

# Lucy Martin Donnelly: a sojourn with the Russells

*by Maria Forte*

---

## I

LUCY MARTIN DONNELLY (1870–1948), an instructor of English literature at Bryn Mawr College, was one of the many female friends with whom Russell corresponded. In the first draft of a biographical sketch of her, Edith Finch (Russell's fourth wife) writes:

In Paris they [Helen Thomas and Lucy Donnelly] met Bertrand Russell, then an attaché at the British Embassy and engaged to Logan's sister Alys. His influence upon Lucy went very deep. In the next years she saw much of him, fell in love with him, and corresponded with him frequently and at length.<sup>1</sup>

That Lucy “fell in love” with Russell is debatable, but new perspectives on their relationship are gained in the letters that she wrote to Helen Thomas Flexner when she stayed with the Russells during the

<sup>1</sup> Edith Finch's biographical sketch of Lucy Donnelly appears in Edward T. James, ed., *Notable American Women 1607–1950* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1971), I: 499–500. This sketch omits the passage quoted. Another comment by Lady Russell concerning Russell's relationship to Lucy Donnelly is included in her notes on Clark's biography. She writes, “B refused a good many ladies who besought his attention—Lucy Donnelly & Lion Phillimore for instance.” Drafts of the sketch and the notes on Clark's biography are in Edith Russell's papers in the Russell Archives. She wrote the former in 1965 and the latter in 1977. The phrase “fell in love with him” in the sketch is bracketed in a quavering hand, no doubt Russell's. But the same hand made editorial cuts of a non-personal nature.

autumn and early winter of 1903. It is not, however, only this love interest that makes Lucy Donnelly's letters to Helen Flexner so interesting—after all Russell's reputation as a charismatic lady's man is certainly well known—but the correspondence has more to offer in the form of insightful and revealing remarks about the Russell household. Lucy's observations and "reportage" to Helen are characterized by numerous comments about Russell. The correspondence offers references to his deteriorating marriage to Alys, his involvement with the Free Trade campaign, his relationship with Mrs. Whitehead, and his reaction to the publication of "The Free Man's Worship". In contrast to these specific topics Lucy's impressions raise issues of a general nature regarding the scholarly use of a set of correspondence. Problems such as the reliability of an individual's recorded descriptions are inevitable in considering the usefulness of letters. The reader of letters must be critical about the letter-writer just as the literary critic is critical of the narrative voice in a work of fiction. In any event Lucy's letters to Helen offer yet another glimpse of the protean aspect of Russell's character.

## II

The visit during the autumn of 1903 came at a crucial time in Lucy's life. In mid-September her closest friend, Helen Thomas, married Dr. Simon Flexner who became the first director of the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, in Lucy's mind the marriage was a threat to her ten-year friendship with Helen. As James Thomas Flexner points out in his biographical study of his parents, Lucy was "thrown into consternation by her friend's engagement" (pp. 406–7). In a holograph note Russell mentions that he "tried to rescue" Lucy from the depression she was experiencing by "offering the consolations of philosophy".<sup>3</sup>

In one of the early letters to Helen, Lucy describes the Russells' apartment at 13, Cheyne Walk, Chelsea, as "cheerless" and "uncared for". As the letters progress she writes of a growing affinity between

<sup>2</sup> James Thomas Flexner, *An American Saga: the Story of Helen Thomas & Simon Flexner* (Boston and Toronto: Little, Brown, 1984), pp. 406–7. This study is the only published work that deals substantially with Russell's relationship to Helen Flexner and Lucy Donnelly.

<sup>3</sup> Bertrand Russell's holograph note, which includes commentary on both Helen Flexner and Lucy Donnelly, is in the Russell Archives (710.049920). His letters to Lucy Donnelly and her replies are all in the Russell Archives. The American Philosophical Society is in possession of Russell's letters to Helen Flexner, and her replies to him are in the Russell Archives.

herself and Russell. Permeating the correspondence are comments that indicate the amount of time they spent together, such as "I had a talk to Bertie—three hours long!" (27 Oct. 1903),<sup>4</sup> "Afterward we talked and talked in his study" (28 Oct.), and "since I returned I have been talking to Bertie" (2 Nov.). On a more dramatic note she explains:

I was just back & resting a moment thinking of how I shd have my tea quietly & read my book when my blue door flew open & in walked Bertie—never was woman more dismayed! However I gave him tea & discussed women & reading & suffering with what liveliness I cd muster & was even persuaded to walk along the embankment with him.... (Thursday [17 Dec.])

Unfortunately, the letters do not always record the details of their lengthy conversations. However, what is revealed is the verbal rapport that emerges between them and the transformation of such talk to paper in the voluminous letters that they wrote to each other until 1948.

One aspect of Lucy's letters is their ability to capture the rhythm of daily life. She writes: "It takes him half an hour, he says, & more, often, in the morning to dress up his mind for the day, before he can dress up himself in turn" (31 Oct.). Her admiration for him, as well as her over-zealous desire to sympathize with him, are both significant themes that recur throughout the letters. Both of these characteristics are clearly evident in the following:

He is desperately unhappy & cd not work or stay alone even—he felt solitude a very nightmare he said. My heart went out to him in sympathy: he is very fine I think. He struggles hard to do right & sets himself the severest standards, and so far as I can see, lives up to them as far as any mortal cd. (30 Oct.)

In his autobiography Russell describes the years from 1902 until 1910 as unhappy and suffused with difficult intellectual activity.<sup>5</sup> The letters that he wrote to Lucy during this time illustrate these stressful years. Lucy felt very strongly about what appears to be rather eclectic topics of conversation with Russell, and she undoubtedly treasured her role as his confidant. She warns Helen that "Bertie has talked to me often very personally, so far as I can judge, & possibly I shd not have written

<sup>4</sup> Lucy Donnelly's letters to Helen Flexner form part of the Flexner Papers at the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. All quotations from this correspondence are from 1903.

<sup>5</sup> *Autobiography*, 1 (London: Allen and Unwin, 1967): 152.

to you even so much as I have of what he has said" (Sunday [22 Nov.]). Lucy valued Russell's company so much that she informed Helen that the conversations she had with him would last her in the "quiet life at Bryn Mawr many a year" and "teach her to think for herself" (*ibid.*). Lucy's letters focus in part on Russell's state of mind and more importantly his effect on her. After the first week with the Russells, Lucy asserts that being under "Bertie's roof and guidance" has absorbed her. Her absorption in Russell was in fact detected by Helen's sister, Grace, whose cryptic warning to Lucy is worth considering:

Grace amused me a great deal by telling me I was evidently very much under Bertie's influence. She warned me against it. She said she knew its perniciousness from experience: she had been under it for a time but had happily after a little come out. I said I wanted to be influenced: she shook her head over me. (29 Oct.)

In fact Grace removed Lucy from Russell's pervasive influence by offering shelter at her home for a month beginning in late November; still, Lucy often saw the Russells. Although Russell claims to have found Lucy "less vivid and less interesting" than Helen, she clearly felt otherwise. He must have enjoyed her as a captivated listener.

She certainly listened attentively to his discourses on the free trade issue. She mentions that she is familiar with all of "Bertie's arguments" (17 Nov.), and at one point she states that Russell has forgotten her for free trade (8 Dec.).<sup>6</sup> Referring to the opponents of free trade, Russell sends a message through Lucy to Helen's husband, Dr. Simon Flexner, informing him that a new disease called "Fiscalitis" has been invented (17 Nov.). On a more serious note and in a more detailed vein, his views concerning the controversy are reported by Lucy:

Bertie came to see me yesterday afternoon, fagged & depressed by his election's going wrong for all his hard work. He said he understood why the working man, the best of them, go for Chamberlain—the idea of the Empire touches their imaginations & the brotherhood of the colonies their hearts. The less gd & more interested of the working men go with the Free Traders, those who are most concerned with not having their wages lowered, those who have no imaginations. As for anti-imperialism, little England, they can-

<sup>6</sup> Richard Rempel, Andrew Brink and Margaret Moran, eds., *Contemplation and Action, 1902–14*, Vol. 12 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell* (London and Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1985), pp. 181–233. Part IV, "Defence of Free Trade", of this volume provides various writings on the issue of free trade.

not understand that. To teach them that the German is other than a black-guard & that they shd regard him with the same brotherly kindness they do a New Zealander is quite out of the question. ([16 or 17 Dec.])

An indication of Russell's immersion in politics at this time is given as Lucy speculates about his political future:

Bertie is full of nothing but politics now & in a great perplexity whether he ought not to go into them. Of course politics are in his blood, his work will not go at the moment so that he wastes his time, & he longs for something more human too than his work can give him. It is cold and isolating. His patriotism is nothing less than passionate. He told me, indeed, that it was to him as though someone were seducing a woman he was in love with. What they want, you see, is a great popular leader to oppose Chamberlain: a man like Gladstone is what they need, they say, able, with right ends in mind but not too scrupulous or clear sighted as to means. This of course wd give Bertie difficulty: he is high minded & his lucidity wd make it difficult for him to be patient and tolerant with the masses' ignorance & stupidities. And then has he the qualities for a leader, an orator? It wd seem not & yet who can say? Moved by feeling certainly his writing becomes eloquent & rhetorical. He is greatly puzzled & says he has now come to the point of lying awake over the decision. (2 Nov.)

A letter written a month later paraphrases one of Russell's comments on his ability to communicate with the general public and displays his propensity for self-analysis. The comment is especially relevant as it relates to his perception of himself as someone with political prospects: "He said in passing that one of the things he minds most is his academic exterior & manners that prevents his talking with or getting near common & uneducated people" (1 Dec.).

### III

It is remarkable how well Lucy's observations follow the general pattern of the public and private events in Russell's life as he recorded them in his autobiography and journal. His disintegrating relationship with Alys is recounted in numerous vignettes involving Russell's all too obvious neglect of his wife. Lucy describes one particular incident: "He refused to go a bicycle ride with Alys & she minded & the tears came to her eyes. She is very far from well" (30 Oct.).

Another bicycle ride is connected to Russell's feelings of distance from Alys. About two years earlier his celebrated bicycle ride was

accompanied by the revelation that he did not love her. The conversations he had with Lucy often revolved around his relationship with Alys. On one of their intellectual excursions Russell explains to Lucy that "he lived on Alys's vitality for years" but "with the gtst difficulty he has learned to say nothing to her" (24 Dec.).

This response regarding Alys is in keeping with the negative feelings towards her that he expresses in his journal. It is no wonder then that Russell looked to Lucy in order to "talk about his work & his difficulties with it & hopes for it" (*ibid.*).

The letters also contribute to the speculation about Russell's involvement with Mrs. Whitehead. Lucy deduced that Russell "is in love or in some way involved with Mrs. Whitehead" but also states that "I cannot say precisely" (9 Nov.). She discloses his thoughts on fidelity. Russell believed that "Although he owed 'a fundamental faithfulness' to Alys, there were other people to whom he owned love also where he had no right to sacrifice entirely to Alys" (*ibid.*). About two weeks later his reaction to Evelyn Whitehead's sudden decision not to visit prompted the following rather histrionic response:

He paced up & down his study murmuring in little bursts "Out out brief candle" etc. Often, most often I can sympathize with him but last night he seemed a little absurd.... Then he sat down by the fire & longed for the mediterranean & sun & warm breezes & told me of once sailing the bay of Palermo & so on—the summer they were there with the Whiteheads very possible. (21 Nov.)

In his autobiography Russell refers to Evelyn Whitehead as the catalyst for a "mystic illumination" which occurred in February of 1901. However, she is not discussed at any great length. Clark's biography gives the impression that the relationship was based solely on friendship, but he adds that the evidence suggests Russell's feelings for her involved more than just "friendly affection".<sup>7</sup> While Victor Lowe's biography of A.N. Whitehead develops much the same conclusion, he focuses his argument on Evelyn Whitehead's character: "loyalty was one of the highest virtues"<sup>8</sup> in her life, and he therefore dismisses the possibility of anything more than a friendly relationship between them.

One of the most intriguing comments that Lucy makes involves Rus-

<sup>7</sup> Ronald W. Clark, *The Life of Bertrand Russell* (New York: Knopf, 1976), pp. 84–5. Clark suggests that Russell's "Dark Lady" of 1902 may have been Evelyn Whitehead.

<sup>8</sup> Victor Lowe, *Alfred North Whitehead: the Man and His Work*, Vol. 1: 1861–1910 (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), p. 248.

sell's reaction to the publication of "The Free Man's Worship" in the December 1903 issue of *The Independent Review*. She writes:

Bertie, perhaps it will interest you to hear, has been very unhappy about his article since it came out, feeling that the world is sneering & laughing at his intimate feelings. In point of fact it is—in particular of course Logan who from what Grace says is being vy amusing & naughty & witty abt it. He tries to talk to me abt it but I put him off. He did tell me however that Mrs. Webb said to him she now perfectly understood Bertie—what he wanted was unhappiness, he enjoyed the luxury of it & Alys need no longer trouble abt him. (21 Dec.)

Russell does not dwell on the reception of "The Free Man's Worship" in his autobiography. This initial response to publication, with its assertion of his apprehension and regret concerning the revelation of his feeling in the essay, suggests that such an emotional investment in his work was perhaps too overwhelming or repellent to him. This may help to explain why he found creative writing so difficult.

#### IV

During her 1903 visit with the Russells Lucy Donnelly was more than a friendly visitor. As her letters to Helen illustrate she observed and recorded the events as they occurred in the Russell household. Readers of her letters to Helen will be struck by her awe of Russell, or possibly even infatuation with him. Undoubtedly such an attitude must be considered when employing her descriptions and comments for critical purposes. This is to suggest not that such observations are utterly unreliable but that they contribute another viewpoint to the already immense amount of information about Russell's life. The delight that she experienced in being with Russell prompted the following exclamation:

Bertie's the most brilliant living mind & I can well believe he may be. Heavens, at what a pace does he not carry one on—the strain is often terrible as it is exciting. And the high rarified atmosphere in which he lives & into which he takes you makes you find other air heavy & unvivifying. (1 Nov.)

Her 1903 visit appears to have solidified the friendship between them which thrived mainly in the form of letters.

*Department of English  
McMaster University*