up the Trinity lectureship, withdrawn in 1916 at the height of his work for the conscientious objectors. Like most members of the landed gentry¹² and the aristocracy, it was possible for Frank and Bertie to live on, even to thrive after events like these, exhausting and distracting though they were.

Frank had a reputation by the turn of the twentieth century as an unreliable marriage partner. His romantic entanglements went well beyond the three women to whom he was variously married. Frank had been able to manage the entanglements, given his social standing. Derham gives a clear and complete account of the three wives, and adds enormously to received wisdom about the third and most exotic, “Elizabeth” von Arnim. Peter Bartrip's articles touch only briefly on the tale of Frank's marriage to Elizabeth von Arnim, concerned as Bartrip is with other matters (mostly legal) in Frank's technical-coloured life.¹³ With the publication of *Bertrand's Brother*, the background and foreground of von Arnim's failed marriage to Frank are clarified at last. Von Arnim would have us believe that Frank was interested in playing cards, controlling his wife's behaviour, and exerting arbitrary authority in the household. He was hardly interested in maintaining an equitable and equable relation between marriage partners. Frank was unconvinced by von Arnim's views. Frank was therefore surprised and upset when Elizabeth left him without warning, “escaping” to North America. An effort to resurrect the marriage failed in 1919. Derham gives a balanced account of the episode, showing how the formalization of Frank's lengthy affair with Elizabeth had been a disastrous mistake.

¹² Cf. THOMPSON, *English Landed Society in the Nineteenth Century* (2005) for the social standing of families one rung down from the Russells. See also SEARLE, *A New England? Peace and War 1886–1918* (2004), pp. 36–114, on schooling and patriotism, gender, class, and social stratification in England during most of Frank's adult life.

¹³ BARTTRIP, “A Talent to Alienate: the 2nd Earl (Frank) Russell” (2012), and “Russell, John Francis Stanley [Frank], second Earl Russell (1865–1931)” (2013); online ed.

Derham's book includes 40 carefully reproduced family photographs, engravings, and cartoons. About half the illustrations will be new to students of Bertrand Russell. The images and graphics raise questions Derham's readers will be able to answer, having read her work. For instance, there are four photographs of Mollie Sommerville Russell, Frank's second wife. They tell four different stories. Most early twentieth-century people had at best a photograph or two to memorialize them.

The illustrations are fine, the index less so. Brixton Prison, where Bertie spent nearly six months in 1918, isn't there. Nor is H.M. Holloway Prison, where Frank spent three months in 1901. The entry for Bertrand Russell is a long list of page numbers without sub-headings, not much use to the reader. Ordinarily, the publisher is responsible for the creation of an index. The index is often the very last, painful step in the making of a book. One feels sympathy for Derham, confronted as she may have been with this last-minute but important task.

There are grammatical oddities here and there. The manuscript has been consistently edited in most but not all places. The last line of page 294 contains an ungrammatical definite article. There are a few more such cases.

Returning to the content of *Bertrand's Brother*, readers may still ask the lead question of this review: how do Frank's experiences and "adventures" lead from one to the next? Did Frank have an organized "theory" of politics and justice, as his brother Bertrand had and did, a theory that would make Frank's biography coherent? Or is his life best understood in psychological terms, as Frank Manuel saw Isaac Newton or the way Freud saw Leonardo da Vinci?¹⁴

Bertie thought his life would be driven by philosophical curiosity, political conviction, and a desire for personal connections with friends and lovers. By contrast, Frank wrote (*My Life*, pp. 2, 369) that he had always been an engineer under the skin, not a philosopher. Is this too easy? Were there philosophical bones under Frank's skin?

His *Lay Sermons* and book on divorce display Frank's capacity for brief analyses of concepts (freedom and justice, science and wisdom, education—an entire sermon on the latter topic), sin and redemption, all in an utterly agnostic perspective, all aimed at a variety of legal and social reforms. Derham implies Frank was no Bertie.

And yet: Frank's published output included over two dozen short and sharp articles on motoring and traffic, on marriage (no surprise there), on electrical and electronic matters—all accounted for in Derham's fine bibliography.¹⁵ To

¹⁴ MANUEL, *A Portrait of Isaac Newton* (1958). Compare the much less "psychologized" study of Newton by WESTFALL, *Never at Rest* (1983). For da Vinci, see SIGMUND FREUD, *Leonardo da Vinci: a Psychosexual Study of an Infantile Reminiscence* (1989).

¹⁵ DERHAM, "Frank Russell's Diverse Writing ... Career" (2021). This includes a listing of Frank's letters to *The Times*, *Automobile Club Journal*, *Daily News*, and so on.

these one should add the press reports of his speeches to Liberal Party associations and organs, then to women's rights groups (notably his talks to the Women's Freedom League, the Sussex Men's League, the Women Writers' Suffrage League, and the Men's League for Women's Suffrage), and finally to left-leaning causes as Frank turned after 1910 to socialist politics. Frank's advocacy of birth control and contraception was sufficiently advanced to attract the attention of Marie Stopes.

Frank's publications show a public commitment to progressive causes going back to the early 1890s. Derham includes a photograph of an 1898 campaign brochure advertising Frank's progressive record (from Hammersmith, London; see Derham's illustration 26). Perhaps one can infer a theory behind the politics and furthermore an ethical position.

By the same token, it is tempting to see in Frank's business activity, always in fields of applied science (mining, telephony, internal combustion and steam engines, and so on) a partial "idea" of science.

It is possible to see Frank and Bertie as complementary. The final question is, did either brother see it this way?

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