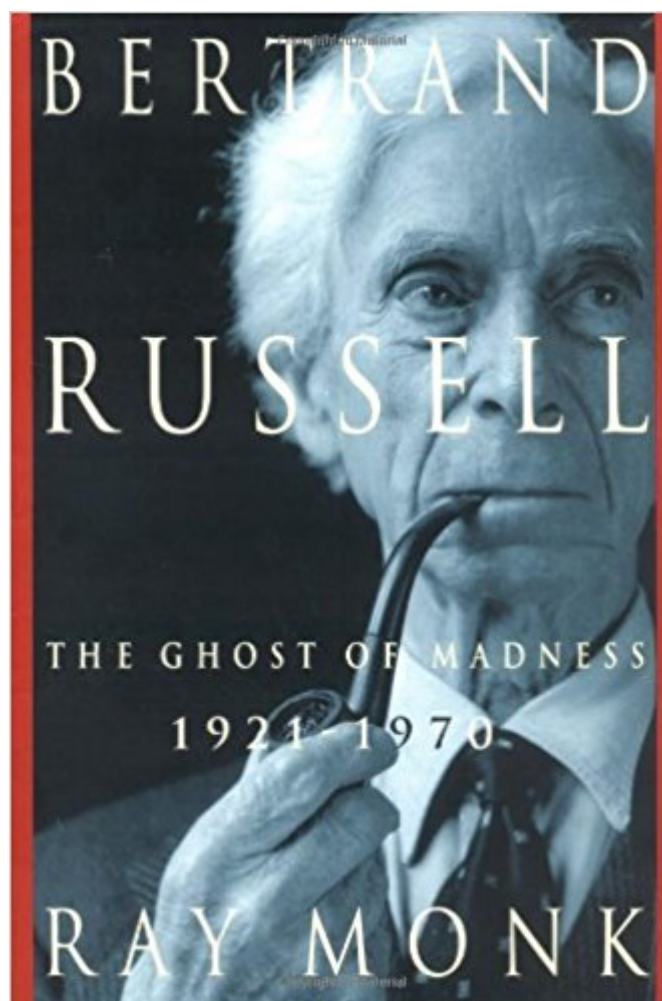


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Bertrand Russell: 1921-1970, The Ghost Of Madness



Synopsis

In the second half of his life, Bertrand Russell transformed himself from a major philosopher, whose work was intelligible to a small elite, into a political activist and popular writer, known to millions throughout the world. Yet his life is the tragic story of a man who believed in a modern, rational approach to life and who, though his ideas guided popular opinion throughout the twentieth century, lost everything. Russell's views on marriage, religion, education, and politics attracted legions of devoted followers and, at the same time, provoked harsh attacks from every direction. On the one hand, he was stripped of his post at New York's City College because he was thought to be a bad influence on his students, and on the other, he was awarded the Order of Merit, the Nobel Prize in literature, and a lifetime Fellowship of Trinity College, Cambridge. He lived to be ninety-seven, and as he became older he became increasingly controversial. Monk quotes Russell's telegrams to Kennedy and Khrushchev during the Cuban missile crisis, an influence that Russell and his followers believed tipped the balance toward peace. Russell devoted his last years to a campaign organized by his secretary to lend support to Che Guevara's call for a globally coordinated revolutionary struggle against "U.S. imperialism." Until now, this last campaign has been misunderstood as a -- perhaps misguided, but nevertheless innocent -- plea for world peace. Monk reveals it was no such thing. Drawing on thousands of documents collected at the Russell archives in Canada, Monk steers through the turbulence of Russell's public activities, scrutinizing his sometimes paradoxical and often outrageous pronouncements. Monk's focus, however, is on the tragedy of Russell's personal life, and in revealing this inner drama Monk has relied heavily on the cooperation of Russell's surviving relatives and access to previously unexamined legal and private correspondence. A central player in Russell's life was his first son, John. Russell applied the methods of the new science of child psychology in his parenting, believing that a new generation of children could be reared to be "independent, fearless, and free." But instead of being a model of this new generation, John became anxious, withdrawn, and eventually schizophrenic. Nor was John's daughter Lucy (who was Russell's favorite grandchild) to be a model of the new generation; gradually she grew so emotionally disturbed that, at the age of twenty-six, she took her own life. "The Ghost of Madness" completes the most searching examination yet published of Bertrand Russell's unique life and work. Together with Ray Monk's highly praised first volume of the biography, "The Spirit of Solitude," this is the classic account of an extraordinary man who championed the great ideas of the twentieth century and was all but destroyed by them. It is a portrait of the mind of a century.

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Customer Reviews

This rich, variegated biography (Monk's second and final volume after *The Spirit of Solitude, 1872-1921*) starts off on a happy note for Russell, with his second marriage (of four) and the longed-for birth of a son. Unfortunately, from that point on, things only go downhill for him emotionally. Throughout his life, Russell (1873-1970) felt that he might go insane. He believed very much in romantic love but was apparently incapable of truly loving anyone. This emotional insecurity led him to multiple liaisons outside of his marriages (at the age of 64, his third marriage was to a 20-year-old) and strained relationships with his two children. Particularly upsetting to Russell was the homosexuality of his son, since he was on record as saying that homosexuality was the consequence of bad parenting. These domestic problems aside, Monk does a marvelous job of covering the highlights of the last half of Russell's long life: his Nobel prize in literature, the Russell-Einstein Manifesto against nuclear proliferation, his imprisonment for antinuclear protests, his social and political philosophy, and his contributions to logic and analytic philosophy. Highly recommended for academic and public library collections. Leon H. Brody, U.S. Office of Personnel Management Lib., Washington, DC Copyright 2001 Reed Business Information, Inc.

One of the great logicians of modern times, Bertrand Russell lived a life that defies all syllogisms. In the second volume of what is sure to establish itself as the definitive biography, Monk lays bare the strange paradoxes that bedeviled the great philosopher during the last six decades of his very long life. Careful scholarship shreds the illusion of success created by Russell's elevation to the Order of Merit and by his surprising selection for a Nobel Prize in literature. What then stands exposed is the

conceptual confusion that increasingly clogged Russell's public pronouncements in his later years, as well as the personal betrayals that poisoned his private life. It is thus a figure of tragedy not triumph that Monk limns in this nuanced chronicle, recounting how Russell lost his grip on serious philosophy, squandered his literary gifts in hack journalism, repeatedly failed in his marital and parental relationships, and embarrassed himself in his politics. To be sure, it is still a modern titan that Monk shows his readers--one who deflected the lives of Einstein, Eliot, and Trotsky. But it is a titan who ascended to the pantheon shrouded in shadows of pathos. Sure to endure as a standard reference for decades. Bryce Christensen Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved

Having read "Wittgenstein", then vol 1 of this biography, this was a natural and exciting follower. I certainly have to wonder what connection there is to a life associated, at least ab initio, with mathematics and failure in one's personal life. Considering the connection between logic, mathematics, and reasoning, and our need for success with those to be successful in one's life in general, this certainly brings up an issue of a golden mean between extremes. It perhaps also brings up an issue of autism and the genetic predisposition to autism as a range of autism might on one hand lead to outstanding mathematical accomplishment accompanied by outstanding social failure. It is such a shame that such a great mind would give up such important work for lack of - self discipline? Self control? A family madness? Most telling I thought was the quote given in response to the question "Why did you give up philosophy?" Since his response is shocking but stabs to the heart of the personal difficulties experienced by BR and successfully passed on to almost all of his children and grandchildren one has to wonder was this nurture or nature. A clue seems to be the success of those who had the earliest and longest break in contact. The less contact the more success? Perhaps an errata sheet should be made available regarding the apparent deleted words. One sentence especially seemed to need "not" to make sense in context, but in general I found my reading to be abruptly halted with the awareness of a word missing - in a context where I could know precisely what word would have been right. I half wonder if RM was using a new word processor or something? I did not notice this at all with vol. 1. Regardless, of all the things worth reading this will always be high on my recommend list. Great philosophers are easier to understand when we know as much as we can about them as persons. Thanks Ray! Eternally grateful.

The biography of Bertrand Russell by Ray Monk is essentially a smear campaign. The following book review by Sylvia Nasar tells it best.....By SYLVIA NASAR - New York Times - April 29, 2001

Bertrand Russell, who was among the 20th century's most influential philosophers and public intellectuals, began his autobiography by declaring, "Three passions, simple but overwhelmingly strong, have governed my life: the longing for love, the search for knowledge and unbearable pity for the suffering of mankind." Thus the author of "Principia Mathematica" and champion of free love and world peace explained his multiple marriages and affairs, towering intellectual achievements and numerous public honors, including a Nobel. Some of his best friends saw him in a less flattering light. "A fervid egoist," Virginia Woolf noted dryly in her diary in 1921, shortly before Russell's 50th birthday -- the halfway mark of what would be a remarkably long life. "A fallen angel with Mephistophelean wit," remarked Beatrice Webb, founder of the London School of Economics, adding, "He may be successful as a litterateur; I doubt whether he will be of value as a thinker, and I am pretty well certain he will not attain happiness." In the second volume of his prodigiously researched and brilliantly narrated biography, "Bertrand Russell: The Ghost of Madness, 1921-1970," Ray Monk, a professor of philosophy at the University of Southampton in England, goes even farther than Russell's contemporaries in deconstructing the iconic sage with the halo of unruly white hair. "His great quality was his unfairness" is the mildest of many barbs repeated by Monk to suggest that the philosopher's professed love for humanity disguised a hatred of most people. The charge of unfairness could apply equally to Monk himself. While accusing Russell of oversimplifying complex issues and caricaturing his opponents, Monk has written an account that reads more like an indictment than a life. Despite his superb grasp of Russell's philosophical work and confident command of the details of Russell's private life, Monk, the author of a sympathetic yet rigorous biography of Ludwig Wittgenstein, is far too convinced of Russell's guilt to do his protean subject justice.

FROM THE ARCHIVES "It may seem curious that the war should rejuvenate anybody, but in fact it shook me out of my prejudices and made me think afresh on a number of fundamental questions . . . "It also provided me with a new kind of activity, for which I did not feel the staleness that beset me whenever I tried to return to mathematical logic. I have therefore got into the habit of thinking of myself as a non-supernatural Faust for whom Mephistopheles was represented by the Great War."-- Bertrand Russell, from his autobiography, quoted in his obituary Feb. 3, 1970

Surveying the eventful second half of the British philosopher's life, Monk maintains that instead of love and pity, "a deep-seated fear of madness and a quite colossal vanity" drove Russell "inexorably" toward "disaster." Not only did Russell waste his intellectual gifts by abandoning highbrow philosophy for hack journalism (and political grandstanding), Monk says, but he caused enough emotional carnage in his own home to make the House of Atreus look like an average dysfunctional family. According to Monk, "loving another was, for him, inconceivable." Russell's

chief victims, he claims, were his son John and his granddaughters Sarah and Lucy -- all of whom suffered from the same devastating mental illness, schizophrenia, that afflicted some of Russell's older relatives. Monk's thesis makes for a compelling story line, but it simply isn't credible -- even on the evidence he supplies. Whatever Russell's flaws -- arrogance, grandiosity, glibness, insensitivity and occasionally hilarious flakiness come to mind -- he was neither as trivial nor as monstrous as Monk would have us believe. Take Monk's first complaint, that Russell churned out gobs of "second-rate journalism" instead of sticking to mathematics and logic. Wittgenstein once said of his former mentor's work, "Russell's books should be bound in two colors, 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." Monk couldn't agree more; "willful shallowness," "wild exaggerations," "crass oversimplifications," "superficiality" and "credulous nonsense" are just a few of his put-downs of Russell's writings of the 20's and 30's. But are newspaper columns meant to be anything but ephemeral? As it happens, Russell turned to freelance writing and the lecture circuit to support his wife and children -- as well as to be able to stay home caring for his young son. And some of Russell's popular work, including "A History of Western Philosophy," was good enough to merit a Nobel Prize in Literature. This cuts no ice with Monk. Monk's cruellest allegation is that Russell's shortcomings as a parent destroyed his son and doomed the granddaughters he and his fourth wife, Edith, raised. One, Sarah, spent "much of her time . . . in psychiatric care," and the other, Lucy, immolated herself five years after Russell's death. Indeed, in a gesture that must be called terminally tacky, Monk uses Lucy's death to point an accusing finger at Russell, calling it, in the book's closing lines, "the final visitation of the ghosts that haunted Russell throughout his life." Monk's vivid rendering of this family tragedy masks the speciousness of his underlying argument. Back in the Freudian 50's and 60's, schizophrenia was widely thought to be a psychological condition for which awful parents were to blame. But that belief has long since been thoroughly discredited by research, and by the efficacy of drug therapy. Both show that schizophrenia is a brain disorder like Alzheimer's or Parkinson's rather than the product of a traumatic "family romance." Not a hint of this is to be found in Monk's volume -- a glaring omission for a decade-long research project. In the book's second chapter, Monk cautions readers that "of course, the links between cause and effect here are very difficult to determine, and one should be wary of attributing John's later misfortunes directly to his upbringing." But Monk exhibits no such wariness. Just a few lines down, he writes: "John did not grow up to be fearless, independent and free, as Russell's theory demanded that he should, but rather inhibited, withdrawn and anxious. It is only in retrospect, however, that we can say: 'No wonder.'" After describing the descent of John,

whose troubles began in elementary school, into full-blown schizophrenia at 33, Monk leaves no doubt as to the cause of his illness. Referring to a nightmare shared by Russell and his granddaughter Lucy, he writes, "What Russell had sensed was a guilty secret of madness in the family; what Lucy had sensed was a hidden murder." Monk goes on to speculate: "Might this not be a metaphor for the feeling that her beloved grandfather had himself a dreadful secret, namely that he had destroyed the life of his son?" Once again, Russell's actions count for very little. That Russell and John's mother, Dora, founded a school largely for their children's benefit, that Russell stayed in a miserable marriage (when his wife had borne two children by another man) to spare his children the pain of divorce, or that Russell provided a home for his troubled son and the son's equally troubled wife for several years doesn't alter Monk's verdict that he was "cold towards those who loved him." He prefers to see Russell as the sole author of his own and his family's misery. "At 41 Queen's Road, therefore, Russell did not just write his 'Autobiography'; he recreated it." Witnessing a parent's grief over a child's devastating illness inspires sympathy in most people. And most people have some sense of the terrible choices that parents face -- choices even bleaker in 1955, when no effective treatments existed. But apparently not Monk. Russell was surely wrong to relegate his son to his ex-wife's care and to refuse further contact with him. But was that so monstrous? He was, not without reason, afraid of his son and determined to shield his granddaughters. For Monk, however, there are no shades of gray. "Dora struggled to cope with John, who was never again able to work or look after himself, and Russell got on with the task of saving humanity," he writes. Monk could just as easily have said, "and Russell got on with the task of caring for his granddaughters" -- but that would have undermined the case he seems determined to make. Unfortunately, Monk's dislike of Russell -- which he says is based largely on the fate of Russell's son and granddaughters -- and his seeming ignorance of the most basic facts about mental illness have skewed his judgment badly. Biographers who despise their subjects are evidently just as much at risk of getting the story wrong as those who worship blindly. Sylvia Nasar, the James S. and John L. Knight professor at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, is the author of "A Beautiful Mind," a biography of the mathematician John Nash.

I have been taken aback by the reviews which state that this book a) depicts Russell as a monster or b) loses "objectivity" through the use of written materials and interviews given by Russell's children and grandchildren. In the first case -- no one is perfect; Russell was an exceptionally amazing human being with remarkable strengths and equally remarkable weaknesses. This by no means makes him a monster -- only human -- and this detailed biography does an outstanding job of

bringing out Russell's extraordinary complexity in all facets of his life. In the second case -- after reading two one-volume biographies of Russell and the memoirs by his second wife Dora Russell and his daughter Katharine Tait -- I thought that I didn't have much more to discover about the entanglements of Russell's personal life. A moment after picking up this book, I found that I had much to learn. The photographs and the text together draw you into a torment of blended (or unblended) families, court battles, mental illness, and noble intent gone horribly wrong. I ended the book with sorrow for all of them. In her memoir, Russell's daughter wrote that, in another age, her father would have been a saint. Some people, during his lifetime, thought of him and even spoke of him as a kind of secular saint. His desire to save the world from itself was exceptionally strong. Reading about the personal tragedy of his family life, I could only think of the saying of St. Seraphim of Sarov: "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and thousands around you will be saved." A peaceful spirit is not something that Russell ever managed to acquire -- and, as a cautionary tale and a deep glimpse into the light and darkness of the human heart -- this biography is highly recommended.

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