

Nicholas Griffin (editor), *The Selected Letters of Bertrand Russell*, volume I: *The Private Years, 1884 – 1914*. Boston/New York/London, Houghton Mifflin, 1992. xxii + 553 pp.

Reviewed by

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This is a sizable tome — more than 500 pages long, containing only Bertrand Russell's letters to others over a short but extremely busy and important period of his life. The editor estimates that there are "forty to fifty thousand" letters in the Russell Archives. One can only wonder at how Russell found the time and energy to write such an abundance of letters.

The editor, Nicholas Griffin, is undisputedly one of the leading scholars of Russellian philosophy in the world today, and one can only marvel at the enormous expenditure of research and time that went into the preparation of this one volume alone. Certainly the time and patience that went into preparing this volume requires an *appreciation* for Russell the man; a scholarly interest alone cannot suffice to account for this effort. In fact, to appreciate the motivation of these efforts, we must consider two aspects of Griffin's work, the personal and the philosophical. The personal dates from Griffin's childhood in Britain, when he wrote a letter to Russell (if memory serves, it chided Russell for his anti-Americanism during the period of the war in Vietnam) and which Russell deigned to answer, despite the correspondent's obvious youth. When, as a Russell scholar, Griffin took up his research at the Bertrand Russell Archives at McMaster University, he was pleased to find his youthful letter to Russell among the Russell papers. At the professional level, Griffin was associated with the Bertrand Russell Editioal Project (BREP) for much of its existence. In preparation of BREP's edition of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, material from the Russell correspondence is frequently used to provide historical background information for the writings included in the BREP volumes.

These volumes present much of the shorter (non-booklength) writings of the Russell corpus, published as well as unpublished. But the BREP edition will not include any of the correspondence *per se*. Griffin's aim in the *Selected Letters* is to provide, then, what we can call a "supplement" to the *Collected Papers*, what Griffin (p. vii) calls a "sort of epistolary biography," with the letters bound together into a continuous narrative by Griffin's interpolations between the letters providing the necessary biographical information to place each letter in the context of Russell's life and circumstances. Also useful are Griffin's footnotes, which identify persons, references, etc., that are mentioned, but not always named or identified, in Russell's letters.

Because this is an "epistolary biography," there is little of direct or obvious interest to historians of logic. Griffin deliberately chose to exclude Russell's technical correspondence to fellow logicians, mathematicians, and philosophers. The one *major* exception is Russell's famous letter to Frege of 16 June 1902 [letter 112] telling Frege of having found a paradox as a result of allowing a function to serve as an indeterminate argument of another function in the *Begriffsschrift*. This letter will of course be very familiar already to every historian and philosopher of logic. Griffin included it because, to his "surprise" (p.vii), it was the only letter he could find about the Russell paradox that "was roughly contemporary with Russell's discovery of the paradox" and because the paradox "occupied Russell's thought, for so much of the next decade" that it "could not well be left out." Thus, although the period from 1896 to 1914 was certainly the most significant in Russell's life from the vantage point of philosophy of mathematics and history of logic, there is little source material of interest in the *Selected Letters* for either philosophers of mathematics or historians of logic. Little, but not none.

If the volumes of the *Collected Papers* covering the years 1896 to 1913 that contain Russell's technical writings are the mother lode of the Russellian corpus for historians and philosophers of mathematics of logic, then this volume of *Selected Letters* is the mountain of tailings left behind after the mother lode has been exhausted, most of the letters being exceptionally uninteresting daily prattle. That does not mean that the researcher willing to diligently sift through the dross with the aid of the book's index will not find gold dust, or even a few scattered nuggets — although granting that bits and pieces of some of these letters have already appeared elsewhere (e.g. in Lowe's biography of Whitehead, in Russell biographies, or even in Russell's autobiography). The letter to Louis Couturat of 17 January 1902 [letter 92] is, after the letter to Frege, one of the two or three most interesting for historians of logic. In this

letter, Russell advocates Peano's notation over the older notation and stresses its superiority in developing an algebra of relations "different from that of Peirce and Schröder" (p. 211). It also discusses the problem of the class of classes and Cantor's power set axiom, the proof of which, Russell says, "doesn't hold" (p. 212). The other [letter 131] is one of only three surviving letters from Russell to Whitehead. Dated 27 October 1904, it was attached to Russell's manuscript "On Functions" and in which Russell says he has "begun to feel the Contradiction to be obvious...." (p. 285). The "contradiction" hinges, in Russell's estimation, on there being two senses of "function," namely "(1) a complex of which x is to be a constituent" and "(2) a dependent variable whose value is determinate when the value of x is determinate" (p. 285), and he asks Whitehead to "try to find a proof of any of the prop[osition]s" in the manuscript (p. 286).

Other letters also have more than passing interest to historians of logic. Some of the letters give us insight and glimpses into how Russell worked and thought.

From Russell's letter to Couturat of 7 January 1902 [letter 99], one learns that in his course on mathematical logic at Cambridge, Russell began with 22 "primitive propositions" or axioms "of general logic (such as the syllogism)" and "deduced from them all of pure mathematics, including Cantor" [i.e. Cantorian set theory] "and geometry," without using any new primitive propositions or primitive concepts (p. 227). Griffin tells us in his footnote (p. 227, n. 2) that by "syllogism," Russell means $[(p \supset q) \cdot (q \supset r)] \supset (p \supset r)$, i.e. the inference rule textbooks today call hypothetical syllogism. In this same letter, Russell goes on to tell Couturat that the material for this course "will appear in the book that I plan to publish with Whitehead" (p. 227).

The letter of 18 October 1909 to Lucy Donnelly [letter 152], written on the evening of the day before he was to deliver the manuscript for *Principia Mathematica* to Cambridge University Press, shows Russell's elation at having completed the task — and his immense, almost obscene, relief [he wrote: "I feel more or less as people feel at the death of an ill-tempered invalid whom they have nursed and hated for years"] at being done with the labor which took so much "time and trouble ...spent on small points in obscure corners of the book, which possibly no human being will ever discover" (p. 326).

There are also glimpses of Russell denigrating his work in *The Principles of Mathematics* [letters 120, 122] to his friends, and his private comments on various friends and acquaintances, some of whom made their own marks in the history of logic. In the midst of a letter to Ottoline Morrell dated 9 October 1913 [letter 216], for example, devoted

mostly to an account of a meeting with Wittgenstein concerning Wittgenstein's "Notes on Logic," Russell offhandedly mentions as well "the prodigy," who, he says (p. 480) "is disgusting, I don't know why; I hardly know how to be civil to him." This "prodigy," according to Griffin (p. 479, n. 3) is a reference to Norbert Wiener. Russell's opinion of Wiener was doubtlessly formed by Wiener's Harvard 1913 doctoral thesis (*A comparison between the treatment of the algebra of relatives by Schröder and that by Whitehead and Russell*) comparing Russell's work with Schröder's which Wiener discussed with Russell and in which Russell's work fared unfavorably.

We also catch a glimpse of Whitehead at work on the *Principia* in the early stages of collaboration. In a letter to his wife Alys of 26 May 1903 [letter 121], Russell described Whitehead as working "like a horse since he got my letter, and has done a lot of things that have to be considered: we have to adopt a joint policy before we can go on with the writing out of our book, and that demands discussion. We began at once yesterday, the instant he had had his tea" (p. 266). We learn from Griffin (p. 275) that work on the *Principia* "went on mainly in the summers when Whitehead was free from teaching;" e.g. (p. 277), that Whitehead and Russell spent an entire day (9 April 1904) talking about how to analyze "the present King of France is bald," and believing for an hour on 13 April that it solved the Russell paradox. We even learn how Russell came to collaborate with Whitehead: in a letter [168] of 12 May 1911, Russell tells Ottoline Morrell that his collaboration with Whitehead began as a consequence of his trip with his wife Alys and the Whiteheads to Paris in 1900 for the International Congress of Philosophy. There, he "was immensely struck by the Logician Peano, who in all discussions seemed better than any one else; so I read his works which revolutionized my work, and started me on my present lines. I persuaded Whitehead to think equally well of Peano and that was the beginning of our formal cooperation" (p. 371).

The historian of logic who has the patience to sort carefully through these letters will also find tantalizing hints at the neglected byways of the history of logic and suggestions for fresh research. Thus, for example, in a letter to Lucy Donnelly of 3 November 1906 [letter 141], Russell mentions that the "mathematics student" of whom Donnelly spoke as coming to Cambridge to study logic with Russell, and whose name escaped him, had not yet arrived. In a footnote (p. 305, n. 1), Griffin identifies this "mathematics student" as Marion Reilly (1879 - 1928), "a Bryn Mawr student" who did soon thereafter arrive at Cambridge to study logic with Russell, and who in 1907 became a dean at Bryn Mawr. [Note, however, that Reilly at the time of her visit to

Cambridge to study logic with Russell was actually already a professor at Bryn Mawr College.] Did she ever do any work in logic? No papers by her are listed in Church's bibliography. It may be well worth pursuing the quest for information on Reilly and her work. One might also inquire whether Reilly's study of logic with Russell contributed to the development of symbolic logic courses in the U.S., for example. Another clue perhaps worth pursuing concerns Itelson, who in a letter of 11 April 1908 [letter 148] Russell says he befriended during the International Congress of Mathematicians in Rome that year, and who claimed that Couturat appropriated the term 'logistic' from him. In the letter, Russell describes Itelson as a Russian "who lives in Berlin, because he found that if he stayed in Russia any longer he would be sent to Siberia, which would put an end to his pursuit of logic" (p. 318). From Griffin (p. 318, n. 2), we know about Gregorius Itelson (1852 - 1926) only that he was an independent scholar who never held an academic post, and (p. 318, n. 3) that he seems to have published nothing. [My files also indicate that in 1904 Itelson also attended both the Second International Congress of Philosophy and the Third International Congress of Mathematics, but contains no additional information on Itelson.]

There is a minor typographical error to notice here: on p. x of the "Preface," "Van Meijenoort" should of course be "van Heijenoort." But let us give the final word to Russell himself, who wrote to Ottoline Morrell on 26 May 1914 [letter 230] "that logic is the *important* thing" (p. 508).