

## News and Announcements

### Varia

#### RUSSELL ON UNDERSTANDING THE *PRINCIPIA* – A LITTLE-KNOWN SOURCE

What is the origin of the familiar statement, attributed to Russell, that only six people ever read the entire *Principia Mathematica*, of whom three were Poles?

On the eve of Bertrand Russell's ninetieth birthday, he was interviewed by John Beavan. Beavan's interview, originally printed in the London *Daily Herald* of May 17, 1962, was reproduced in the August 1991 issue of the Russell Society News (no. 71), p. 19. In the introduction to the interview, Beavan characterized Russell as "the greatest logician since Aristotle." This interview is one of the sources of Russell's statement that few people ever understood or completely read the *Principia*.

It arose in response to Beavan's question:

I asked him if he not regret that he is known to most of us only through his ephemeral writings, superb though they often are; that his great work which gives him a firm and important place in the history of thought is understood only by the very few who had gone deeply into mathematics and logic.

Is it not sad that the world knows only the Russell who is the man of passion and prejudice, and not the philosopher?

Russell thought this was a great joke. "Only six people have read through 'Principia Mathematica,' and three of those were Poles."

There is an earlier and more familiar source for this statement – in Russell's intellectual autobiography, *My Philosophical Development* (first published in 1959; reissued: London, Allen & Unwin, 1985, reprinted 1988). In this source, Russell begins a discussion of the mathematical aspects of the *Principia* (p. 66) by asserting that:

I used to know of only six people who had read the later parts of the book. Three of these were Poles, subsequently (I believe) liquidated by Hitler. The other three were Texans, subsequently successfully assimilated.