

Review

Bertrand Russell's ascension

by *Stefan Andersson*

Carl-Göran Ekerwald. *Bertrand Russells Himmelsfärd* [Bertrand Russell's Ascension]. Göteborg, Sweden: Författarförlaget, 1974. 157 pp. 17.65 Kronor. ISBN 91-7054-126-4.

CARL-GÖRAN EKERWALD'S novel, whose title translates as *Bertrand Russell's Ascension*, is the story about how the main character, Bertrand Russell, while visiting the United States in 1914, gets an invitation from a young female student whom he met in Oxford one year earlier, what happens there, and the consequences of this meeting. The framework of the story is based on fact. To this the author adds his own reconstruction of what was said and of what happened.

The setting of the book is interesting. The first three chapters coincide with three different days in Bertrand Russell's life. We first meet him on a summer day in 1914 while he is visiting Helen Dudley (Rosie in the book) at her parents' home outside Chicago. (The author does not say anything about how serious their relation was one year earlier.) As soon as Russell gets a moment of privacy with Rosie, he makes his proposal: "... I love you. I want to marry you. . . . I want to have children with you Rosie" (p. 39). The second day is two months later when Rosie comes to London. At this point Russell finds it impossible to adhere to their original plan because of the outbreak of the First World War. If he is going to oppose the war, he cannot risk his good reputation in any way. He rejects her love and thus sacrifices Rosie for the chance of obtaining world peace. In the third chapter, one day ten years later, Russell visits Rosie at a mental hospital. The last part of the book (the fourth chapter) is wholly fictitious and deals with the character's last day and his ascension.

The novel can be seen as an indirect accusation against Bertrand Russell's unethical behaviour, for he only used the war as an excuse to terminate their relationship. Several times in the book Russell is portrayed not only as a rather ridiculous figure but also as a man who cannot control his sexual impulses. For example, "Russell looked around in a proud manner. And then once more he attacked Rosie's sisters. Do you intend to follow in your sister's footsteps and come over to England also? He licked his lips. The saliva had drooled from his mouth" (p. 54).

Russell's own description of this sad love-story is somewhat different compared to Ekerwald's version. Russell says: "... we would live together openly, perhaps marrying later on if a divorce could be obtained. . . . When she arrived I could think of nothing but the war, and as I had determined to come out publicly against it, I did not wish to complicate my position with a private scandal, which would have made anything that I might say of no account. I felt it therefore impossible to carry out what we had planned . . . the shock of the war killed my passion for her, and I broke her heart."¹ (It was not as easy for an English aristocrat to get a divorce in 1914 as it is in Sweden today. The author does not seem to realize this.)

In R. W. Clark's biography we find some letters between Russell and Lady Ottoline Morrell. They clearly show us that Russell did not give a full account of what was in his mind concerning this matter. If Ekerwald had had this information his novel would probably have been much longer. In his last letter to Ottoline, which he wrote just before leaving the United States, he talks about Helen: "... she and I spent a long day in the woods together and I found that I care for her a great deal—not with the same intensity or passion as I feel for you, but still very serious. I told her I cared for some one else with whom I would not break, but she said she did not mind that."²

If Russell at this point underestimated his feelings towards Ottoline, or if he overestimated his passion for Helen I do not know, but in order to make a fair judgment of Russell's behaviour we unquestionably need Helen Dudley's own version. What did Russell really promise Helen and how did he say it? Until we know this it is not fair to condemn anyone. Certainly Helen Dudley's sisters did not condemn Russell.

The book seen merely as a novel is worth reading. However, the author would have reached more readers if he had refrained from

luxuriating in Russell's hard mastered emotional life. Ekerwald is not competent to give a true analysis of Russell's passions, for he lacks not only the knowledge to do this but also a sympathetic appreciation.

Lund, Cambridge, Mass., and Berkeley

¹*The Autobiography of Bertrand Russell, 1914-1944* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1968), pp. 213-14.

²*The Life of Bertrand Russell* (London: Cape/Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1975), p. 235.