**Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947)**


Distinguished philosopher and mathematician, Alfred North Whitehead was an outstanding intellectual figure of the first half of this century. Not only was he master of two disciplines, but also he was at home in two nations, Great Britain and the United States. Trained in mathematics at Cambridge University, he subsequently taught there for twenty-six years. In 1910, at the age of forty-nine, he moved with his family to London, where he soon resumed teaching—first at University College, afterwards at the Imperial College of Science and Technology—and where his research interests began to extend beyond pure mathematics into the philosophy of physics.

It was in 1924, when he was sixty-three years old and near retirement age at the Imperial College, that he accepted an invitation to join the philosophy department at Harvard University. There he taught, and wrote, not mathematics but philosophy. What was to have been a five-year appointment was lengthened, and Harvard deferred retiring him until he reached the age of seventy-six. After retirement he and his wife continued to reside in the American Cambridge and to be active members of that academic community. At the end of 1947 he died, full of honors, admired both for his work and for his character, an Englishman to the last but a warm friend of America and Americans, of whom he had written that “there is in all sections of the population a warm-hearted kindness which is unsurpassed in any large social system.”

Victor Lowe, professor emeritus at the Johns Hopkins University, a former student of Whitehead and a recognized authority on his thought, offers us now the first volume of what is to be a two-volume life of Whitehead. The present volume opens with an account of Whitehead’s family background of English middle-class folk and closes with the story of the Whiteheads’ move from Cambridge to London. It tells us about Whitehead’s childhood and his education and about his career as a mathematician (and logician); the second volume will cover his philosophical career during the subsequent years in London and at Harvard.

For most American general readers it is the later career with which they have some familiarity. Many will have some knowledge of some of the writings in which Whitehead sought to make use of his distinctive conceptual framework in intellectual history and in the interpretation of science, of religion, of education, and of other social institutions. Among his influential books (most of which are still in print) were *Science and the Modern World* (1925), *Religion in the Making* (1926), *The Aims of Education and other Essays* (1929), and *Adventures of Ideas* (1933). Some, but not many, readers will have ventured into the formidable (even “impenetrable”) magnum opus of metaphysics, *Process and Reality* (1929), in which he sets forth his “philosophy of organism.” In any case, the Whitehead most of us know is the Harvard philosopher of the twenties and thirties. That philosopher we can look forward to meeting in Lowe’s second volume. Meanwhile, we have now a very engaging report of the earlier years and the earlier, mathematical, career of this eminent man.

As Lowe makes clear at the outset, the biographer of Whitehead works under a severe handicap: the scarcity of documentary evidence. There are, of course, Whitehead’s numerous published articles and books. But the manuscripts of these, along with drafts of other, unpublished, pieces, were destroyed by his widow, in accordance with his wishes. Correspondence received by him was also destroyed. As for letters from Whitehead to others, few of them remain. His letters to his wife were among the materials de-
stroyed. In general, he was not given to letter-writing. There are, however, in the Russell Archives at McMaster University, a number of Whitehead's letters to Russell of the period of their collaboration on *Principia Mathematica*, and these are made use of in the present volume. There exist also some letters (1924-1929) to T. North Whitehead, a son, which are to be published as an appendix to the second volume. Lowe says that he had many conversations with North and with Jessie Whitehead (the sister)—they encouraged him and in a sense authorized his writing of the biography—and it seems reasonable to suppose that much of what is said about Whitehead as a person and about Evelyn Whitehead, his wife, derives from Lowe's notes of conversations with the son and daughter, together with his personal recollections and his notes of conversations he himself had with Whitehead.

The chapters on Whitehead's family, on his public school years at Sherborne School, and on his education at Trinity College, Cambridge, are of considerable interest intrinsically as well as for the light they shed on the intellectual and emotional development of our subject. We learn a good deal about public school and university life of the period, and we are introduced to many of the interesting persons with whom Whitehead must have interacted in those years. At the university level Whitehead's formal education was exclusively in mathematics. But, of course, one's formal studies were not all that Cambridge provided in the way of education. There was ample opportunity for other reading, and for talk. Whitehead said that "by the time that I gained my fellowship in 1885 I nearly knew by heart parts of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*." Central to the informal education of a favored few at Cambridge was the association nicknamed "The Apostles" (The Cambridge Conversazione Society), to which Lowe devotes an entire chapter. Whitehead was elected a member in 1884; he later testified that the Society had had a "wonderful influence" on him. Lowe gives us some vivid pen-portraits of the men who belonged to the Society while Whitehead was an active member (e.g., J. M. E. McTaggart, G. L. Dickinson), for the sake of what they suggest as to Whitehead's intellectual experiences as an Apostle. Furthermore, Lowe has obtained some data—admittedly skimpy—as to Whitehead's views on some of the issues taken up in the Society's discussions. At the end of each meeting an appropriate summary question was put to the members present for their votes (e.g., "Does the devil exist, or is he merely loathsome?"). Each member signed his name in the record book to signify his vote, adding a brief comment if he wished. Lowe uses information from the record book as to Whitehead's votes and remarks as evidence regarding his early philosophical, social, and religious opinions. Most of this is decidedly conjectural, but intriguing.

In 1884 Whitehead completed his studies and became a fellow and teacher at Trinity College. The story of his life and work during the twenty-six years he remained at Cambridge occupies half of the present volume. From it we learn something of Whitehead's work as a teacher and of his participation in the academic business of Trinity College and the University of Cambridge. There are substantial discussions of each of Whitehead's publications during this period, including *Principia Mathematica*, in which mathematician Whitehead and philosopher Russell work together to show that the foundations of mathematics may be placed in pure deductive logic.

Indeed, a major feature of the book is its treatment of the relations between Whitehead and Russell, especially during their collaboration on *Principia Mathematica*. Russell was the younger men: he went up to Cambridge in 1890, by which time Whitehead had been a fellow for six years. Whitehead supported and encouraged Russell as a student; as colleagues they found they had a common interest in the logical foundations of mathematics. Each of them produced a substantial work on the subject—Whitehead's was *A Treatise on Universal Algebra, with Applications*.
(1898), Russell’s, *The Principles of Mathematics* (1903)—each of which was meant to be followed by a second volume. As things turned out, Russell induced Whitehead to work with him on what was meant to be the second volume of his *Principles*. But after some years it became clear that the project they were engaged in should stand independent of the earlier book. The work was finished by late 1909 and published, in three volumes, in 1910, 1912, and 1913. (A projected fourth volume, on geometry, was never produced.) The story of their collaboration in this great enterprise is an engrossing one—it has its technical parts, inevitably—and Lowe also has interesting things to say about Russell as a person and about the relations between Alfred and Evelyn Whitehead and Bertrand and Alys Russell. The two men made a remarkable team.

On the personal side, Whitehead’s teaching years at Cambridge were marked by two major events: his prolonged debate with himself as to whether he should shift from Anglicanism to the Roman Catholic communion (which ended in his becoming, for years, an agnostic); and his marriage to Evelyn Wade, who is the most colorful of the characters in this biography. It is evident that Lowe is not much of an admirer of Evelyn Whitehead. He does acknowledge Whitehead’s devotion to her as well as the important ways in which she gave her husband needed support. On the other hand, Evelyn is portrayed also as a very possessive, overly romantic person given to dramatizing events in her life, and also as a “sofa lady” who from time to time had false angina, unconsciously using her illness to influence people. But we shall not have a complete picture of Mrs. Whitehead until Lowe’s second volume is before us, since the greater part of the Whiteheads’ married life falls within the scope of that volume.

This is a highly readable book. Lowe has a relaxed, forthright style; and he has succeeded in putting together, out of unpromisingly skimpy material, a surprisingly rich narrative. Certainly it is time for a biography of this notable thinker. Whitehead had a mind of great power, scope, and imagination. Perhaps few would dispute Lowe’s claim that he was “the most powerful systematic thinker that philosophy had seen since Hegel.” There is a continuing interest, on the part of some philosophers and theologians, in Whitehead’s key ideas. But even persons averse to, or indifferent to, his philosophical system may still find in his writings valuable insights and intimations. His frequent flashes of eloquence make him one of the most quotable of philosophers—e.g., “Philosophy may not neglect the multifariousness of the world—the fairies dance, and Christ is nailed to the cross.” It is good to begin to learn more about the person behind the words.

—Reviewed by W. E. Schlaretzki

Sir Gilbert Murray (1866-1957)


We do not often think of Gilbert Murray nowadays, but in his own time he cut quite a figure. Son-in-law of the ninth Earl of Carlisle, one of the wealthy Whig lords who had dominated English politics since the Great and Glorious Revolution, he was a leader in radical Liberal politics from the Boer War to Woman’s Suffrage. Moving in the progressive circles that promoted "Ibsen-ity," Murray wrote plays and translations of Greek tragedies that had a significant impact on the English theater of the first decade of this century. George Bernard Shaw said his version of Euripides’ *Bacchae* “came into our dramatic literature with all the impulsive power of an original work.”