

Russell at Newnham: an unpublished paper on staff remuneration

by Sheila Turcon

RUSSELL AND TRINITY is the obvious association for anyone who is asked about Russell's life at Cambridge. It was to Trinity that he went as an undergraduate in 1890, where he won a prize fellowship in 1895, was engaged as a lecturer in 1910 and from where he was dismissed in a *cause célèbre* in 1916 for his pacifist convictions. He returned from time to time over the years to give lectures until he was finally elected to a fellowship in 1943. Yet Russell was associated for a number of years with another college at Cambridge—Newnham, the women's college founded by one of his undergraduate lecturers, Henry Sidgwick. A previously unpublished document by Russell has recently come to light detailing his concerns over the situation of the Newnham staff.

Newnham College began very modestly in October 1871 with the gathering of five young women under the tutelage of Anne Clough at a house on Regent Street, Cambridge, purchased by Sidgwick.¹ Lecturers at the College in the 1890s included Miss Martin (later Mrs. James Ward), Miss Merrifield (later Mrs. Arthur Verrall), and Miss Crofts (later Mrs. Francis Darwin). James Ward would become one of Russell's teachers in 1894 when he was studying moral sciences at Trinity. The Verralls and the Darwins became friends of Russell. By 1892, when Mrs. Sidgwick was installed as principal of Newnham, the College had achieved an impressive level of academic standard, although women were not allowed to proceed to degrees for many years to come.

Another women's college, Girton, had developed at the same time

¹ Information on Newnham's history is from Alice Gardner, *A Short History of Newnham College Cambridge* (Cambridge: Bowes & Bowes, 1921), Mary Agnes Hamilton, *Newnham: an Informal Biography* (London: Faber & Faber, 1936), and Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, *Women at Cambridge* (London: Gollancz, 1975).

as Newnham. Russell's maternal grandmother, Lady Stanley of Alderley, was one of its founders. Girton, however, was more closely allied to the Church of England, and perhaps for that reason Russell was never drawn to it. He had encouraged his childhood friend Maud Burdett to attend Newnham.² In the spring of 1898 he and his wife, Alys, made a donation of £1,000 to Newnham College; the funds allowed the College to clear its building debt.³ In later years, as we shall see, he was opposed to the College incurring new building debts to the detriment of other improvements. His aunt, Lady Agatha Russell, was also to be a benefactress of the College.⁴

Russell's formal association with the College began in November 1901 when he joined its governing board, the College Council, and continued until his resignation in June of 1911. He attended thirty-seven meetings in all, and absented himself on only five occasions.⁵ This commitment to women's education is never mentioned in his *Autobiography*—nor is his involvement with curriculum development at University College, London in 1901–02.⁶ Yet clearly Russell did devote considerable time and effort to these interests. He joined the Council on the recommendation of Mary Bateson (a Cambridge historian) and Jane Harrison (a classicist at Newnham). Other members of the Council during his tenure included Millicent Fawcett, the suffragist whose organization, the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, he would join in February 1907 as a member of its Executive Committee, Dr. George Prothero, Mrs. Verrall, Mr. Nathaniel Wedd, Dr. Evelyn Shuckburgh, Dr. James McTaggart, and his collaborator on *Principia Mathematica*, A.N. Whitehead. Most of these people are mentioned in his private journal for 1902–05, now published in his *Collected Papers*, Volume 12.

² *Cambridge Essays, 1888–99*, Vol. 1 of *The Collected Papers of Bertrand Russell*, ed. K. Blackwell et al. (London: Allen & Unwin, 1983), p. 381.

³ *Cambridge Essays*, p. xxxiv; Ethel Sidgwick, *Mrs. Henry Sidgwick: a Memoir by Her Niece* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1938), p. 144. The money was inherited on the death of his grandmother, the Dowager Countess Russell (*Autobiography* [London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1975], p. 326).

⁴ She bequeathed to the College her home "Rozeldene", Hindhead, Surrey, its contents, and all real and personal estate not specifically disposed of elsewhere on her death, which occurred on 23 April 1933. See RA REC. ACQ. 502 for her last will and testament.

⁵ All information on Russell's involvement with the Council is taken from the Minute Books at Newnham College Library. I would like to acknowledge Miss A. Phillips, Librarian, for her assistance. My notes are available in RA REC. ACQ. 864.

⁶ Russell was on the Committee of Board of Studies elected for 1902. On 11 Dec. 1902 it presented a "Report on Scheme of Studies of Logic and Methodology for Honours B.Sc." (RA REC. ACQ. 1,013).

His tenure on Council parallels a difficult period in his private life: the disintegration of his marriage, which began around January 1902 and ended with his separation from Alys in May 1911. The well-known image of Russell callously bicycling away from her love tells us little about the man who chose to remain at his wife's side for years afterward. His decision to stay with Alys after his love for her was dead required considerable self-will. Understandably he was not always a pleasant person to live with in this period, as his journal reveals. Yet a decision to leave Alys might easily have resulted in her suicide. This possibility could never have been far from his thoughts, although it is expressed only briefly in his journal. The journal was one method of coping with the stress engendered by the hothouse atmosphere of life with Alys. The structuring of his life into separate compartments was another. While not implying that he joined the Newnham Council merely to escape his wife, I think the fact that he had regularly scheduled meetings to attend out of town surely helped. The longevity of the marriage after its initial rupture depended upon the couple finding adequate means of alleviating their marital stress. Only after excruciating years of preparation was Alys ready to live life on her own. Even then her love for him never wavered. When the final break came, over his burgeoning affair with Lady Ottoline Morrell, wife of a Liberal M.P., he prudently resigned from the Council. The affair would have endangered the reputation of the College, should it have become common knowledge.

The Council was concerned with such administrative matters as finances, the appointment of staff, scholarships and examinations, the library, buildings and grounds and so on. It divided into a number of committees centred around these concerns, but there is no record of which, if any, Russell served on. At meetings of the whole Council, he concentrated his main efforts on the well-being of the staff. Indeed, the first motion he seconded, that of Mr. Wedd's in 1903, concerned the striking of a committee to consider the remuneration of the teaching staff. In all the years Russell was on Council, he was involved with just eleven motions, usually on matters regarding the staff. He was obviously selective in deciding which motions he would either initiate or second. In 1907 he again supported Mr. Wedd in presenting a motion based on Mrs. Sidgwick's proposal that the staff "... should hold a meeting before each meeting of Council which would give them the opportunity of proposing questions to come before the Council" and thus bring them closer to the administration of the College.

There is no obvious reason why Russell would select the staff as his main focus of interest. As a member of the Cambridge academic com-

munity he would have been aware of the staff's disadvantaged position in relation to the older, more established Colleges. Possibly he recognized that recruitment of a qualified staff should, in part, depend upon a just remuneration and that the soundness of the College as an educational institute rested first and foremost on its staff. Finally, it is possible to see his involvement as a foreshadowing of his recognition of the idea of workers' control, an idea fostered by the model of Trinity which was self-governing (in contrast to Newnham).

Russell's major contribution at Newnham lay in the area of salaries and staff pensions. As early as November 1904 Russell raised the question of a pension fund, but the Council thought that new buildings must have priority. The matter of pensions remained dormant until November 1908. The building debt had finally been cleared (again), and Russell felt that staff remuneration should now have priority. Fearful that the Council would immediately want to incur new building debts, Russell circulated the following typeset statement (found in the Newnham Library) to all Council members requesting their cooperation in delaying a decision until a Staff Committee on Salaries and Pensions could make its report.⁷

In view of the question as to building which is to be considered at the next meeting of the Newnham Council on November 21st, I wish to suggest certain reasons in favour of delaying the decision for a time.

In the first place, it does not yet appear certain that the present large number of applications for entry will be maintained, since it is not always easy to distinguish a temporary pressure from a permanent growth in the demand. We therefore incur a certain risk of being unable to recover the expenses of building, and of being compelled either to leave some rooms unoccupied or to lower the standard of the entrance examination. The lapse of another year or two will make it less difficult to estimate the extent of this risk.

In the second place, there is reason to fear that immediate building might entail postponement of reforms as regards the remuneration of the Staff. An enquiry into the question of salaries and pensions is at present being conducted by a Committee of the Staff, which is expected to draw up its report in time for the February Council. It seems well that, in considering whatever suggestions they may make, we should have the financial freedom which

results from the absence of debt. It has long been recognized that certain changes involving an increase of expenditure were desirable, such, for example, as the establishment of a pension fund; but these changes have hitherto been postponed on the ground that it was desirable first to pay off the debt. The debt is now completely paid off, and it seems unwise immediately to incur a new debt, and thereby again to postpone much-needed reforms. It may be thought that the existence of a new debt should not prove an obstacle to such reforms. The Council has, however, hitherto regarded the existence of a debt as an obstacle, and it appears probable that it would not alter its view on this point.

On the above grounds, I propose to ask the Council on November 21st not to decide upon the building question until after it has considered the report of the Staff Committee, and taken such action as may seem expedient in view of that report.

BERTRAND RUSSELL.

Russell was concerned that Mrs. Sidgwick, in particular, would oppose an increase in staff salaries and the formation of a pension scheme. Anticipating the worst, he had written to his friend Margaret Llewelyn Davies, "Fighting Mrs. Sidgwick at Newnham and Mrs. Fawcett in London seems my fate; and I always get beaten" (dated [Nov. 1908] by Russell). According to Mrs. Sidgwick's niece and biographer, the students always came first with her, and she considered any motion to raise fees to create or supplement a pension fund unacceptable.⁸ There is no indication that Russell ever proposed raising fees; the final report talks of the pension fund being supported by "subscriptions and donations". Although she put students before staff, there is little reason to suppose she was opposed in principle to staff betterment. Her first priority remained with the students; in this instance, providing adequate housing for them. But she must have found the logic of Russell's reasoned approach convincing. Russell was able to tell Davies, "My little agitation on the Newnham Council has so far been completely successful; Mrs. Sidgwick did not oppose at all strongly" (5 Dec. 1908). At its November 1908 meeting Council agreed to Russell's request to defer the question until the new year. When it met in January, Whitehead and Russell proposed setting up a Council committee to study the staff committee's report on salaries and pensions. Mrs. Sidgwick agreed to become a member of this committee along with Whitehead and Dr. Peile. Their report, dated 10 February 1909, generally supported the proposals already made by the staff; it

⁷ The document consists of one leaf, undated, measuring 135 × 165 mm. (RA REC. ACQ. 973). Its existence was not known until October 1986, too late to consider it for inclusion in the *Collected Papers*, Vol. 12. Its form is similar to that of Paper 24, "The Present Situation", a letter which was circularized to the Executive of the N.U.W.S.S.

⁸ *Mrs. Henry Sidgwick*, p. 179.

was accepted and passed by Council in February and March 1909.

In 1910 the College incurred further debt. McTaggart and Mrs. Sidgwick moved that “the accumulation of a reserve fund be deferred until the debt is paid off.” Whitehead and Russell opposed. Their amendment lost by a narrow margin, nine votes to eight. Mrs. Sidgwick could still wield power if she so chose. She stepped down as Principal at Christmas 1910, and Russell’s resignation from the Council followed six months later.

Years before Russell had written Graham Wallas during his first trip to America that Bryn Mawr, Alys’s alma mater, “is a fine place, immeasurably superior to Girton and Newnham.” Russell, however, was obviously far from abandoning Newnham to its fate. In the first decade of the twentieth century, he committed himself to the improvement of women’s education and to the betterment of the staff who served that end.

The Bertrand Russell Archives