

*Bertrand Russell 1921-1970: The Ghost of Madness*

Ray Monk

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'Poor Bertie' Beatrice Webb wrote after receiving a visit from Bertrand Russell in 1931, 'he has made a mess of his life and he knows it'. In the 1931 version of his *Autobiography*, Russell himself seemed to share Webb's estimate of his achievements. Emotionally, intellectually and politically, he wrote, his life had been a failure. This sense of failure pervades the second volume of Ray Monk's engrossing and insightful biography. At its heart is the failure of Russell's marriages to Dora Black and Patricia (Peter) Spence, his poor relationships with his children John and Kate, and the decline in his reputation as a philosopher. Russell, who had changed the direction of philosophy irrevocably, was in later years unable to find permanent academic employment in Britain, ousted from his professorship at the City College of New York because of his views on sex and marriage, and was reduced to giving non-specialist lectures at a foundation established by the Philadelphia philanthropist Albert C. Barnes. Eventually in 1944 he returned to Cambridge, but by then the philosophical world was in the grip of Ludwig Wittgenstein's ideas, and Russell was largely ignored.

Yet recent history has been kind to Russell, and whatever he may have felt in 1931, his reputation as one of the Twentieth Century's unquestionably great philosophers is secure. This reputation is based on his work on the foundations of mathematics, logic, metaphysics and the theory of knowledge, that was written well before the period covered by this volume. Russell's period of great achievement in

philosophy was all but over by 1921. This was partly a result of the intellectual exhaustion he felt after completing, with A.N. Whitehead, the massive *Principia Mathematica* in 1913, and partly a result of the devastating criticisms his work had received from Wittgenstein, his former student. These criticisms caused Russell in 1913 to abandon a large philosophical book he was preparing for publication, and he gradually lost confidence in the view of mathematics expounded in the *Principia*. It is arguable that the best book he wrote after 1921 was his *Autobiography*.

Russell did not make a habit of abandoning books he was preparing for publication. In the forty-nine years covered here, he published almost fifty books (and a vast number of articles) on moral, historical and political subjects. As Monk remarks, most of this work is of poor quality. Russell had strong opinions and a fluent literary style, but little skill in political or historical analysis. His political works are marred by his preference for broad, *a priori* generalisations about human behaviour and a striking lack of concern for the messy empirical details of political reality (somewhat ironic in the century's greatest empiricist). Russell wanted to change the world, but his proposals for changing it were vague and impractical. Monk wryly comments, 'saying "War should be abolished" is not a contribution, either to the theory of war or to its abolition; nor is saying "people should be more reasonable" a large step in making them so'. Reading Monk's careful summaries of these political and moral works it is hard not to see the point in Wittgenstein's ponderous quip that Russell's works should be bound in two colours, 'those dealing with mathematical logic in red – and all students of philosophy should read them; those dealing with ethics and politics in blue – and no-one should be allowed to read them'.

So why did Russell write all this junk? Part of the explanation is financial: the second half of his life was filled with the constant need to earn money to pay for his

unpredictably extending family. Monk tells the tragic story of Russell's family in absorbing detail, some of it painful to read. Many aspects of this part of his life deserve to be called failures. But to understand why Russell is still valued as a philosopher, the reader should return to Monk's excellent first volume, *The Spirit of Solitude*.

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