Russell and Jourdain

an exchange

The following letter on I. Grattan-Guinness's account (in Russell 8*) of the relationship of Russell and Philip Jourdain has been received from Mrs. Dora Russell. She was married to Russell from 1921 to 1935. At present she is writing her autobiography. Dr. Grattan-Guinness appends a reply.*

March 30th, 1973.

... Professor J.E. Littlewood and Russell were at Lulworth, where they had taken all rooms in a farm-house for the summer to entertain their friends and run a sort of reading party such as is, or was, usual at the Universities.

Lulworth is *not* in Hampshire near to Fleet, where Jourdain was. It is in Dorset, near Wool, but on the coast. I was staying there at the time and was present when Russell and Littlewood were discussing the visit to Jourdain before he died. To go was quite a considerable journey. But this was not what exercised Littlewood and Russell. As mathematicians neither of them agreed with the "proof" on which Jourdain kept pressing for an opinion. There was an agonised discussion as to whether it would be right to tell a dying man, for his comfort, that his proof was "right". Both of them felt that they could not, even in the extremity, depart from what they held to be mathematical truth. On the understanding that that was their joint view, Littlewood went to carry greetings and what comfort could be given from both of them. So far as I know, Russell did not attempt to explain his own action, but seems to have accepted the reproach which you print from Laura Jourdain in silence.

Porthcurno, Cornwall — Dora Russell

Dora Russell's letter on the estrangement between Russell and Jourdain opens up the affair to a somewhat greater degree of detail than I had planned in my article. The mixture of personal bitterness and mathematical technicalities had suggested only a minimal addition to the manifestations, cited in footnotes 19 and 20, in the published literature.

I am very grateful for the information that Littlewood went to Jourdain as a joint representative. Perhaps I can supplement Dora Russell's remark by quoting, with the permission of the author and recipient, a passage from a letter of 22 November 1969 from Professor Littlewood to Dr. J.M. Rollett:

> Towards the end of his life [Jourdain] became engrossed with trying to prove what is known as the "Axiom of Choice"....By 1914 professional mathematicians were convinced that the endeavour was quite hopeless. And we were right; it has now been *proved* that you can neither prove nor disprove the Axiom on the basis of the other and accepted axioms of mathematics.
>
> When he was dying he sent a request to a party staying in Lulworth, including Russell, Dorothy Wrinch, and myself, asking someone to come to listen to his final proof. D.W. and I went, and he gave his "proof", fallacious as usual....I said that a new point was involved, and I would have to consider it closely and at length. Then he burst out: "My dear fellow, you know perfectly well that you can see whether a proof is right or wrong in 5 minutes." Strange outburst of complete rationality! We were booked to leave the following day, and that was all.

In the Russell Archives there is a letter from Jourdain to Dorothy Wrinch dated 24 September 1919, just after the visit:

> I am very sorry you would not take the expenses as I thought it was quite the right thing to do: it was very pleasant to see you both.
>
> Of course I should like to see B.R. if he thinks there is any chance of agreeing. If only he could [accept a feature of the new proof] that would I think be enough, but I do not want to distress him should he think that it is necessary for my peace of mind to agree, where he does not really do so, because I am somewhere near the end of my tether.

There is no trace of the telegram sent by Russell to which Laura Jourdain's letter of 26 September, which ended my article, was the reply. But we can surely agree with Dora Russell that Russell "accepted the reproach in silence", since the tone and contents of the letter show clearly that Jourdain was in no state to receive a response of any kind. However, Russell *did* make a public (and just) denial of accusations from Jourdain, in the letter to the editor of *Science Progress* which I cited in footnote 20 of my article.

I. Grattan-Guinness