Book reviews

Her own woman

Katharine Tait. *My Father Bertrand Russell*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975. $8.95. C$10.50 (Longman Canada). London: Gollancz, 1976. £5.95. Pp. xii, 211. 8 pp. of illustrations.

In *My Father Bertrand Russell* Katharine Tait, Russell's daughter by his second marriage, writes: "Over and over, in describing the varied scenes of my family life, I find myself writing "it seemed ... but...." It always seemed normal, cheerful, sensible, even optimistic, but that was only *seeming*. It *felt* unhappy, angry, dangerous; life itself was threatening and usually sad." The difference between "seeming" and "being" among the Russells is what this remarkable book is about. Seeming normalcy of relationships but being unhappy, sometimes wretchedly so, give the stark terms of this narrative of growing up. She adds, "Sometimes I think I should have written this book in parallel columns, the bright side and the dark side" (p. 146)--so little had they cohered at the time. Katharine Tait's is not a book about defeat. It is a book that arises from the dulling frustration of family conflict into a clearer light of understanding that penetrates old conflicts with a clarity prompting admiration.

How did Russell's daughter who, often in this memoir, tells of the sinking feeling that she couldn't be the person she felt she ought to be, find strength to write as she does? The answer is outlined in the chapter called "Conversion", which tells of emergence from a hitherto futile search for meaning. Emergence came not through her father's prescription for happiness in *The Conquest of Happiness* or from other self-help writings, nor by the ministrations of "adjustment" psychiatry, but by revealed Christianity. Marriage, reflection on the past, and learning not to bend to the burden of guilt feelings were freeing, but acceptance of the Christian message of unconditional love rescued Katharine Tait from

the deepest misery accumulated in childhood and youth. Such a conversion was, of course, heresy against the progressive rationalism of her upbringing--against all that father and mother had stood for though, as she points out, Russell had passionately searched for God everywhere but in the church. Where he scorned to search she found; yet less is made of this in the book that one might expect. It is not a book about religion in any way insisting on theology and creed.

Strength, one feels, is also the product of psychological understanding. For readers not sympathetic to a "conservative" return to the church, there is a radicalism about this book too. Katharine Tait's determination to face issues exactly as they were is very much in the spirit of her father's best social thought. Yet where Russell's first appeal was to reason in resolving human conflict, her impulse is to reconstruct, as fully as possible, the feelings surrounding conflict. This is an exercise in psychological truth-telling--the pain, for example, at not always being taken for herself by her father who teased her as "Miss Wogglywoo", as well as the many remembered joys of family life by the sea in Cornwall. The twin columns of dark and light build up side by side, but so charged with reactivated feelings are the incidents comprising them that they don't long remain independent of each other. Dark and light fuse as the self-portrayal develops in these pages--a self-portrayal showing acceptance of the bad together with the good in the making of a person remarkably strong in the face of past adversity.

Katharine Tait's account of childhood and adolescence is always simple in statement, the simplicity of achieved understanding, never of incapacity to reckon with what beset her. The gift of language is a help. As her mother remembers in *The Tamarisk Tree*, Kate aged two years and three months showed an unusual verbal gift, a gift that was to become an instrument for precise, honest thinking without the slightest taint of clever Bloomsbury self-consciousness. Her writing shows much of her father's lucidity of style, his wish to use language with utmost directness and precision. How better to master the difficult issues she faced than to state from early memory with adult perspicuity? Beacon Hill School training seems to have served her well in this, however unfortunate its larger effect as recorded here. (Incidentally, much that is new is to be learned from these pages of the day to day experience of Beacon Hill School, as well as of the Russells' ordinary domestic arrangements.) But wasn't it also the freedom and encouragement simply to think about questions that strengthened her to look squarely at the most difficult family relationships? No doubt threatening events forced clear seeing upon her, but it is to Katharine Tait's credit, as spokesman for those who grew up with parents who had repudiated social and religious conven-

tions, that she states so well the deficiencies of such an upbringing. Her remarks on the early twentieth-century phase of being sexually liberated are forcefully apt in view of the false promise "freedom" has been for so many people whose life-style is descended from Russell's *Marriage and Morals*.

The book certainly pays tribute to her father's greatness, but it also reveals the human cost of his relationships with women other than her mother. These, his daughter realizes, he entered more by compulsion than by chance, and she shows only too well how their complications interfered with the optimal development of his children. This result of Russell's life-long acute inner loneliness must have been most difficult to write about, but his daughter, another rival for his affection, does so with firmness. The reader looking for an explanation of Russell's romantic variability won't find it here. Instead the consequences of that variability for innocent dependents puts in question the alacrity with which Russell sometimes thought about large moral principles to the neglect of the minute particulars of which they are made. Katharine Tait is convinced that attention should be returned to the good, or lack of it, in the minute particulars of day to day living in the family and among intimates. For her the question of morality concerns the conditions under which young people are allowed to feel, or are prevented from feeling, the self-worth that moves them toward maturity. If these conditions don't come naturally, then there is struggle of which the outcome is unknown and can be dangerous. Katharine Tait is one of the fortunate whose struggle has brought the personal dark and light together without having to simplify either element.

In his *Autobiography* Russell wrote of Kate and her brother John with a matter-of-factness which, judging from this reassessment, assumes too much about their smooth passage into adulthood. For all his scintillating wit as a parent, his companionable playfulness and undoubted love, Russell was little attuned to the emotional realities of his children growing up in *their* time and place. This is surprising since by his own struggle he had learned so much about the reasons for his own unhappiness. We are shown how Kate and John were placed under the special stresses of changing relations with two of Russell's wives, as well as changes of locale and the uncertainties in Britain and America imposed by a world war. The book deftly weighs up these factors in accounting for Kate's persistent youthful despair which scholastic successes could deflect but not alleviate. Russell's intense belief in the culture of the mind gave place only with difficulty to thoughts about the emotions as they play their part in the maturational processes. It is his daughter who shows a right relation between thought and feeling.

More a Victorian man of principle than one at ease in the post-Freudian age, Russell undervalues the ways in which good and bad early relationships constitute the sorts of persons we become. The moral issues of "persons in relation" did not gain prominence in philosophy until John Macmurray's Gifford Lectures of 1954: lectures in which it is shown that the unit of being is not the "I" alone but the "you and I" in relationship. Russell's favouring of Watsonian behaviouristic principles in bringing up children suggests that an individualistic morality of correctness impressed him more than did the relational theories of Freud and his followers. Katharine Tait wishes that "he had paid a little more attention to the theories of Freud and less to those of the American behaviorist John B. Watson. He never realized how much he was transmitting to us beyond the enlightened theories of his conscious mind" (p. 63). The child's intuitive knowledge of a secure relationship is shown for what it is.

It is inevitable that a great man's reputation will undergo re-evaluation after his death--perhaps the greater the man the more severe this must be, and from all quarters, including his family. But let us look back at Russell for a moment. Did Kate know, when writing her memoir, of her father's confessional precedent in the brilliant letters to Lady Ottoline Morrell and to Lady Constance Malleson? In many of these letters he, too, strives to bring together the light and dark and to make sense of his position in a world he did not create or ask to be born into. These letters show a striving for purpose perhaps unequalled in modern autobiographical literature. Russell's love-letters indicate the direction taken by his daughter's memoir almost sixty years later in an era more used to talking out loud about the ardours of relationships. The visionary intensities have dropped away, to be replaced by soberer analyses of what went wrong and what went right. Katharine Tait frequently achieves a more ample self-revelation than her father, knowing that his rational optimism barely masked a profound solitude and despair going back to his own childhood. To understand this is to begin to forgive without blinking the facts. It is said without bitterness that "he was never there when I needed him" (p. 130). The daughter has been able to get beyond her deprivation to a realization of how deprived and isolated was her father's own upbringing at Pembroke Lodge--a remarkable formulation to find in our accusing age, when new "generations" try to portray their anxieties as uniquely their own.

Here is an important autobiographical venture--a venture in seeing and knowing. We are well past the fathomless torment of a seventeenth-century John Bunyan at odds with the enemy-father Satan in *Grace Abounding to the Chief of Sinners*, amd we are also past the uncomprehending

division of parent from child over evangelical belief as in Edmund Gosse's *Father and Son* (1907). Perhaps the female view of a father is more easily managed, but that does not take away from this accomplishment. Real people and their strivings are brought steadily into focus. It is true that there are tragic events Katharine Tait acknowledges she cannot fully reconstruct--her parents' separation in the Beacon Hill School period being the most critical of them--but there is much more she does understand giving us hope in human adaptive capabilities. Her loving attitude to her brother in his sufferings is evidence of a determination to see the picture whole even after its parts had fallen into disarray.

My Father Bertrand Russell represents a stage in spiritual autobiography well along the way to a psychological enlightenment that is much more than the clinical unravelling of generational conflict. This book searchingly reflects on a painful past, a past that for the writer comes out composed and comprehended--nothing avoided it seems, nothing forced when it won't fuse. Clearer than Russell's, her vision of parents and children is no doubt aided by the freer circulation of ideas about human development we now enjoy, but this alone doesn't explain the courage and sureness of handling Katharine Tait brings to her task. If it's fair to spiritual autobiography of the past to speak of advance in the attempt to make sense of ourselves, then here is an important example of that advance. Russell was a flawed modern saint, and by this book his flaws as a parent are put on display. But also he persisted with the greatest courage in a struggle and search which confers on Katharine Tait the ability to be a spiritual survivor herself and to talk about it. She does so in one of the few constructive ways remaining for our distracted time.

Department of English
McMaster University

Andrew Brink