



George Harrison Russell
(1923–2006)

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George Russell exercised enormous and benign influence across the entire span of his long and noble career. He described the effect of his own great teacher in Cambridge, the Benedictine monk David Knowles, as ‘osmotic’. Knowles, he said, wasn’t a proselytiser; what was ‘absorbed’ was perhaps more important than the specific content of courses.¹ The same could be said of George Russell’s own teaching (largely on the subject of medieval literature): there was certainly plenty of solid content in his courses, but it was all delivered as the radiant, life-giving sustenance of a living tradition.

Russell’s unforgettable teaching was simultaneously magisterial and deeply humble. Young Australians coming in fresh from the sunlight and the beaches met something altogether different in the imposing figure of George Russell: his very presence and regard silently told young Australian students, with all their unbounded optimism, that they may yet have something to learn about the crooked timber of humanity; and yet George Russell also had a ready and sympathetic laugh. His posture, that of a large man slightly hunched forward, was expressive. On the one hand, the forward lean was produced by pressure from above: George had the look of a man patiently shouldering what was weak in the world; on the other, that same forward lean was an expression of meticulous attentiveness to his interlocutor. George took his students seriously, perhaps more seriously than they took themselves. He encouraged his most committed students to deepen their training overseas. What an extraordinary teacher he was.

George Russell was born in Wellington, New Zealand, on 24 August 1923; he attended Palmerston North High School and worked his way through university at Victoria College, Wellington (now Victoria University) ‘by cutting hay with two horses an old farmer had given him’.² He won the University Medal in 1943 and served as a Lecturer in English until 1946, in which year he was on the third civilian boat to England to take up a doctoral scholarship at Pembroke College Cambridge.

He took his PhD in 1948. After spells at King's College London and the University of Sydney, Russell was appointed to his first Chair (at the age of 30), at the University of Queensland, which he held between 1953 and 1959. He held a Readership and then the McCaughey Chair at the University of Sydney until 1965; a Chair at ANU between 1966 and 1971; and, in 1971, he took up a Chair at the University of Melbourne, from which illness forced him into retirement in 1983. He was a Foundation Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities.

After his premature retirement and move, with his wife Isabel, to North Western Victoria, he taught at the University of the Third Age in Mildura and, briefly, at La Trobe University as an Adjunct Professor. I remember not being at all surprised when a friend told me that George had recently given a class on the British film *Trainspotting*. George was alive to the world around him.

Everything about George Russell inspired confidence: everyone certainly had confidence in him (even if he seemed ready to distrust himself at times); and in his company people felt more confident in themselves. Perhaps this explains why he was consistently called upon to repair dysfunctional administrative systems.

Post-war Australian departments of English were grappling with the pressures of professionalisation; intellectual life in Australian universities (certainly in Australian departments of English) is in any case fraught with incessant culture wars. George Russell's catholic sympathies marked him out as a person who wouldn't be signing up to the manifesto of any puritan or militant camp; his deep wisdom, his disinterestedness and his personal gravitas marked him out as the person who would be asked to resolve the infighting of warring militants. This he did, although the effort required was not negligible or without its costs. He said this, for example, of his time in Melbourne: 'I wouldn't say I was ever unhappy there, though I was often exhausted, or disappointed, or exasperated'.³

For all his gifts as teacher and institutional leader, however, George Russell was also a great scholar. And the central object of his scholarship was the grand but messy late fourteenth-century masterpiece, *Piers Plowman*. George's point of entry into this work was, characteristically, via its most difficult and punishing portal, that of its many manuscripts and their bewildering patterns of variants. The editing of *Piers Plowman* has, across the twentieth century, swallowed a number of scholarly lives. Editing the poem is an extreme test of character. George Russell passed the test as a triumphant survivor.

The poem itself might be said to train its editors. For the work's most profound ethical commitment is to sufferance and patience. Langland, the poem's author, apprehends these two words in their full semantic range, from 'patience' in the modern sense, to 'suffering', to 'allowing'. George Russell was the poem's best editor, precisely because

he best exemplified the poem's own ethical value. Russell 'suffered' the poem's complexity. He refused to force the material evidence into premature clarity; he refused to subject the complexity of that evidence to ideological convictions about how a great poet should write; he refused to ignore or dismiss the value of what the scribes wrote. Russell waited until he was ready; and in 1997 his triumphant edition of the C-Text of the poem appeared, *Piers Plowman: The C-Version; Will's Vision of Piers Plowman, Do-Well, Do-Better and Do-Best* (London: Athlone Press).

No account of George Russell should or could omit recognition of the fact that he was part of a wonderful and generous family team: his wife Isabel, who survives him, is herself a teacher. She is a great and life-giving force, as was her very remarkable and inspiring husband.⁴

James Simpson

Notes

¹ Cited from Vincent Buckley, "George Russell as a Topic in His Own Right", in *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G.H. Russell*, edited by Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson (Cambridge: D S Brewer, 1986), pp. 1-15 (at p. 3).

² Cited from Denise McCarthy, "George Harrison Russell, Scholar", *Age*, 12 April, 2006.

³ Buckley, "George Russell as a Topic in His Own Right", p. 5.

⁴ I warmly acknowledge the generous help of Isabel Russell in the composition of this obituary.