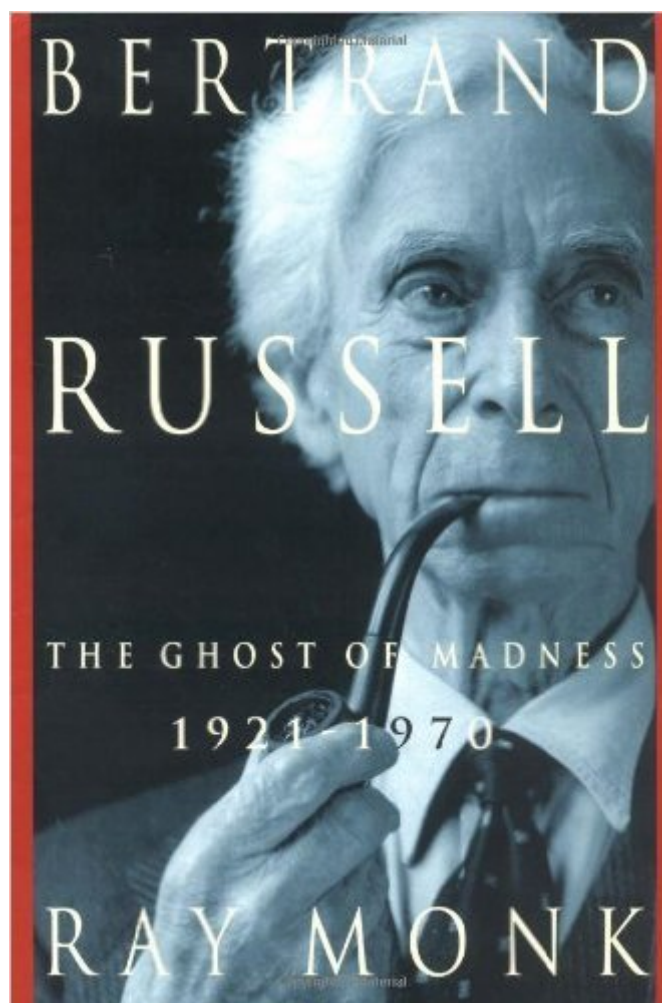


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Bertrand Russell: 1921-1970, The Ghost Of Madness



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

When great and important people merge productively, then fall out bitterly, the reverberations often last for generations. Their admirers continue the quarrel long after the original protagonists are dead, often with more passion than the protagonists themselves. Plato and Aristotle's respective followers engaged in passionate mutual denunciation from medieval times to the C19th, though they couldn't raise much heat now. Wagner and Nietzsche provide a 19th century example, Lennon and McCartney a twentieth century one. The Wittgenstein-Russell break-up has to date bubbled under with fewer publicly noticeable manifestations (an example before Monk's book is the portrayal of Russell in Derek Jarman's entertaining film "Wittgenstein"), but we will hear more of it. The breakup was really not that dramatic. Russell recognised Wittgenstein's brilliance and persuaded him to take up philosophy, treating him with considerable and apparently typical generosity at both a material and intellectual level. For a while the two men were colleagues and friends, until Wittgenstein broke away on finding his own philosophical direction. Russell admired Wittgenstein's early work but was dismayed by the rest, considering it a journey into mysticism. (And indeed Wittgenstein is one pavingstone on the road that led to Derrida, though fortunately he is much more than that.) Their friendship ended with some anger and mutual disappointment but no real scenes, no dramatic denunciations. Wittgenstein and Russell attended the same social events long after the breakup, including the famous incident where Wittgenstein waved a poker, threateningly in some accounts, at Karl Popper. (Russell's stern, "Wittgenstein, put that poker down!")

Don't get me wrong, I am a serious Ray Monk fan, and a serious Russell devotee, but that's just the

problem. Ray Monk, although he puts Russell's mathematical achievements at the pinnacle of human endeavour, finds everything else about Russell to be pathetic and disgusting. This book, which is about the second half of Russell's life (and Ray Monk has written a biography of the first half called 'The Spirit Of Solitude' which is equally compulsive reading, but suffers from the same love-hate relationship with Russell) has much more biographical material than any previous book on Russell BUT almost every new fact is framed from Ray Monk's perspective of disdain and contempt. Russell had a traumatic childhood, with the death of his sister (diphtheria) then that of his mother and father coming in rapid succession at about the age of four, followed by a mostly isolated upbringing by his grandparents. Instead of finding this tragic early influence a basis for sympathy and understanding, Monk uses it as a basis for finding a river of underlying insanity and evil flowing beneath the actions and writings of what he considers to be a monster who should not have lived past the completion of his mathematical masterpiece. Just as it is important to have a biography written by someone who is not blind to the faults of their subject, it is also important to have the biographer not hate their subject, or have some kind of grudge against them or some aspect of their lives. Monk cannot bear the fact that Russell does not live up to Monk's lofty expectations, that a god of mathematics, a subject of absolute moral purity, has human frailties and imperfections.

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