

## My father Bertrand Russell

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July 3, 2004

Children of famous parents seldom show any particular distinction, and the only daughter of Bertrand Russell is no exception. The memoir written some five years after the death of her father is an attempt to describe what it was like to have had such a father. Thus the reader is invited to expect a certain titillating kind of gossip, unofficial views and peculiar perspectives, bound to fascinate. However, the book is rather short on revelations, especially of the piquant sort, and provides instead a brief overview of the latter part of the famous philosophers life.

It starts out charmingly with a vignette of the family arriving in Paddington station for their annual summer vacation trip to their house in Cornwall. Russell is the master of the situation, organising the disposal of luggage, getting tickets, buying a detective story for himself and comics for the children, and seeking out an empty compartment, instructing the children to discourage the intrusion of fellow passengers by making funny faces.

The summer holidays in Cornwall are painted with the kind of blissful nostalgia that you expect from the reminiscences of early childhood adventures. The parents appear rather aloof entertaining visitors, indulging their work and employing an extensive domestic staff including gardeners. Both of the parents were championing a more egalitarian society but while at its work they were taking advantage of the situation into which they had been born. The subsequent sojourn at Telegraph Hill and the experimental school run by her parents was a more mixed experience, furthering the childrens estrangement from their parents and being concluded by the bitter split up of the latter and the dismantling of the school.

A reader of Monks biography recognises many incidents described in that book, some of which probably were the original sources for the former. Much has been made of the cold and insensitive upbringing of the children based on specious theories of child education and rigidly implemented as being a likely source for the eventual mental breakdown of the oldest child in his early adulthood. But Russell himself is attributed with an even worse upbringing, (at least in the eyes of the author, although reading his Autobiography I do not find this corroborated) although he did not suffer undebilatingly from it in his adulthood. One thing is clear that the daughter was in constant awe of her father, there was no way you could get the better of him in an argument; he was sharp, he was quick and besides in order to buttress he had an almost unlimited font of knowledge to draw from. Always rational, always reasonable, there never was the possibility of the normal adolescent rebellion, as in fact Russell himself, in his policy of encouraging independent thinking and argument, forestalled any rebellion. Thus her father, by temperament and personality, remained closed to her, and in spite of their relationship of blood, she was, like any other person, thrown back to his Autobiography in order to find a window to his mind. An image sticks to her. Her father at work. His back straight, his concentration unperturbed, covering page after page with neat handwriting, never fidgeting, crossing out,

or crumpling a paper; knowing exactly all the time what he wanted to do. And then the sudden interruption, the break, the tea, holding the hot cup with both hands. And the pipe of course. A regular smoker of eighty years, a habit surviving intact throughout the vicissitudes of his life, testifying to the fact that our habits are the most intimate of our associations.

In later years when she was having psychological problems she consulted the writings of her father but was unable to find any guidance nor consolation, as he always attributed personal unhappiness to a repressed upbringing, in fact the very opposite of what he had imposed on his own progeny. Characteristically she was as a teenager able to breach sexual matters with him frankly, however, without achieving the natural intimacy such a frankness would ordinarily be seen as a symptom of. Russell was never comfortable with intimacy, always preferring the impersonal and the permanent. With women he was never constant, once his interest flogged there was nothing, and he could discard without sentimentality. In fact everything seemed to be viewed in terms of absolutes, there never were to be any half measures.

And then Russell the outspoken critic of religion was eventually to witness her late conversion to Christianity. What remained in the end was the tepidity of mutual good-will and a concomitant politeness, nourished by financial largeness on the part of Russell. His death in many ways overdue nevertheless seemed to be a big shock to her. In the very end of her memoirs she describes her father as the most fascinating man she had ever known. And his opposition to religion she explains as the ironic twist of a man who was really acting the part of a prophet, rallying against the folly of his contemporaries, and whose greatest passion was for the search of certainty, which can be conceived as a search for God in disguise.

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