

Two countesses and one formidable woman

by *John G. Slater*

Karen Osborne. *'Elizabeth': the Author of 'Elizabeth and Her German Garden'*. London: The Bodley Head, 1986. Pp. [x], 341. £15.00. C\$35.00.

THE BERTRAND RUSSELL interest in this book stems from the fact that "Elizabeth" was, from 1916 until her death in 1941, his sister-in-law, the third (and last) wife of his only brother, John Francis Stanley, 2nd Earl Russell, who was always known as "Frank". During the early months of their marriage, Bertrand lived with them in their house in Gordon Square, London. The marriage was a stormy one from the start, so Bertrand, living in the same house, was often caught in the middle of their quarrels. His sympathies were usually with Elizabeth, because Frank's behaviour was at times so outrageous that even brotherly affection was strained to the breaking-point. The brotherly relationship was never severed, however, even though Frank, more than once, reached such peaks of jealousy that he accused his wife of having an affair with his brother. It is true that Bertrand and Elizabeth got on very well, but I know of no evidence to support Karen Osborne's judgment (p. 247) that they did have a sexual relationship after the war. Bertrand would surely have mentioned such a fact in his *Autobiography* had it been a fact. Knowing Elizabeth and Frank as he did, he could not have helped but realize that an affair with her would likely have disastrous consequences for both his personal life and for his political work.

Elizabeth was born Mary Annette Beauchamp in New Zealand, but was brought up in London by parents who were seldom content to remain in any one location for very long. This cosmopolitan upbringing was to prove the best possible training for the life she was to lead. In 1889, while in Rome with her father, she met the Count von Arnim, a Prussian nobleman fifteen years her senior. After a two-year courtship, they were married. It was not long before Elizabeth began to think she may have made a mistake. In rapid succession she gave birth to three daughters, but her husband was not pleased, for he desperately wanted a male heir. Elizabeth saw that she would be perpetually bearing children until a son was produced. She therefore withheld herself from

sexual relations with her husband for long periods. The next trial also produced a daughter, and was followed by another long period of abstinence. Finally, the fifth child did prove to be a male. The Count was satisfied.

Osborne raises a doubt that Count von Arnim was the father of the boy. She speculates that his father was Frank Russell (pp. 90–2). There is, of course, no direct evidence for her belief. The case she makes is purely circumstantial. Elizabeth and Frank had met in 1894, when both were twenty-eight years old. Sharing a common interest in the theatre, they sometimes went to plays together when Elizabeth was visiting her parents in London. In *My Life and Adventures* (1923) Frank, without naming the woman, describes their meetings and says, "we very soon thought we were in love" (p. 180). Despite this confession, and despite the fact that these meetings were to continue over several years, neither Frank nor Elizabeth ever suggested they were anything but what they appeared to be. It seems to me unlikely that Frank Russell, who began his autobiography by noting that he was born almost exactly nine months to the day after his parents were married, would have missed mentioning a similar connection of dates in the case of Elizabeth's son, had it existed. He was about as possessive a man as it is possible to imagine, so it is difficult to believe he would have remained silent about a son, especially since he had no other children. In their subsequent quarrels and lawsuits he threw every past indiscretion he could think of at her; he would never have missed such a damaging one. Indeed, Osborne herself provides us with the best evidence that Count von Arnim was the boy's father. When her son was an adult and living in America he still constantly required his mother's financial help: "Copybook maxims flowed from him, but also he reminded her, as she never lost an opportunity of commenting in her diary and letters, of Henning [her husband], 'The very spit image of him'" (p. 288). Given this evidence against Osborne's claim (and no evidence to support it), it is difficult to understand why she even raised a doubt about the boy's paternity. The reader is left feeling uneasy about the reliability of other judgments she makes where the evidence is scanty.

These lapses of judgment are not sufficient to detract very much from the fact that Osborne has given us as full an account of Elizabeth's life as we are ever likely to have. She had the great advantage of knowing, and interviewing extensively, Elizabeth's last important male friend, Alexander Stuart Frere-Reeves. He was able to supply her with some of the facts about Elizabeth which were missing from the existing written record. Elizabeth's second daughter burned many of her mother's papers after her death; Elizabeth in her will had given her daughter the power to destroy "whatever she thinks should be destroyed" (p. 313). In addition, her letters to Frank, which presumably began in 1894, were left in his will to his secretary-companion who in her turn left them to Frank's second wife, the one he had divorced in order to marry Elizabeth. They seem to have disappeared. Osborne made a determined effort on more than one occasion to track them down, but without success. As a result of this destruction the documentation for Elizabeth's life is uneven, some periods being much more fully accounted for than others. Osborne's biography,

as one would expect, reflects this. I have already mentioned one such period, that of the early relationship between Elizabeth and Frank Russell. Had the correspondence between them survived, Usborne would not have to speculate on the nature of their feelings for one another.

By the time she married Frank Elizabeth was a famous and very successful author. *Elizabeth and Her German Garden* was published anonymously in London in 1898, and remained in print for decades. It was followed by a steady stream of novels, all of which were said to be by "the author of *Elizabeth and Her German Garden*". The success of her first book led her to use "Elizabeth" as her first name. She made a great deal of money from her books, which gave her independence from her first husband while he lived and provided her with an elegant style of life after his death. And, course, she was titled. Why, then, did she marry Frank Russell, with whom she had violent quarrels even before their marriage? Marriage to him would give her the title "Countess Russell", so there was no gain there; and he was not even well-to-do financially. Some part of the explanation surely has to do with the outbreak of the First World War. She fled, with three of her children, to England in August 1914, travelling on borrowed passports. But they were German nationals, living in a land where, as the war dragged on, Germany and Germans came to be hated. What was worse was the fact that one of the most prominent German generals was named "von Armin". Given these facts it now makes more sense why a woman of her intelligence and feeling would find marriage to a rather disagreeable British peer attractive. As the Countess Russell she would be in a strong position to protect her children even if they were von Arnims. As it happened the children were not persecuted, so she was not obliged to come to their aid. It is perhaps just as well that a test never came, for Elizabeth does not seem to have had very strong ties to her "crabs", as she called them. One of them, her fourth daughter, died in Germany during the war, and she died believing that her mother had abandoned her, which is very nearly the truth.

Soon after the war's end Elizabeth and Frank were separated. As might be expected the break-up was messy and, especially on his part, filled with thundering denunciations. When she left him she took with her the things which she had brought into the marriage as well as those which she had bought with her own money during their time together. After she moved out he sued her for stealing his property. There was a trial at which both of them gave testimony, but Frank had no case and the verdict went to her. He continued to bombard her with threatening letters; he did not take his various defeats gracefully. But she had her revenge. In 1921 she published *Vera*, "which was to be the most highly acclaimed of all her novels" (p. 218). There can be no doubt that it was inspired by her marriage to Frank, a fact which Bertrand Russell recognized almost from its first page. He read it "with mounting horror, so exact was the depiction of his brother" (p. 233). Many other readers, of course, made the same connection. Frank thought of suing her for libel, but was dissuaded by his lawyers from doing so. Perhaps they thought he would lose a second time. *Vera* does put paid to a horrible marriage. The book's success

demoralized Frank, who carried a copy with him wherever he went and read passages to those he met and demanded to know whether or not they were true descriptions of him. When he published his autobiography two years later he did not mention Elizabeth by name, nor did he admit that he had been divorced from his second wife and remarried a third time. A photograph of his second wife was reproduced with the caption "Countess Russell" under it. This public act indicates something of the stress he must have been under by his failure to break Elizabeth's spirit. Elizabeth never divorced him; she was still the Countess Russell when she died in South Carolina in 1941.

Elizabeth was clearly a woman of the world, and it seems to be this aspect of her personality that appealed to Bertrand Russell. At one time the two of them decided to carry on a correspondence with a view to publishing it as a book. It was her idea. Russell was to take the part of a literary gentleman called Mr. Arbuthnot who had met a girl, Ellen Wemyss, in a train and had loaned her a book; Elizabeth would play the part of Ellen. They exchanged a few letters of the projected correspondence, but Elizabeth broke it off when Russell allowed, in one of his letters, that Ellen was silly. Later she was to try to interest other male authors in her idea, but every time the exchange proved a failure. It is surprising, given her extraordinary individualism, that the idea of a joint work had ever occurred to her. Her books were solely her own work; she did not ask others to read them during their composition; and they appear to have been published exactly as she submitted them. It seems unlikely, therefore, that any joint literary project would appeal to her for long enough to complete it.

I have noticed these errors of fact in the book. Usborne states (p. 47) that Elizabeth's second daughter was born in February 1892, but two pages before her first daughter was said to have been born in December 1891. This is too quick even for the Count von Arnim, who certainly did believe in keeping his wife pregnant. Frank and Elizabeth were married on 11 February 1916, not a day later (p. 189). She claims (p. 202) that Bertrand Russell was evicted from his flat because of his work for the No-Conscription Fellowship during the First World War. I know of no evidence to support this claim; he moved in with his brother because he did not have enough money to rent a flat. Usborne is mistaken regarding the date on which Bertrand moved into Frank's house in Gordon Square; it was during the summer of 1916, not September 1917, as she states (p. 201). Bertrand Russell's article for *The Tribunal* which landed him in prison was written and published in January 1918, not in May (p. 203). On or about the first day of May of that year he entered prison, having exhausted his appeals. Usborne seems not to know (p. 204) that Lady Constance Malleon was a regular visitor of the imprisoned Russell too. All of his female visitors were used to smuggle letters out.¹

The index of the book leaves a great deal to be desired. It seems to have

¹ In addition to these errors, there are small mistakes at: (p. 9) "the" is required before "sole"; (p. 88) "fracas" should be plural; (p. 230) "." is required after "syphilis"; (p. 277) Marie Mallet appears in the text, but Marie Mallet turns up in the index; (p. 279) "and nor" should be "nor".

been compiled by a rather idiotic programme. For all of the main actors, except Elizabeth herself, there is simply a list of page numbers, with absolutely no indication of what one can expect to find there. There is not even the use of the hyphen to indicate extended discussions.²

The design of the book also leaves a great deal to be desired. Widows and orphans used to be the printer's anathema. They would be killed at the proof stage, if they had survived that long. In this book they literally abound.³

It is good that Usborne has written this book. It documents the life of a minor, but enchanting, writer of our century, whose books often prove addictive to new readers and a constant source of pleasure to old ones. Generally speaking, Usborne writes well, but there are passages where editing is still required. One such embarrassment occurs in the caption to a photograph of the Count von Arnim in his winter coat: "Elizabeth always kept the coat with her after he died for sentimental reasons." How living does affect one!

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² To make my complaint clear: consider the initial discussion of Frank Russell; it begins on page 48 and runs without interruption to nearly the bottom of page 53. An intelligent index would list this as 48–53, an idiotic one as 48, 49, 50, 51, 52, 53. I regret to have to report that the latter is found here, with the added embarrassment that "48" is dropped. What is the point of compiling such a useless list? It cannot be excused on the ground that the compiler was ignorant of what a decent index is, because, as I have noted, Elizabeth herself receives the full treatment: there are over a hundred sub-headings under her name. Why could not the other principals have been accorded the same courtesy?

³ There are dangling half lines at the top of pages 12, 28, 41, 55, 63, 66, 82, 93, 98, 129, 131, 132, 147, 158, 160, 161, 174, 192, 193, 197, 209, 212, 224, 234, 243, 252, 260, 262, 266, 267, 272, 279, 285, 293, 301 and 307; and at the bottom of pages 7, 15, 38, 73, 95, 115, 119, 145, 154, 161, 168, 192, 233, 240, 247, 255, 302 and 313. On occasion these consist of single words: the first line of page 193, to cite the worst offender, reads simply "dead." One used to see much better work from The Bodley Head. Their lack of care on this book should make them ashamed of themselves. Does no one at The Bodley Head care about the look of a page anymore?