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Edith

Caroline Moorehead

An excerpt from Caroline Moorehead's biography Bertrand Russell: A Life, republished with a new Foreword in 2022 by Spokesman, to mark the 150th anniversary of Russell's birth.

The name of Edith Finch first crops up among Russell's papers in 1948, when she wrote to tell him of his old friend Lucy Donnelly's sudden death while they were on holiday together in Canada. Russell had known Edith for many years, meeting her first in Paris in the twenties, and then on visits to Bryn Mawr, where she taught. She was forty-seven in 1948, a small, pretty woman, with grey eyes specked in brown, who reminded Mary Trevelyan of a little bird, with a calm manner and infinite good sense. Her grandfather was an Episcopalian clergyman. She was quiet and extremely clever, and, like Russell, sceptical, anti-dogmatic and precise, with excellent manners. Her rather surprising past included a spell riding bareback in a circus in Paris, and the friendship of Gertrude Stein, as well as two biographies of Carey Thomas and Wilfrid Scawen Blunt.

Shortly before Christmas 1950, she arrived in London. She dined with Russell, and next day he wrote to thank her for a 'heavenly evening', signing his letter, 'All my love darling'. On April Fool's Day 1951, he was writing, 'You say that every Sunday you doubt my existence. I think today is Sunday – I think so, ergo sum. If I thought it were Monday the argument would be just as good.' By May that year, the letters were still more loving. 'My dear Heart, I love you very much indeed ... I do not feel that your love is partly hate, as love usually is.' In October, he began to talk of a deeper love than he had ever known before, or ever expected to know. They were married on 15 December 1952; Russell was eighty, Edith fifty-one. It was to be his happiest marriage, lasting until his death in

1970, more enduring in terms of affection than any of the others and lacking all the frenzy of his earlier commitments. ‘Of course I am happy,’ he told reporters. ‘How can one fail to enjoy life so long as the glands are in good working order? That is the only secret.’ To Gamel [Brenan], he added, I am very happy – more so than for a number of years. Both publicly and privately everything goes so well with me that I am in danger of becoming smug.’ To her friend Phyllis Urch, Colette [Malleston] remarked that she had feared Russell was making a fool of himself with a ‘pretty flapper’, but then on seeing Edith’s photograph in the paper ‘it wouldn’t surprise me if he has met his master this time.’

Bertrand Russell: A Life by Caroline Moorehead, pages 491/492

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‘I had been invited to Bryn Mawr by Miss Edith Finch of the English Department and Miss Donnelly who for years was head of the Department — now retired. They live in a most romantic stone house — built recently — amid forest trees and wildflowers not far from the college. I was conveyed from the station by Miss Finch and her car, to a little cell in Pembroke East (dormitory) where a speech specialist with a microphone vainly tried to make me sound human ... [I] was prepared to read the piece again and two little ones for the other side of the record when Miss Finch (pleasing little Dresden creature that she is, in a raspberry dress and silver goat-skin jacket) reappeared at the crack of the door, which had been secured by a crosswise, chicken-coop-wooden button, and she firmly led me away to the car, for we wished to join Miss Donnelly at the house and then all go to a tea in the Deanery! ...’

Poet Marion Moore in a letter to Hildegard Watson, April 1944

Source: University of Rochester Library Bulletin rbscp.lib.Rochester.edu

Photo: George Platt Lynes

Edith Finch befriended teenager George Platt Lynes in Paris in the mid-1920s, where they were part of Gertrude Stein’s circle.