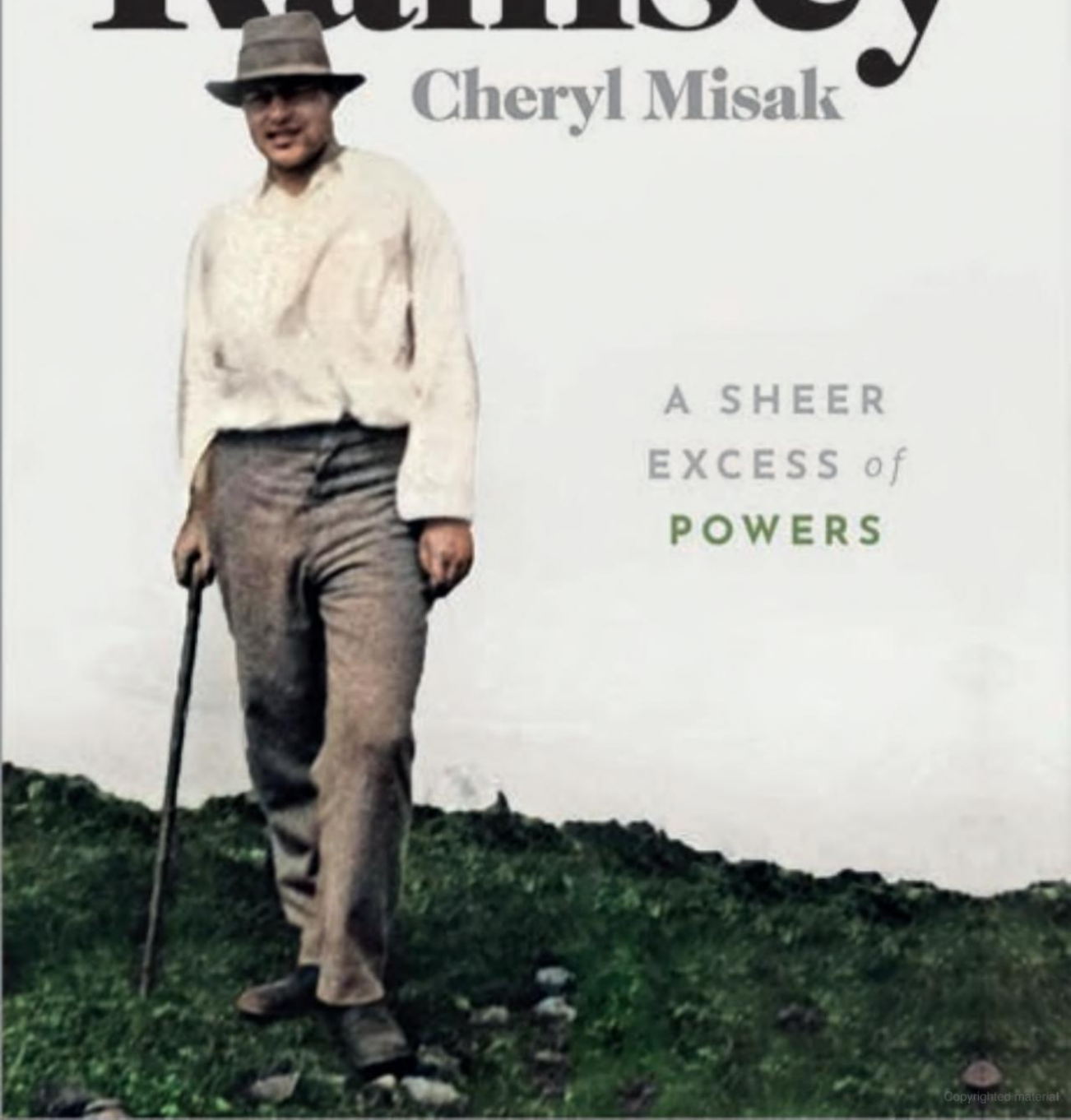
Frank Ramsey

Cheryl Misak



A SHEER EXCESS *of* POWERS

CHERYL MISAK

FRANK RAMSEY

a sheer excess of powers

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS: ARCHIVAL SOURCES

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ASP/RC.1974.01	Rudolf Carnap Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh Library System
ASP/HR.1973.01	Hans Reichenbach Papers, Archives of Scientific Philosophy, University of Pittsburgh Library System
BL	British Library
BK	Kingsley Martin Collection, Sussex University
BR	Ludwig Wittgenstein Collection: Research Institute Brenner Archive, University of Innsbruck
BRA	Bertrand Russell Archive, McMaster University
BTTS	*Better than the Stars,* (Mellor, 1978)
CA	Cambridgeshire Archives
CUL	Cambridge University Archives
DA	Maurice Drury Archive, Mary Immaculate College, Limerick, Ireland
EC	Einstein Collection, Hebrew University
GCA	Girton College Archives, Cambridge
KH	Harrod and Keynes Notes and Memoranda, University of Tokyo Archives
KCA	King's College Archive, Cambridge
LRA	Lettice Ramsey Autobiography, courtesy of Stephen Burch
LWG	Ludwig Wittgenstein: Gesamtbriefwechsel / Complete Correspondence, Electronic Edition
MBP	Max Black Papers, Cornell University
MCA	Magdalene College Archives, Cambridge
OF	Ogden Fonds, McMaster University
TCL	Trinity College Library, Trinity College, Cambridge
TFL	Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto

TFL MS/COLL/735	Laurie Kahn Ramsey Collection, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto
VCA	Vienna Circle Archives, Noord-Hollands Archief
WCA	Winchester College Archives

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS: PUBLISHED WORKS OF FRANK RAMSEY AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN

Details can be found in the Bibliography.

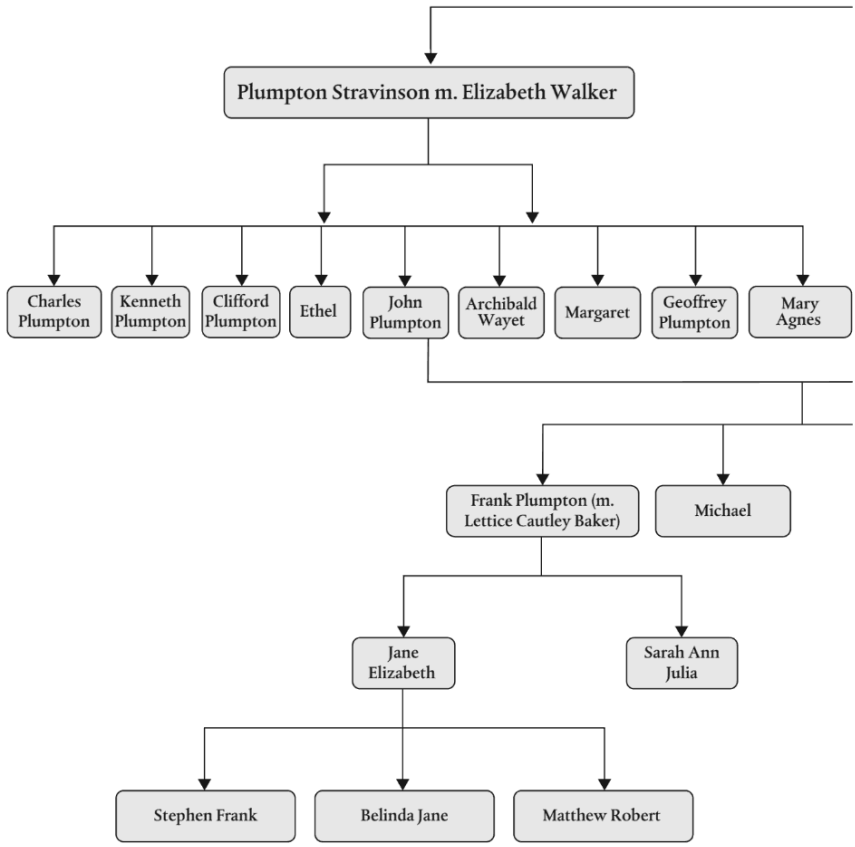
Ramsey

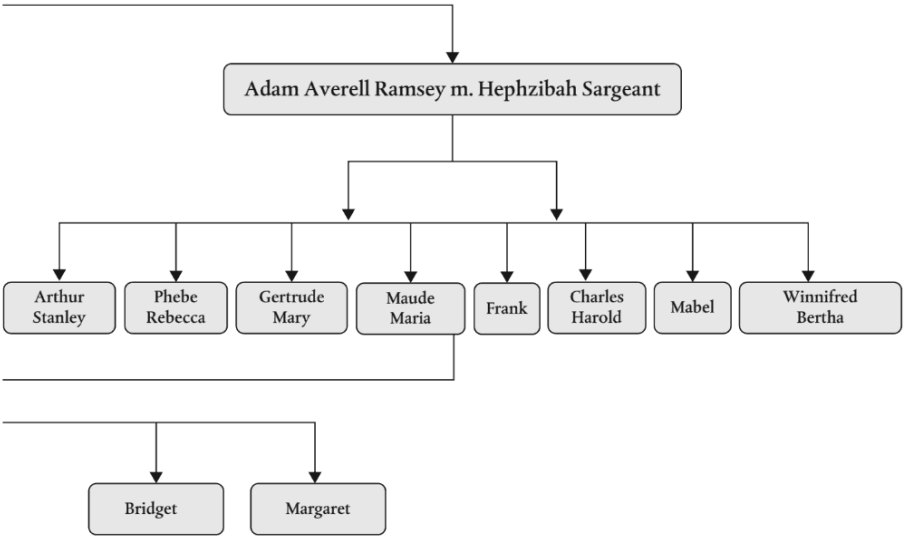
C	'Chance'
CN	Critical Notice of Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
DP	'The Douglas Proposals'
DS	'On There Being No Discussable Subject'
EBFM	'The Foundations of Mathematics', *Encyclopedia Britannica*
EBM	'Mathematics: Mathematical Logic', *Encyclopedia Britannica*
EBR	'Russell, Bertrand Arthur William', *Encyclopedia Britannica*
FM	'The Foundations of Mathematics'
FP	'Facts and Propositions'
GC	'General Propositions and Causality'
K	'Knowledge'
KP	'Mr. Keynes on Probability'
ML	'Mathematical Logic'
NP	'The Nature of Propositions'
NPPM	*Notes on Philosophy, Probability and Mathematics*
NST	'Notes on Saving and Taxation'
OT	*On Truth*
P	'Philosophy'
RMM	Review of Ogden and Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning*
RT	Review of Keynes *A Treatise of Probability*
TH	'Theories'
TP	'Truth and Probability'
TT	'A Contribution to the Theory of Taxation'
U	'Universals'
UMA	'Universals and the "Method of Analysis"'

Wittgenstein

CV	*Culture and Value*
LAPR	*Lectures & Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief*
LFM	*Lectures on the Foundations of Mathematics*
M	Letter to the Editor of *Mind*
MCI	'Arthur MacIver's Diary: Cambridge'
PG	*Philosophical Grammar*
PI	*Philosophical Investigations*
PPO	*Ludwig Wittgenstein: Public and Private Occasions*
PR	*Philosophical Remarks*
RPP	*Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology, Volume I*
T	*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*
WCL	*Wittgenstein in Cambridge: Letters and Documents*
WPCR	*Wittgenstein's Philosophical Conversations with Rush Rhees*
Z	*Zettel*

TRUNCATED FAMILY TREE





AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Some remarkable people were involved in more unusual ways. Amartya Sen convinced me to take on the project over lunch at Trinity College in 2015. Steven Methven, in addition to reading the manuscript twice, introduced me to Ramsey's grandson—Stephen Frank Burch. One of the pleasures in writing this biography was spending time with Stephen. He never knew his grandfather. But his grandmother Lettice was a constant and loving presence in his life. Stephen trusted me with a large satchel of original material, despite the sensitivities and intrusions that inevitably arise when a stranger delves into the life of a family member. When it came to the decision to grant permission to quote, he was magnanimous. It was a pleasure also to meet Ramsey's nieces: one of them, Anne Paul Jones, granted me permission to reproduce the photo of the Ramsey family taken in 1919.

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anniversary of Ramsey's death. Pedro Garcia Duarte organized two sessions on Ramsey at the History of Economics Society meetings. Brian McGuinness hosted me at his home in Siena to discuss Ramsey and Wittgenstein. Michael Nedo provided generous access to his extraordinary collection of Wittgenstein materials and a copy of a rarely seen four-page original manuscript in Ramsey's hand. The exceptional physicians David Naylor and Mark Tonelli figured out, as much as is possible, the cause of death, and Mark commented on the entire manuscript in draft. Roger Penrose provided insight into his father Lionel and Max Newman. Rainer Lackner of the Kirchler Hotel in Hinterux made our stay more informative and warned us to stay off the mountain when the weather locked in. Monika Gruber took me to Ramsey's flat and Gretl Wittgenstein's house in Vienna. Hermione Lee saved me from errors with respect to Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. Ray Monk kindly answered queries about his biography of Wittgenstein, as did Henry Hemming about his biography of Geoffrey Pyke. Bernie Linsky sent me the complete set of the TLS *Wittgenstein in Red* letters.

This is the second happy opportunity I've had to work closely with archivists. Patricia McGuire and Peter Monteith at King's College, Cambridge provided endless support and information, and Patricia made excellent comments on sections of the manuscript. When I talked with them in the King's Archive Centre, I was standing precisely where Ramsey's old rooms had been. Jonathan Smith of the Wren Library at Trinity College, Cambridge pointed me to material not readily found, and cast his educated eye over parts of the manuscript. Suzanne Foster at Winchester was a wonderful guide, unstinting host, and careful reader. My old friend Jacky Cox, now Keeper of the University Archives at Cambridge, was a brilliant source of ideas as well as a reader of various sections of the manuscript. Lance Lugar in the Archives of Scientific Philosophy at the University of Pittsburgh went out of his way to find material in the Ramsey, Carnap, and Reichenbach collections, as well as to reproduce the letter from Ramsey to Wittgenstein. Catherine Sutherland and Matilda Watson in the Pepys Library at Magdalene College, Cambridge and Evan Fay Earle at Cornell University Archives also provided vital materials. Jennifer Toews and Mark Pellegrino at the University of Toronto Fisher Rare Books Library efficiently took in and archived the complex Laurie Kahn Ramsey Collection.

This book would not have been possible without vital institutional support, for which I am thankful. The chair of my department, Martin Pickavé, the Faculty of Arts and Science Dean's Office, and the Office of the Provost at the University of Toronto generously accommodated my many leaves. The book was started in 2014–15, when I was a very happy Visiting Fellow Commoner at Trinity College, Cambridge, the college of Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, and the undergraduate Ramsey. In 2016–17,

a Humboldt Research Prize enabled me to spend 12 months in Stefan Gosepath's research group at the Free University in Berlin. During that year, in which I wrote a first draft, the librarians at the Wissenshaftskolleg zu Berlin fetched over 300 items for me, as the spouse of a fellow. In 2017–18, the Guggenheim Foundation supported the project with a Fellowship and the Oxford Centre for Life Writing hosted me as a Visiting Scholar. The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada provided material support for travel and for my two superb primary graduate student research assistants. Soroush Marouzi came on board for the final two years and provided crucial help, especially with the probability and economics sections and the endnotes, and in the Cambridge archives. Griffin Klemick was with the book the whole way, providing terrific editorial support, saving me from countless mistakes, and taking on the yeoman task of compiling the index.

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PREFACE

Beginning at the End

Any biography of Frank Ramsey must start with, and be haunted by, his death. He was one of the most powerful and influential thinkers Cambridge ever produced. Yet he died just shy of his twenty-seventh birthday, in January 1930. In November 1929, the young don at King's College, Cambridge was ill with jaundice. His family and friends weren't alarmed, as the ailment was not uncommon. A few weeks into his illness his wife Lettice herself came down with flu and Frank was moved across town to his father's house, his old family home. Lettice had their two little girls to look after, and needed a break. His brother Michael came home for Christmas, and on New Year's Day, wrote in his diary:

> Then to Frank. He was in bed with jaundice, poor fellow, and he looked very weak. We talked about the usual sort of topics and argued less than usual. He thought that a lot of unhappiness in the world was caused by 'unsatisfied lust'. I expounded to him the desire 'to contemplate a oneness' and he was tolerant, though he didn't understand. 'Have you had any more success at this trick?' he asked!

Michael, 'Mick' to the family, was at this time a vicar's assistant in Liverpool. He would go on to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Frank used to call him 'my little brother the curate'. Michael was very much given to the contemplation of 'oneness', and not at all given to regretting lust unsatisfied. Frank was a resolute atheist, immersed in bohemian culture and interested in Freud. He thought it both frustrating and comic that his brother, to whom he was so close, was devoting his life to a God that didn't exist. They often argued about it, mostly in a good-humoured way.

On 3 January, Michael noted that Frank 'still looks ill'. Frank wrote to Lettice from his new sick-room, both concerned about her and sounding the first note of alarm about his condition. He asked if she would consult someone in her physician-populated family and ask what he knew about jaundice. Lettice contacted her uncle Bobby, a senior surgeon at Guy's Hospital in London. Bobby was taken aback by Frank's condition and things then moved quickly. Frank was moved by ambulance

to Guy's, where he was admitted to the Lazarus Ward for exploratory surgery. Two dear friends, Frances Marshall (later Partridge) and Ludwig Wittgenstein, joined Lettice at his bedside during these grim days. There was to be no miraculous resurrection from Lazarus Ward. Frank died in the early hours of Sunday, 19 January, leaving behind his family and a devastated set of friends and colleagues.

Also left bereft were great swaths of scholarship. If we include his undergraduate days, Frank Ramsey was an academic for ten years. In that short span, he made indelible marks on as many as seven disciplines, depending how you count: philosophy, economics, pure mathematics, mathematical logic, the foundations of mathematics, probability theory, and decision theory. The Austrian economist Joseph Schumpeter described him as being like a young thoroughbred, frolicking with ideas and champing at the bit to work out solutions to problems:

> Certainly, that young man was a true product of Cambridge at its best—nobody can have any doubt about it who ever met him, which the present writer did but once. In discussion he impressed one curiously like an overgrown two-year-old who misbehaves on the race-course from sheer excess of powers.

John Maynard Keynes struck a similar note in his obituary, describing a boyish enthusiasm and a lack of constraint in Ramsey's thinking, laughter, and relationships:

> His bulky Johnsonian frame, his spontaneous gurgling laugh, the simplicity of his feelings and reactions, half-alarming sometimes and occasionally almost cruel in their directness and literalness, his honesty of mind and heart, his modesty, and the amazing, easy efficiency of the intellectual machine which ground away behind his wide temples and broad, smiling face . . .

My subtitle and aim derives from these observations of Schumpeter and Keynes. I aim to articulate the quality of mind and heart possessed by this extraordinary young man possessed of a sheer excess of powers.

The Mind

As Schumpeter said, Ramsey was very much a product of Cambridge. It was a particularly luminous period for that university. During the three decades of Ramsey's life, Cambridge was home, off and on, to the philosophers Bertrand Russell, G.E. Moore, and Ludwig Wittgenstein; the economists J.M. Keynes, Arthur Pigou, and Piero Sraffa; and the mathematicians G.H. Hardy and J.E. Littlewood. Ramsey came into substantial contact with them all.

But although Ramsey was very much a product of his time and place, he was one of those rare minds whose ideas seem to bound over the thinking of his contemporaries, launching the discussion into a future that only he could glimpse. He has attracted an almost mythical status in all the disciplines he touched. One must keep in mind what early death can do to a reputation. It can amplify promise and project greatness, which, had death not intervened, might have been compromised by later disappointment. But even when we account for that, Ramsey's genius is clear.

He is perhaps most widely known for his trailblazing work on choice under conditions of uncertainty. His paper 'Truth and Probability' solved the problem of how to measure degrees of belief, and then provided a logic of partial belief and a model of subjective expected utility. These results underpin contemporary economics and Bayesian statistics, as well as much of psychology, artificial intelligence, and other social and physical sciences. 'Truth and Probability' was not published in Ramsey's lifetime, as he was in the middle of expanding on it, by writing a book with the same title, when he died.

In economics proper, Ramsey published two papers in Keynes's *Economic Journal*, one on optimum taxation and one on optimal savings. Each has become a classic, and each has launched a branch of economics and a sizeable handful of Nobel prize-winning ideas. He identified very modern problems and solutions to them, setting agendas that are still being pursued a century later. His workhorse model (now modified and known as the Ramsey–Cass–Koopmans model) is still a feature of most graduate course textbooks and his name in economics also lives on in Ramsey Pricing, Ramsey's Problem, the Keynes–Ramsey Rule, and more.

In philosophy, he made advances in logic, foundations of mathematics, philosophy of science, truth theory, philosophy of language, and decision theory. Donald Davidson, a leading philosopher of the twentieth century, in 1999 coined the term 'the Ramsey Effect': the phenomenon of finding out that your exciting and apparently original philosophical discovery has been already presented, and presented more elegantly, by Frank Ramsey. In addition to this wonderful catch-all label, philosophy, like economics, has named specific innovations and approaches after Ramsey: Ramsey Sentences, the Ramsey Test for Conditionals, Ramsification, Ramseyan Humility, and more.

In pure mathematics, we have a fruitful branch of combinatorics and graph theory. His discovery here was quite literally an aside. He had been working on the *Entscheidungsproblem* that the German mathematician David Hilbert had set in 1928. It asked whether there was a way of deciding whether or not any particular sentence in a formal system is valid or true. Ramsey solved a special case of the problem, pushed its general expression to the limit, and saw that limit clearly.

Shortly after his death, there would be great excitement when Kurt Gödel, and then Alan Turing, showed the limit to be hard and fast, and the problem to be unsolvable. But a theorem that Ramsey had proven along the way in his contribution, an important mathematical truth now called Ramsey's Theorem, showed that in apparently disordered systems, there must be some order. The branch of mathematics that studies the conditions under which order must occur is now called Ramsey Theory.

He also played a major role in the history of thought. Even as an undergraduate, Ramsey held his own in the impressive environs of Cambridge. He shook Keynes's confidence in his newly published probability theory; wrote a damning report on C.H. Douglas's Social Credit proposals; and perhaps most strikingly, had an immense influence on Wittgenstein. In 1921, at the age of eighteen, Ramsey was asked to translate Wittgenstein's early and difficult work, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*. As soon as it was published (in 1922), he wrote a Critical Notice of it which still stands as one of the most important commentaries. Indeed, we will see that Ramsey's persistent objections to the theory of meaning and truth set out in the *Tractatus* were largely responsible for Wittgenstein's turn away from the *Tractatus* and towards what we think of as the later Wittgenstein. This was one of the most important shifts in the history of philosophy. Wittgenstein was himself largely responsible for the way philosophy unfolded in Cambridge and beyond. Ramsey's book, had it been completed, might have reset this major part course of philosophy.

Much of Ramsey's work had a delayed effect. That was partly caused by its prescient nature. The rest of the world had to catch up with him, especially on technical matters. We still struggle to work out some moves and proofs Ramsey declared obvious. The delayed effect was also caused by the fact that much of his work was unfinished, his ideas left in drafts or notes, alive with thought, but destined to stay in their raw state. His friend and colleague Richard Braithwaite published some of these drafts and notes in his 1931 selection of Ramsey's work, *The Foundations of Mathematics and Other Logical Essays*. Braithwaite tidied up some of the manuscripts and provided titles, in ways that subtly changed their meaning. He declined to publish any of the book manuscript, only coming to appreciate its significance much later. That manuscript and various other notes were published only in the 1990s. That is, only recently has the full and accurate picture of Ramsey's thought been available. One of the aims of this book is to bring to light the importance of the relatively unknown work, as well as the famous papers.

It will become clear that one of the ways in which Ramsey was so special—and radical—was that he saw it as a mark of a good theory that it be 'realistic', or able to make a difference in practice. His general approach was to move away from high

metaphysics, mystical solutions to our deepest problems, unanswerable questions, and indefinable concepts, and move towards human problems that are in principle solvable in down-to-earth ways. As Steven Methven has put it, Ramsey dispensed with myth and metaphor, and instead placed human beings—'finite, fallible and yet extraordinarily functional'—at the heart of his theories. During Ramsey's time, Bertrand Russell, Wittgenstein, and the Vienna Circle were all engaged in a quest for certainty and logical purity. They conceived of truth in terms of our propositions getting right a reality wholly independent of us. Ramsey would retain a place for this kind of absolute truth for a very small class of propositions. But for the vast bulk of our beliefs, he stood in opposition to his contemporaries. He was engaged in a quest for beliefs that would work best for human beings.

The Heart

The first American Nobel Laureate in Economics, Paul Samuelson, rightly said that 'Frank Ramsey was a genius by all tests for genius.' But Ramsey was the antithesis of the kind of figure with which this label is often associated. He was not an enigmatic, cult-encouraging eccentric. He was that rarity among so-called geniuses—genial, open, and modest. He was, as his brother put it, 'very accessible to his fellow human beings'. 'Never a showman', said Ivor (I.A.) Richards, one of the founders of the new Cambridge school of literary criticism. Frances Marshall never heard anyone say a word against him—she didn't think it would be possible. Richards summed him up thus: 'Frank was never less than serious about anything and never solemn about anything either.' But the best one-liner is his brother Michael's: despite his being so clever and accomplished, Frank had 'a total lack of uppishness'. Wittgenstein told a story that also perfectly captures Ramsey's character. When Wittgenstein was a schoolteacher in a small village in Austria, Ramsey came to visit. In one of the classrooms there was a physiological diagram on the wall designed to show that certain 'bad habits' could give one an enlarged heart. Ramsey opined that a pupil's ambition should be to have as big a heart as possible.

Ramsey's own heart was outsized, as were his laugh and physique. His head, said Braithwaite in an obituary, was pentagonal and his smile gentle; his 'enormous physical size' was perfectly in proportion to 'the range of his intellect and his devastating laugh'. Moore, in his copy of that obituary, underlined 'devastating'. Patrick Wilkinson, who would be a colleague of Ramsey's at King's College, said that 'He shook with laughter'. So distinctive was his laugh that when his sister Bridget's son was a student in Ramsey's old undergraduate college, one of the college servants heard the laugh (without seeing the owner) and, in a state of astonishment, announced that it sounded just like Frank Ramsey had risen from the dead.

Ramsey thus comes across not only as one of the most impressive minds in the history of philosophy, mathematics, and economics, but also as one of the most attractive personalities. Even if we take into account the tendency to romanticize the traits of someone who died so young, there is overwhelming evidence of a simple, honest, hearty, and generous character. But there are flaws too, and I will not step around them. Indeed, Ramsey's naturalness and appetite for life, while usually being a strength of his character, was sometimes a weakness. It made him naïve and wretched in his romantic life, until he found his footing. While that is far from unusual in a young man, we will see that it was such a problem for Ramsey that it could spill into a bitter fault-finding with himself and his friends.

It might be thought that if Ramsey somehow managed all of his astonishing intellectual advances in a mere decade, he could not have had much room left for living, and that any biography must be mostly about his work. But that is not true. He lived an interesting life in interesting times. He started his Cambridge undergraduate degree in October 1920, not long after the First World War, with the surviving youth of Britain still struggling with the loss and with their re-entry into a peacetime world. He was part of the flow of a certain sort of English person who went to Vienna to be psychoanalysed, and was 'cured' by one of Freud's students. He was a vital member of the Apostles, the secret and elite Cambridge discussion society, during one of its most compelling periods, and part of the Bloomsbury set of writers and artists, with their open attitudes towards sex, their love of friendship, and their witty, gossipy, shocking conversation.

Indeed, Ramsey seemed not to know anyone who was boring or dull. Many of his friends went on to important lives. Lionel Penrose became the founder of modern British genetics. Kingsley Martin became the editor of *The New Statesman*. Max Newman went on to become a leading Second World War code-breaker and a computer pioneer. This biography will shed light on the lives of these, and many more, major figures in British modern intellectual history, as we see them intersect with Ramsey's life. We will also get an indication of how this remarkable group, in the hothouse that was 1920s Cambridge, played a key role in shaping the subsequent trajectory of philosophy, economics, and mathematics. By gaining a better understanding of this history, we might improve our understanding of the intellectual disciplines in which we engage and thus improve our understanding of ourselves.

It may appear to the more austere academic that Ramsey's personal experience is irrelevant to what is really important about him—the intellectual advances. It might even be thought a violation to dredge up intimate facts about, for instance, his emotional life and his sexual relationships. But these sentiments are, I think,

misguided. For one thing, it will become clear that Ramsey and his wife were uninhibited about such matters. Indeed, Lettice Ramsey deposited a copy of almost all the sensitive material in the King's College Archive Centre. This means that it has been widely available and that many of the intimate details are already in print. Ramsey's sister, Margaret Paul, reproduces some of the most painful letters and diary entries in her memoir of her brother. Henry Hemming, in his biography of Geoffrey Pyke, describes an early embarrassment in Ramsey's sex life. John Forrester and Laura Cameron have written and quoted much about Ramsey's psychoanalysis and the personal problems that caused him to seek treatment. But these matters have not always been placed in their full context—for instance, in the frame of reference of the free attitudes of Bloomsbury and the fashion for Freud. So one reason for including the intimacies of Ramsey's life in this biography is to rectify misleading impressions.

Another reason for including matters of the heart as well as the mind is that Ramsey's ideas become more distinctly focused when we see how they are aligned with his personality. His instincts, in all parts of his life, were straightforward and directed to the facts. We might go so far as to say that differences in the personalities between Ramsey and one of his most important interlocutors, Wittgenstein, manifest themselves as differences in their philosophy. Fichte famously said:

> What sort of philosophy one chooses depends . . . on what sort of man one is; for a philosophical system is not a dead piece of furniture that we can reject or accept as we wish; it is rather a thing animated by the soul of the person who holds it.

I will suggest that this is especially true of Ramsey and Wittgenstein.

Finally, those who are interested in people, as well as ideas, will want to see how Ramsey's apparent effortless superiority was set against a background in which he struggled with the full range of human emotion and anxiety. He was held in high esteem from the time he was a child and was moved ahead of his age group in school, with the consequence that he was always at least three years younger than the rest of his cohort. He would suffer for that. Though he may have appeared on the surface as a dispassionate logical brain, Frank Ramsey was as emotionally vulnerable as the next person. He was sharply aware of that fragility, and it interested him both personally and intellectually. In addition to being a superbly gifted technical thinker, he explored topics in psychology, ethics, politics, and the meaning of life. I will venture that Ramsey's poignant remarks on the timeless problem of what it is to be human are as fruitful to us today as is his work on more specialized topics.

The Challenges

One can understand why a full intellectual biography of Ramsey has been so long in coming. Many of the topics and problems he pursued seem impenetrable to all but a small number of specialists, and their range is staggering. Anyone who would try to fully understand Ramsey must be comfortable both in the minute crannies of technical scholarship and on the grand peaks of abstract thought. The task is daunting.

What we have to date is a wonderful BBC radio programme on Ramsey, a sister's substantive memoir, an electronically available trade biography, and biographical chapters in fine commentaries on Ramsey's work.* But no comprehensive biography has been undertaken. Because we have been waiting nigh on a century for it, I have tried to do what might be impossible. I have tried to satisfy all the parties interested in Ramsey for one reason or another—for his advances in decision theory, probability theory, and mathematics; his work on the deepest questions in philosophy, such as the nature of truth and meaning; his ground-breaking advances in economics; his relationship to Wittgenstein; his foray into psychoanalysis, and on and on. The result is an introduction to his work, as well as an account of his life.

My own expertise is in philosophy, and there is a plausible case to be made that this discipline provides the best basis from which to try to tackle the whole of Ramsey's thought, although a philosophically minded economist would also be suited to the task. Nonetheless, I will not attempt ham-fisted explanations of work that goes beyond my ken. I have asked some of the best people in, for instance, Ramsey Theory in combinatorial mathematics, optimal taxation theory, and optimal savings theory, to write short guest boxes. Indeed, even where something of interest to the specialist is within my range, I have asked guests to explain the brilliance of Ramsey's view, or show where sparks from his mind have alighted. My text is designed for a certain kind of general reader, whereas the material in the guest boxes is for those who know, or want to know, more. Those boxes will be invaluable for some, and unintelligible to others. They can be skipped without rendering unclear the line of thought in the main text.

Another challenge is that Ramsey's work comes into focus only when we see it as responsive to his contemporaries and to the moral, political, and economic affairs of

* See Hugh Mellor's *Better than the Stars* (BTTS) and 'Cambridge Philosophers I: F.P. Ramsey' (1995); Margaret Paul's *Frank Ramsey: A Sister's Memoir* (2012); Karl Sabbagh's *Shooting Star: The Brief and Brilliant Life of Frank Ramsey* (2013); Nils-Eric Sahlin's *The Philosophy of F.P. Ramsey* (1990a); Pedro Garcia Duarte's 'Frank P. Ramsey: A Cambridge Economist' (2009a); and Gabriele Taylor's 'Frank Ramsey: A Biographical Sketch' (2006).

his time. A fair bit of background on the likes Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein, Keynes, Pigou is necessary. Separate and weighty books would be required to get each of these thinkers right. I have had to severely telescope their positions.

To make matters even more difficult, Ramsey often produced highly compressed arguments and proofs, expecting us to be able to fill in the gaps and keep up with his pace. He often made an important point by employing a witty remark, and generally did not belabour explanations. As Moore put it shortly after Ramsey's death:

> [he] had . . . an exceptional power of drawing conclusions from a complicated set of facts . . . But sometimes I feel that he fails to explain things as clearly as he could have done, simply because he does not see that any explanation is needed.

Twenty years later, Ramsey's friend, the economist and statistician Roy Harrod, captured his cerebral manner perfectly:

> The intellectual process is at white heat; but the style is delightfully cool, like that of some old naturalist taking one for a ramble in the country and making desultory observations.

Ramsey's early death also hinders our ability to provide the explanations that Moore and others have found missing. He might have done so, had he had more time. Moreover, we tend to interpret an individual's youthful thought through the lens of their mature or adult thought, and we cannot do that here. Ramsey had very little adulthood for us to go on.

The modern cast of Ramsey's ideas introduces a further challenge. It makes the danger of engaging in Whig history omnipresent. There is a temptation to read his work by viewing it from the perspective of contemporary theories, thinking that Ramsey leads inexorably to this particular present. Even contemporaries of Ramsey, who were interviewed in the early 1980s, had their recollections burdened with all sorts of more recent events and theories. I will place Ramsey in the context in which he found himself, in an attempt to avoid such distortions.

But I will also need to cautiously employ contemporary standpoints. Ramsey's thought is almost always described as being ahead of his time. So I will need to take a look back from where we are now and see what his contribution were, both to the way the history of ideas unfolded and to freestanding ideas. The first endeavour is made a little easier by the fact that Ramsey's questions and ways of answering them left a traceable mark in Cambridge. For many years after his death, when Wittgenstein and Moore held their philosophical discussions, they would pepper their remarks with 'Would Ramsey say this?' or 'Would Ramsey think that?' Moore

would still be writing in his notebooks what Ramsey would say about various matters as late as 1953. Richard Braithwaite based much of his own work on Ramsey's, and Wittgenstein's turn away from his early position was largely caused by Ramsey. His influence, that is, continued to shape discussions long after his death. I will give indications of Ramsey's enduring effects by tracing connections of thought back to him when those lines are there to be seen. When there is a break in the lineage—when Ramsey's ideas reappear decades later without an obvious path back to him—I will offer explanations of that.

A related danger would be to succumb to the temptation of taking Ramsey to be a kind of god. It seems that intellectuals, like other breeds of humans, need heroes—those super-talented rarities around whom stories can be built. Such narratives no doubt simplify complex histories and vest too much credit in formational figures. Correctives can and should be administered, bringing to the fore those who have been relegated to the shadowy background. I have done some of that here, bringing to light some little-known figures, such as the Polish probability theorist Janina Hosiasson. But at the same time, we do require coherent accounts of how we arrived at where we are. We require maps of a discipline if we are to make sense of it, and those maps will point to iconic features in the landscape. A wilderness trail could be signposted every five feet, but it is a better trail if the directions are spaced out at important junctions. Ramsey merits prominent signposts in our histories of philosophy, economics, and mathematics.

One challenge seems trivial in comparison, but nonetheless proved difficult for me: I wasn't sure what to call him. I have decided to use 'Frank' when I discuss his life and 'Ramsey' when I discuss his work. There aren't too many photographs of him, as the most important album (from 1928 to 1929, when Lettice was starting to take a lot of photos) has gone missing. But in the surviving pictures, an unaffected character shines through. Referring to that kind of person by his surname seems stilted, especially when discussing his boyhood. But it would be equally odd to use 'Frank' when talking about his work, especially when his surname graces so many important theories and innovations.

Another small decision I have had to take is how to cope with the extended cast of characters, who, once introduced, often reappear on the scene. Rather than risk annoying the reader by fastidiously saying who is who at every reappearance, I will allow the index of names to carry the weight. The pages where the person is properly introduced (not necessarily the first mention) are in bold.

Finally, one cannot describe a life, nor a life's work, without bringing to it one's own interpretation, and describing its shape or arc. Otherwise we just have a tedious transcription of what was said, recalled, or written. I've endeavoured to seek out and

enlist all the available sources, and to be as fair-handed as possible, so that my reading of Ramsey is as true as it can be. But the facts, both with respect to the life and the work, are partly lost to the past, and even those that are accessible require interpretation. At times, my own reading has had to be especially present. For instance, there is no discussing Wittgenstein's ideas without taking a stand on scholarly disputes.[†] Moreover, I came to be interested in Ramsey because he put forward the kind of philosophical pragmatism I had already thought right. In presenting him as a pragmatist of this particular variety, I have marshalled the texts, so as to prevent the impression that I am imposing an unwarranted interpretation on him.

For those who like a strong narrative, an overarching story tying everything together, that pragmatism happens to provide one. Ramsey rejected metaphysical and mystical answers to our most profound questions, preferring to offer solutions close to the human ground. In life too, he was a kind of pragmatist, always trying to work things out in the best and most optimistic way possible, for himself, for his friends, and for his relations with others. There are of course exceptions to this tendency, both in his thought and life, and I will not try to squeeze everything about Ramsey into this mould.

Note on Primary Sources

One might think that, given the brevity of Ramsey's life, there could not be much documentary evidence about it. That would be a mistake. Ramsey's father wrote not one, but two, accounts of his son's life—one in an autobiography at the end of his own life and another in a scrapbook, full of letters and school reports, put together shortly after Frank's death. In 2013, a fine memoir by Frank's younger sister, Margaret Paul, was published after her death. There is also a wealth of material from some of the most celebrated diarists and letter-writers of the period. A.C. (Arthur) Benson, Master of Magdalene College, essayist, poet, and nephew of Henry Sidgwick, whose diaries clock in at over four million words in 180 volumes, offers us insights into the young Frank and his family. Frances Marshall, who was the fourth in the ménage at the core of the Bloomsbury group (the Lytton Strachey–Dora Carrington–Ralph Partridge relationship) does the same for the adult Frank. There are illuminating materials in archives, such as those at Winchester College; Trinity College, Cambridge; the Ramsey, Keynes, Braithwaite, Partridge, and Sprott papers at King's College, Cambridge; the Ramsey–Schlick correspondence at the Vienna

[†] My reading of Wittgenstein and of his relationship to Ramsey differs, for instance, from the 'resolute reading' of Wittgenstein, pioneered by Cora Diamond (1995, 2011). See my *Cambridge Pragmatism: From Peirce and James to Ramsey and Wittgenstein* (Misak 2016).

Circle Archives in Amsterdam; the Ramsey, Carnap, and Reichenbach collections at the University of Pittsburgh Archives of Scientific Philosophy; and the Russell and Ogden papers at McMaster University. Hugh Mellor's 1978 radio portrait includes short interviews with people who knew Ramsey, and Ramsey's grandson, Stephen Burch, possesses private material not available elsewhere. Ramsey's diaries and letters were not occasions for creativity and were not meant for posterity. But they manifest the sometimes painful truth and honesty of his feeling, and allow us to see not just a remarkable mind, but also the whole person.

Finally, in what can only be described as an academic's fairy-tale, I discovered a priceless, and pretty much unknown, goldmine. I was already well into this biography when I came across a 1982 letter from one Laura Leavitt Kahn in the Max Newman papers at St John's College, Cambridge. She had written to Newman to say that she was an Oxford doctoral student, whose thesis was to be a biography of Ramsey. She wondered if he had any recollections he might share with her. She had a motor car, and would like to come to interview him. To make a long story short, I tracked down that student, Laurie Kahn, now an award-winning documentary filmmaker in Boston. The biography had never been written. But Laurie had done a tremendous amount of high-quality investigating and interviewing. Her materials had been lent out and it was an open question as to whether they still existed. Happily, they had been preserved, and now reside in the Thomas Fisher Rare Books Library at the University of Toronto, gifted by Laurie, with relevant copyrights.

Laurie said to one of her interviewees that she'd come to her project at the last moment possible, fifty-two years after Ramsey's death, when those who had known him were at least in their late seventies. I began my research well after that crucial period, after everyone who had known Ramsey was gone. Laurie interviewed Ramsey's widow, his siblings, his childhood and undergraduate friends, his students and colleagues, Wittgenstein's nephew, and more. By opening a window into the past for me, she made possible what had seemed impossible: access to direct questions and candid answers about Ramsey from those who were in a first-hand position to know. I am grateful to Laurie for her diligence and interviewing skills in 1982 and for her kindness in 2016.

In addition to all this, there is a significant quantity of hardly excavated intellectual work by Ramsey himself. Most of the important material has now been published—a set of papers in 1931 by Richard Braithwaite, reprinted and added to by Hugh Mellor in 1978 and 1990; the unfinished book manuscript in 1991, edited by Nicholas Rescher and Ulrich Majer; notes on philosophy, probability, and

mathematics by Maria Carla Galavotti also in 1991; a note on the weight of evidence in 1990 by Nils-Eric Sahlin; and one on economics by Pedro Garcia Duarte in 2009. But many of the original manuscripts, with Ramsey's cross-outs and pencil edits, remain a treasure trove for anyone with a love for intellectual detective work. Most of them are housed at the University of Pittsburgh's Archives of Scientific Philosophy, which purchased the Ramsey papers in 1982. That collection consists of seven large boxes, each holding as many as thirty-eight folders, and are available digitally. A few of Ramsey's original papers are in the Cambridge University Archives, and some are in private hands. For instance, Lettice gave the Wittgenstein scholar Michael Nedo a short and undated manuscript on Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. Very few people have laid eyes on that. Some of the original material is nowhere to be found, such as the important paper 'Theories'.

Some personal material has also been lost or destroyed. The most relevant of Lettice Ramsey's photo albums has disappeared. Laurie Kahn's inventory of it makes one feel very bad about that: there were pictures of Frank with Lettice and Frances Marshall frolicking on river banks; Frank horsing around and relaxing with his little girls; Frank visiting Keynes at his country house; Frank exercising on the beach, playing tennis, enjoying picnics with his friends, unclad with Lettice, and walking with Elizabeth Denby, the other great love of his life. Denby's own letters to Frank were burned, on her instructions, after her death.

While no doubt less than ideal for the scholar, I have kept the text uncluttered by consigning the citiations of both primary and secondary sources to the back of the book. Anyone who wants to track down the original material, or investigate my warrant for a particular claim, can do so. My policy with respect to citation of the primary material is complicated, for what I hope are understandable reasons.

Sometimes an item is only accessible in photocopy or digital form, in more than one location. For instance, Ramsey's grandson holds the originals (as well as the copyright) of all the letters and diaries, but Lettice Ramsey gave not-quite complete and not quite identical copies to both King's College and to Laurie Kahn. My choice of source in these instances will inevitably be irritating to some, but not to others, the irritation likely being dependent on one's continent of residence.

Scholars in a number of fields have been to the various archives and have used material from them (often without securing permission). Sometimes a published version of a letter, diary note, or manuscript is inaccurate, or partial, or fails to register an important strikeout or hesitation on the author's part. In those cases, I cite the more accurate or more revealing source in the archive, rather than the published one. Where the published transcription is perfect, or where there is an

utterly trivial error in it (such as a missing full stop) I cite the published version, silently correcting the text. I mark what is illegible by [ ]. If a letter is translated from, say, the original German to English, I give the name of the translator in the endnote, if it's not obvious from my text. Page numbers to Ramsey's collected papers are those of the 1990 Mellor collection, not the 1931 Braithwaite volume.

PART I

BOYHOOD

1

THE RAMSEYS

A Cambridge Family

Frank Plumpton Ramsey was born on 22 February 1903, in the family house on Chesterton Road, in the heart of Cambridge. He was the eldest child of Agnes and Arthur Ramsey. Arthur was a mathematics Fellow and President (vice-Master) at Magdalene College, Cambridge—a good textbook writer, but no great mathematical mind. Agnes, Oxford-educated, at a time when it was rare for a girl to be sent to university, was a social reformer. Arthur and Agnes expected success from their children, and they got it. Michael was born the year after Frank. He became Archbishop of Canterbury, the head of the Church of England. Then came Bridget, who would be a physician, and then Margaret, an Oxford economics don.

The family was part of what Noel Annan, Provost of King's College, Cambridge during the 1950s, called the English intellectual aristocracy. In the early 1900s, its Cambridge branch was composed of a complex web of people and families. Frank's nursery school teacher, Miss Sharpley, had been the governess of Frances Darwin, granddaughter of Charles Darwin. Agnes's political work brought her into the orbit of John Maynard Keynes's mother. The Keynes and the Darwin families were bound together by marriage. Edward Bevan, who would become Ludwig Wittgenstein's doctor and friend, had been a neighbour of the Ramseys, wrestling on the drawing room carpet with Frank and Michael when they were all youngsters. Charles (C.K.) Ogden, the influential editor and inventor of Basic English, was a family friend.

With such a background of cultural privilege, Frank's ascent to the heights of the English intellectual world might at first glance appear frictionless, and indeed, the bald facts support that view. He won a scholarship to Winchester, a top academic public (fee-paying) school, and then studied mathematics at Trinity College, Cambridge. Keynes, who had identified him as a major talent early on, snapped him up and made him a Fellow of King's College, Cambridge when he was only twenty-one. Apart from boarding school, holidays, and a half-year in Vienna, Frank spent his entire life in the warm embrace of Cambridge, in arguably the most glorious decades of the university's 800-year history.

But while it might have been an ascent up a ladder that had been placed there for him, no one could have expected Frank to climb so fast and high. As Keynes put it, 'One almost has to believe that Ramsey in his nursery near Magdalene was unconsciously absorbing from 1903 to 1914 everything which anyone may have been saying or writing in Trinity.' Moreover, the ascent wasn't without its hesitancies. We will see that there were personal struggles that might have tumbled him from those rungs.

Frank was of a very particular class and status, in that fine-grained English way. It was not upper class, but a confident, professional, upper middle class. He had the certainty of the vicarage, and the tools of an excellent education, in his baggage. We will see that some of the prejudices of that class were in there as well. But his socialist and egalitarian principles, his 'caring for the underdog', would make those biases inert in his actions. Since one of his philosophical triumphs would be to show how we judge what someone believes by their behaviour, we should do the same with him.

Vicars and Preachers

Both Frank's parents were the children and grandchildren of clergymen. On Arthur's side they were evangelical, low church, populist Congregationalists. Arthur's father, Adam Averell Ramsey, was a minister in Yorkshire, where Arthur spent his childhood until the family moved to build a new congregation in Hackney, London. Agnes was from a more traditional family, though just as devout. She grew up in villages in Norfolk, where her father, Plumpton Stravinson Wilson, was an Anglican vicar.

Not only did churchmen permeate Frank's lineage, religion also permeated his immediate family. They were regulars at the non-conformist Emmanuel Congregational Chapel in Cambridge, where Arthur was a deacon from 1914 until his old age. Arthur led daily prayers after the family's breakfast and Agnes sent Frank prayer and hymn books when he was away at boarding schools. Michael would make his life in the church. The one he chose, much to his mother's pleasure and his father's initial displeasure, was the Anglican Church of England. The young Frank, as you would expect, was a believer.

He rebelled, however, quite early on. Arthur gives the following account of Frank's state of faith at the age of thirteen:

> In the summer of 1916 we spent a few weeks at Old Hunstanton, our only family holiday together between 1914 and 1919. While there Frank talked to me about religious difficulties. He was thinking out things for himself. I think it was in the following term that he decided, much to his Housemaster's surprise, who thought him too young, that he wished to be confirmed.... [T]hat he should wish to take such a step after a good deal of thought about it was a great joy to us both.

He was at Winchester at a time when almost all the boys were confirmed in the Church of England.

But in June 1920, his final year at Winchester, Frank would write to his mentor back in Cambridge, C.K. Ogden, with a different story about his religious state of mind during his confirmation:

> Dear Mr. Ogden,
>
> I thank you very much for your letter, which I would have answered before, if I had had the opportunity. Mother and Bridget were here from Saturday till Tuesday and since then I have been writing a very bad essay for Mr. Williams which is sometime overdue.
>
> I think this might interest you about Williams. When I was confirmed 3½ years ago, I rather doubted if I believed all the things I was supposed to and consulted Williams about it as he was preparing me. So I went and told him I didn't believe in the resurrection of the body; he didn't seem to mind and explained to me that what I understood by 'the body' was really called 'the flesh' and that the body only means the personality, so that everyone believed in the resurrection of the body, but of course no one in the resurrection of the flesh, which was an absurd doctrine. I then showed him that in the baptismal vow which I renewed in confirmation it said not resurrection of the body, but actually resurrection of the flesh, which he had just told me was an absurd doctrine. I thought he would be rather at a loss but he didn't seem to mind a bit, but defended the resurrection of the flesh quite happily. . . . As far as I can see he is prepared to say he believes in anything if he thinks it will pay; he isn't a bit clerical and it looks as if he took orders as a step to a headmastership.

At the age of thirteen, Frank was already an atheist. He made his views known to his masters in an essay on whether the state should support sectarian education. His conclusion was that they must not do so:

> sectarian education is not education. . . . True education is broad and tolerant; it should make us feel the littleness of man, of our nation and of our creed. Moreover there is everything to gain from Christian and Parsee children learning ethics or comparative religion together . . . There is no harm in Bible reading; it is the best book anyone could read; what is objectionable, is the belief that the bible or any other book represents final truth. People talk of education in the principles of the Christian religion; that is not really education, any more than education in the principles of Marx is education.

Frank's atheism was an unwanted first for both sides of the family, made even less welcome because his two younger sisters followed him. Michael, who was always close to Frank, was terribly unsettled when, on a family seaside holiday, he first heard from Frank that he had lost his faith. They had arguments about it all of Frank's life. Michael was always clear, however, that although Frank was certainly sorry that Michael had joined the clergy, it was never an issue that threatened their

relationship. On his deathbed, Frank was still trying to persuade Michael that religion was irrational.

Frank was so known for his atheism that, after his death, when one of his friends embraced religion and got himself baptized, a close friend of both said 'B. could never have done that if Frank had been alive.'

Hearties vs Spartans

Frank's mother was from a family of hearties—vigorous, lively, and loud. Agnes was a Wilson, the second-youngest of nine, born in 1875. Her mother Elizabeth ('Meme') was the daughter of a successful merchant in North Lynn, Norfolk. Agnes's father, the Reverend Plumpton Stravinson Wilson, was head boy and cricket captain at Uppingham School in Rutland, then marched on to Exeter College, Oxford, where he lost his right hand in a gun accident. The name 'Plumpton' is a nod to the Wilson family's descent from the de Plomptons, knights who held considerable land after the 1066 Conquest. There's a village called 'Plompton' in Yorkshire named after the family—Sir Edward Plompton swapped the 'u' for the 'o' in the 1500s. There's at least one Plumpton in every generation of the Wilson family, although by Agnes's day it was relegated to middle-name status. Five of her six brothers had it bestowed on them. It's not clear why just one—Archie—escaped.

The Wilsons valued education for their sons and, unusually for the time, their daughters as well. Meme taught them gently till they were six, then the Reverend took over in what one of the boys—Charlie—called an 'exceedingly rigorous' way. But none of the brood seemed to mind, and they all reaped the benefits. The boys won scholarships to public schools and went on to become doctors, schoolmasters, vicars, and an organist of Ely Cathedral. One sister, Ethel, became a schoolteacher, as did Agnes, and another, an art-schooled painter.

The Wilsons were large, both physically and in personality. They managed to be 'ebullient members of the upper middle class', despite subsisting on a vicar's salary and his after-hours tutoring. Perhaps they were aided by money on Meme's side. Frank's sister Margaret described the Wilson clan as a friendly, amusing, noisy, and cheerful bunch, 'over-confident in their opinions'. They were a constant presence in the lives of Frank and his siblings. Meme was a wonderful grandmother, loved by the Ramsey children. The Reverend was terrifying, not least because of the hook that served as his prosthetic hand. When he was a young adult, Frank would complain about how loud and obnoxious his Wilson relations were, and how they simply shouted their opinions at each other. But as a child, he enjoyed going on vacation with the extended family. They were jolly affairs, with outside games and singing

round the piano. Once, in Perranporth in North Cornwall, Frank read *War and Peace* to the cousins in the evenings. The clan also convened at uncle Kenny's house in Fettes in Edinburgh, where everyone would get angry at each other over bridge games. Arthur did not like being beaten at cards, or at billiards, on these family jamborees.

Frank's eldest Wilson uncle, Charlie, played a significant role in his life, as he was Frank's headmaster at his first boarding school. Charlie had taken his degree at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he represented the university in cricket and rugby. He was one of a very few Englishmen to earn international caps in both rugby and football. But in the Wilson family, that hardly distinguished him. Another of the boys, Geoffrey, was such a good footballer that the *Daily Mail* called him 'England's darling'. Every one of the Wilsons seemed to get a Blue (a place on their Oxford or Cambridge sports team). There is a photo of a holiday in which a pack of the boys of that generation stride through the surf. They are strong, athletic, and handsome. A couple of them look just like Frank.

Charlie became co-headmaster of Sandroyd, a highly regarded and well-equipped preparatory school. It had an indoor heated swimming pool and a nine-hole golf course. Charlie was an outspoken conservative who believed in the Empire. The Oxford archaeologist Christopher Hawkes, an ex-Sandroydian, remembered him as 'the great Victorian, athletically and scholastically towering'. Parents, he said, 'adored this kind of thing' and 'simply fell for him'. Charlie was 'genial and powerful and stumpy, occasionally wrathful but an extraordinary teacher'. He chose his Sandroyd boys on physical as well as intellectual merit. In his day, the school was in the Oxshott woods in Surrey. One had to come up from Cobham Station in horse-drawn buggies or else walk through the woods. Charlie would run a genetics test on prospective mothers. As he walked them back to the train station, he would bring out his pocket-watch at the half-way mark and said 'Oh, Mrs. So-and-so, we've missed the time—we shall have to run.' If the mother, in her corset and long skirt, said she simply couldn't, the boy was out. If she sprinted though the woods, Charlie would return to the school and say 'We'll have that boy.'

Charlie's account of the family—the 'Wilson Family Record'—is mostly an adventure tale stuffed with roaming, shooting, fishing, and general mischief. The only unwelcome break was said to be the Sunday regime, with its relentless talk of hell-fire and eternal punishment. Charlie's construction of the Family Record was of course the image he wanted to present, but all those sporting blues give it the air of truth.The girls are far in the background of this record, except when one marries 'an amusing pal' who engages with Charlie and the boys 'in quest of sport'. Agnes's marriage goes unmentioned. Arthur was not a sporting bonhomme.

The politics of the Wilsons as adults were all over the map. Agnes and Ethel were left of centre. Charlie and Kenny were the opposite, each holding a full deck of unpleasant views about class and race, against which their sisters would rail. Charlie thought that 'socialists and liberals' were 'miserable worms', whereas Agnes would remain a socialist and liberal (though hardly miserable) all her life. The following story of Charlie's illustrates the familial tensions:

> The Matabele chiefs were on view in London. They were much admired by certain foolish ladies and one of them, reputedly rich, actually married Lobengula, a huge handsome savage. . . . I remarked that I would sooner see a sister of mine dead than so married. This caused an outbreak from Ethel and Agnes, who had rather advanced views. They argued that God had created coloured men as well as white. I proved right this time, as after a week of this unnatural union, Lobengula being in his opinion scantily supplied with cash by his wife, seized her hand and bit her thumb off! The union was promptly annulled. I had my triumph and made the most of it.

Lobengula was the Matabeleland ruler who eventually gave Cecil Rhodes permission to dig for gold on his lands. Charlie had met Rhodes while trying for a scholarship at Exeter, his father's old college in Oxford. The examination didn't go well and he reported that 'Cecil Rhodes, then an undergraduate, dug me out of the Clarendon Hotel and got me rooms at Oriel College.' They remained friendly—so much so that after Rhodes finished his degree he offered to take Charlie to South Africa with him, an offer Charlie declined.

Frank's father came from a very different sort of family, the kind that did not become mates with the likes of Cecil Rhodes. It was Spartan, strict, and austere. His mother, Hephzibah Sargeant, was from a class not dissimilar to that of the Wilsons, her father being a wealthy London coal merchant with a wharf on the Thames. But her marriage to the evangelical preacher Adam Averell Ramsey took her down in the world. He was first a minister in Hackney, on the outskirts of London, then in the smoky mill and mining town of Dewsbury, Yorkshire.

In old age Arthur and his sister Phebe would write in their own family records that their childhoods were full of nursery games and a father's affection. But they seem to have been looking back through rose-tinted glasses. In Margaret's description, the family was 'low-spirited', dour, straight-laced, and pious. The children had a strong 'sense of sin' and a 'formidable father' in Adam Averell. They also had a strong sense of the class difference between their parents. And Arthur's father, in Margaret's view, regarded all the women in the family as his slaves. All but one was a spinster, and they all suffered from a streak of hypochondria. One of them was told of a weak heart and stayed in bed for twenty years till the diagnosis was reversed,

whereupon she got up and continued with life. After his wife died, Adam Averell's unmarried daughters stayed on to look after him. Lucy, who will reappear in these pages, begged her father for funds to take piano lessons and then taught piano in a boarding school, which she called a 'dog kennel', a different girl coming every half hour. Eventually she returned to fulfil her duty to her father.

The finances of the family were precarious, as were the children's lives and educations. Two of the three boys died in adolescence. One of them had been called Frank and would be the namesake of the first-born child of Arthur and Agnes. The education of the girls was not considered important, or at least it was not where money would be spent when in short supply. The two youngest nonetheless persevered and made schoolteachers of themselves, almost the only genteel route for the daughters of the hard-up middle-classes who were obliged to earn a living.

Agnes Ramsey

It is no surprise that Agnes, being a Wilson, was a powerhouse. After her excellent home-schooling, she got a place to read history at St Hugh's, Oxford, where she made an impression and a success of herself. Her sporting Blue was in hockey. She had met the mathematician and author Charles Dodgson (better known as Lewis Carroll) when her father did a stint at a vicarage in Oxford. When a little girl, she used to go boating with Dodgson, and when a St Hugh's undergraduate, she attended his logic lectures and went on further excursions with him. One of those trips, to the theatre in London, was taken with a fellow St Hugh's student, whose mother received a letter from Dodgson beforehand. Despite her being seventeen and Dodgson sixty-three, he wrote: 'I venture to ask if I may regard myself as on "kissing" terms with her, as I am with many a girlfriend a great deal older than she is . . . Of course, I shall, unless I hear to the contrary, continue to shake hands only.' We don't know if he was on such terms with Agnes. He did give her a copy of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, fondly inscribed. Much later, her young son Frank would be frightened of the picture of Alice with her arm out of the window and her leg out of the chimney. So Agnes cut out all the illustrations, destroying the book's monetary value, but making for a great family story.

After Oxford, Agnes taught at East Putney High School, in London, for a couple of years. She was known for an absent-mindedness that would have her covered head-to-toe in chalk. After two years, Agnes became 'fed up' with being a schoolmistress and gave it up, going up to Fettes school to keep house for her brother Kenny. As Frank's sister Margaret said, the move is something of a mystery. Kenny was one of the Tory brothers she had always fought against, and housekeeping was

not her strong suit. Nonetheless, it was momentous, for it would be at Fettes that she met Arthur. Perhaps to escape the housekeeping for her brother, perhaps because she felt it true love, Agnes married Arthur in 1902 and moved to Cambridge.

Only then did she find her stride, via her left-leaning political inclinations. She was a founder of the Cambridge branch of the Federation of University Women. She agitated for progressive causes. She put pressure on candidates for parliament to support the vote for women; gave talks in and beyond Cambridge on the topic; organized fund-raising stalls in the market; and was on the organizing committee of the Cambridge Association for Women's Suffrage. That was the non-violent group, unlike the suffragettes. She quickly became part of the nucleus of liberal Cambridge, along with Mrs Sidgwick, Mrs Keynes, Lady Darwin, and their progressive husbands. Agnes herself was always on the more radical part of the spectrum, more Labour than Liberal. She had suffragist friends come to stay and Labour Party gatherings in the garden. Graham Wallas, the social psychologist, educationalist, and major figure in the Fabian Society and the London School of Economics, was one of these visitors, as was Hugh Dalton, Labour Party economist and eventual Chancellor of the Exchequer. These leading figures in British left-wing politics had a warm respect for Agnes. Decades after her death, Dalton remembered Agnes and Clara Rackham as the women who made the Labour Party in Cambridge great.

Hardly a day passed without a committee meeting or three. Agnes was a school governor and a frequent letter-writer to the newspapers, advocating a women's right to birth control, the freeing of Irish political prisoners, and countless other progressive causes. She was elected to the Cambridge Board of Guardians and was involved in the Cambridge Workhouse on Mill Road. There was no state social safety net in those days, so Agnes went round on her bicycle putting milk on the doorsteps of the poor. She was instrumental in starting a children's home, connected with the workhouse, to save as many children as she could from being put to work. With her own offspring in tow, she would go to the grim workhouse on Christmas day to serve plum pudding. When she was speaking on political causes in the market square, you could hear her at Senate House, which, even at its nearest point, is a considerable shout away. Merely speaking in the square, never mind shouting, was a brave thing to do. Agnes's friend Leah Manning spoke of an occasion when she and Maurice Dobb, then an undergraduate, were addressing a crowd there:

> A score of undergraduates got between the shafts and ran us round and round the square. I couldn't keep my balance, and since I soon began, indelicately, to show my underwear, Maurice pushed me down on to a chair and clung desperately to it himself, while the men continued their frolic with cries of 'good old Ginger' and 'good old Bertie'.

Dobb, of whom we will hear more later, was called 'Band-Box Bertie' by his fellow students, his genteel familial roots buried under his sympathies for communism. The intelligence services had their eye on him, and he would later befriend and come under suspicion together with the Cambridge spies for Russia, Kim Philby and Guy Burgess.

Agnes's children were all devoted to her, and were perfectly happy being brought up to think that the Tories were 'the stupid party'. Michael found his mother flawless: radiant, friendly, outgoing, understanding, with a powerful sense of humour. He could always enjoy this unalloyed view of his mother, as he never rebelled against her. Agnes held on to her Christian beliefs and mores, and Michael's devotion to the Church of England meant that he never strayed from those principles. Frank also adored his mother, but when as a young man he felt the sharp end of Agnes's moral sensibility, he would rue her inflexibility. Publicly, she was involved in family planning and promoting contraception, which was thought not respectable at the time. But when it came to personal sexual morality, Agnes was not quite so fiercely progressive. Her daughter Bridget later said that it was a surprise to her that her mother would even know what family planning was, given that she would never discuss such intimate matters with her children. She told Bridget when she started studying at Cambridge that if she let a man kiss her, she must marry him. Bridget assumed that this was because a kiss could cause a pregnancy.

While many of their neighbours and other acquaintances had the view that Agnes was an effusive and charming woman, others saw her as formidable and overbearing. She was tall and confident in her views, with no time or interest in being stylish or mending her stockings. Her morals were uncompromising. During the war, she gave a talk to the British Women's Temperance Society on how spending anything that went beyond the truly essential was an evil. We should take pride, she said, in being shabby, and children should also feel the effects of wartime frugality—for instance, in their Christmas stockings.

Arthur Ramsey

The young Arthur Ramsey enjoyed football and cricket, although the pitches, organization, and equipment at his schools were nowhere near the standards of the Wilsons. That was the least of the hardships. Most critical was the fact that the mathematically talented and hard-working boy had to make his own way educationally. Arthur's mediocre schools hardly ever sent their pupils to universities. He recalled: 'If I succeeded in solving examples, well and good; but if I failed there was nobody available with the time and ability to show me how to do them.'

Nonetheless, the school encouraged him to apply for scholarships to Oxford and Cambridge. He tried, and tried again, until he succeeded in getting a scholarship to Magdalene College, Cambridge. He was of the first generation of Ramseys to attend university.

Magdalene back then was a small, poor college, with a dearth of good students. Its formal teaching didn't amount to much. During Arthur's undergraduate days, from 1886 to 1889, the mathematics students had just over two hours of lectures a week and were advised to hire private tutors out of their own pocket. Arthur did that, worked hard, and went to church twice a day. He ended up coming fifth in the final examinations, and after graduation, was encouraged to apply to teach at a good public school—but not in England, where his non-conformism would be an obstacle, if not an outright bar. So he applied to Fettes in Scotland and landed a position there in 1890. One of his colleagues was Kenny Wilson, one of the right-wing members of the high-spirited Wilson family.

If Agnes was a Wilson through and through, Arthur too was a chip off his family's block. He was a stiff man with a bald head and a big moustache, thin and wiry—as physically unlike the Wilsons as possible. He was pinched emotionally too, again, unlike the Wilsons. He would eventually become a fellow of Magdalene and Arthur Benson, the Master of the college, would say that when roused to anger—an all-too-frequent occurrence—Arthur Ramsey 'was all eye and moustache'. Arthur's father's severe, puritanical streak had also lodged itself in him. None of his fellow Magdalene Fellows, apart from Benson, called him by his first name: he was A.S.R. (Arthur Stanley Ramsey) to them. His obituary in the Magdalene College Record noted: 'He did not give intimacy easily—"I do not think", he once said, "that I have ever addressed anyone other than a relation by his Christian name."'

The story of how Arthur ended up a don at Magdalene is ironic, given that his wife would be a suffragist. In 1896, while he was a schoolteacher at Fettes, his old mathematics supervisor at Magdalene died. The possibility of filling the vacancy took up residence in Arthur's mind, despite a discouraging reply to an initial query. He soon had his chance to make an impression, during an especially low note in Cambridge University's sorry history around the admission of women.

Women had been successfully sitting the Cambridge exams since 1870, but they were not officially members of the University, and were not granted degrees. Rather, the women's colleges—Girton and Newnham—would award each student a certificate saying that she had done all the work, passed the exams, and would have obtained a certain class of degree. A proposal was made in 1897 to grant to women membership in the University and degrees. The women had their supporters, some

powerful. Henry Sidgwick, the eminent utilitarian philosopher at Trinity, was on their side—he had co-founded Newnham in 1871. The women's colleges thought they might win the vote. After all, they had successfully established themselves and grown in size, demonstrating that their students could meet the University's standards. Indeed, a larger proportion of the women were now sitting the difficult final cumulative exam than their male counterparts, many of the latter content with the less ambitious, 'Ordinary' degree. Arguments raged pro and con in the national press.

Cambridge University was (and still is) governed by ancient rules. Any graduate (who had waited the requisite year and taken his automatic MA) was eligible to vote on this proposal. The ugly side of this radically democratic system was on full display, as old boys were called from near and far to come and vote down the proposal. Arthur was approached by a Fellow of Magdalene and offered a room in College if he would travel from Edinburgh, no minor journey in those days. On the account he gave when he was in his eighties, he initially demurred, after which another Fellow urged him to make the trip because the College was considering him for the vacant Fellowship. Here is Arthur's description of the day, a day which the anti-woman forces won:

> After lunching in the Combination Room we went round to the Senate House to vote. The streets were crowded with people especially near the Senate House and there was no lack of flags and such inscriptions as 'Get thee to Girton, Beatrice' hanging across Trinity Street, and a dummy figure of a woman in bloomers mounted on a real bicycle hung high above the ground..... The voting showed a huge majority against the proposal in the largest poll ever taken in the Senate House. A large body of undergraduates at once rushed round to Newnham College, I suppose to make a hostile demonstration, but the authorities had wisely shut the College gates. One man climbed a drainpipe and got in at an open window, to find himself in a room with about half-a-dozen young ladies who stared at him so scornfully that he could think of nothing better to do than climb out of the window and go back down the drainpipe, and the demonstration petered out.... The women's Colleges bore their rebuff with fortitude and dignity, and no further steps were taken in their interests until after the first world war.

Arthur neglects to tell us how he voted. That alone should raise suspicion. His daughter Margaret asserted that he voted against the women. Magdalene would be the last all-male college in the whole of Oxford or Cambridge to admit women (in 1988), and he was there to do its bidding. Arthur had his meeting with the Master and in due course was offered the job. In 1897, at the age of thirty, he left Fettes and returned to his old college and to Cambridge, where he was to spend the rest of his long life.

On occasion, he would return to Fettes to see Kenny Wilson and his other old colleagues. On one of those visits, he met Agnes Wilson, eight years his junior. He

was so taken with her that he extended his stay and proposed marriage after a week. She asked him to return for an answer in a couple of months when her family would be visiting. The prospect of running her own house in Cambridge, rather than her brother's house in Scotland, was attractive, and so was the political and intellectual milieu. She was an intelligent woman with modest means, and staying at Fettes offered limited prospects. She decided on Arthur and Cambridge.

They married, and moved into a spacious house in central Cambridge, at 71 Chesterton Road, next to the river Cam.* When the Ramsey children were young, they were able to cross over the bridge and play on the common, Jesus Green. The issue of how the family was going to worship must have been talked about, for Arthur and Agnes were each committed to opposite sides of the conformist/non-conformist divide. The deliberations were resolved by a compromise. They all attended the Congregational church, very regularly, always in the same pew. But Agnes's Anglican father christened all the children and Agnes made her communion on holy days at Anglican churches. They prayed and read the Bible as a family every morning.

They also found work-arounds for their political differences. Arthur would always resent Agnes's suffragist garden parties, but never prohibited them. He would not be converted to the Labour Party, but he would often attend suffragist meetings, sometimes even publicly sitting on the stage with Agnes. They had an intriguing marriage. One of Frank's Winchester friends recalled that Agnes was the dominating party. But Arthur had his own bad-tempered ways of keeping the household under his control.

Arthur was never to be more than a journeyman mathematician. He was considered a boring teacher, his lectures 'read at a fast dictation speed'. His style is summed up nicely in his obituary in the Magdalene College Record:

> Let it be conceded that his relations with undergraduates were marked by a certain rigidity; but this, although it kept intimacy at bay, did not impair the great personal respect in which we held him. His standards were high, his rule austere; and the College prospered under his rod.

He became famous for adapting his lecture course notes in various branches of applied mathematics into clear, well-organized, and highly successful textbooks.

* The house currently has a blue plaque stating that it is the birthplace of Michael Ramsey, with no mention of Frank. There is also no plaque on Frank's Mortimer Road house, in which he lived as an adult.

He was also a pillar of college administration—steward and bursar, before a twenty-two-year run as President, or vice-Master, from 1915 until his death at the age of eighty-eight in 1954. When he arrived at Magdalene, the college was in dreadful shape. The quality of its students, fellows, and finances was at a low ebb. Although its inferior standards had enabled Arthur himself to get in, he made it his mission to raise that bar, and when Arthur Benson was made Master in 1915, the two spent the next decade turning the place around. Arthur Ramsey's obituary in *The Times* is titled 'Mr. A.S. Ramsey: Resurgence of Magdalene College Cambridge'. He also did more than his share for the University, including being chair of the Faculty of Mathematics, where he reigned in a competent but conventional way, always set against new notions and notations.

In writing the record of his life, Arthur described his career at Magdalene as productive, happy, and easy. But we get a different picture from Benson's diaries, which have Arthur conducting rude, self-righteous, and brainless arguments with his colleagues, and frequently losing his temper in meetings: 'R is very unconciliatory & scornful & his temper is bad—it's a pity, but he's a forcible man by virtue of those very qualities.' Benson himself got 'a look of hatred' all too frequently from Arthur. On one occasion, Benson complained to his diary:

> A beastly letter from Ramsey, saying that we were disgracing ourselves by selling drink to cadets and & advertising our wines. . . . This is very bad of Ramsey. Why not enquire first before he makes a row? It isn't for us to settle about total abstinence for cadets—& it comes from a man who wrecked his own health by indulgence in tobacco.

Two days later, Benson was still railing about Arthur, who wouldn't let the matter drop: 'The truth is that R believes himself to be a radical, & is really a Pharisaical bully & tyrant.' Eventually Benson had to reprimand Arthur for the 'violence' and unreasonableness of his campaign. Arthur's non-conformist conscience was hardening into an abhorrence of personal self-indulgence, and this became a running theme in Benson's diary. An undergraduate who was found too doctrinaire sparks the following remark from Benson: 'But of course he was Ramsey's pupil!' Benson thought 'The Ramseys of this world' are all about 'contemptuous virtue and complacent commonsense'.

But there was another side to Arthur's character. Benson thought that despite his 'violent Puritan mind, intensely self-righteous & self-sufficient & full of contempt & censoriousness', 'this disease is of his reason only; we unite as friends in the lower regions of the heart'. Benson had a soft spot for him. On the very day he was offered the Mastership of the College, he informally offered Arthur the Presidency, ensuring that he would work side by side with his frosty, narrow-minded, suspicious, and self-absorbed colleague for the next decade. Benson was so fond of him that he sent

for Arthur as he lay dying. The fact that Benson, from one of Cambridge's most eccentric, radical, and accomplished families, was the colleague to whom Arthur was closest, is telling about Arthur's dual and duelling traits. Benson's diary makes the dual sides clear:

> He might, I think, be very hard if pushed almost cruel. But there's beauty about him within and without, which wins me. He is very ambitious, very nervous, wants to be someone, desires success. But with that he unites real affection and tenderness.
>
> Ramsey came out *at his best* like the sun from the clouds. . . . That is like R. to snap and growl till the last minute, & then walk out in a leonine sort of way and give one his paw.

Benson's diagnosis of Arthur was that he was so uncomfortable in his own skin and with his own education that he needed to look down on those who mastered the social and intellectual world. On a Thursday in the spring of 1924, Benson and Arthur took a walk before dinner. Frank had just finished his undergraduate degree and Arthur had just had the news of Frank's election to an Allen Fellowship, which would help him write a thesis:

> He talked about Frank and his own intellectually starved youth—a big family all at the local school—his lack of reading. R has been converted to a belief in culture by his clever family.

Arthur's struggles with his character may have been the product of his strange upbringing. He was completely out of place in any kind of social gathering. Benson never tired of reflecting on how Arthur could not cope in company:

> He exercised his usual dulling influence on the party: because he never follows anything up, or wishes to learn what anyone thinks about anything. If one questions him, he answers with pleasure; if one doesn't he simply sits; I never saw anyone less civilised or social.
>
> He has to be attended to like a child, or he sighs and says nothing.
> He has to be spoonfed all the time with such questions, & they are few, as he can understand. Ramsey is to parody Wordsworth 'Contented if he might despise the things which others understand'.
>
> Ramsey came to Hall. It is astonishing how his presence seems to flatten things out. He is narrow-minded & self-absorbed; & all his real goodness doesn't make him in the least sympathetic. He has no use for friendship – he's an individualist; & he prefers being what he calls sincere to feeling that other people are comfortable.

That last sentence should be kept in mind when we get to Frank's relationship with Wittgenstein. While he had his endearing side, Wittgenstein too was notorious

for being sincere at the expense of the comfort of others. It may be that Frank's long experience of dealing successfully with his father helped him to manage Wittgenstein, when others could not or gave up.

While Arthur's character flaws might be understandable, that didn't make them easier to take. At dinner at home, he would be silent and sulky, or rage at the children and his wife. Agnes sometimes left the table in tears. When it got too much, Michael would leap up in the middle of a meal and run around the garden in an agitated state. Frank had a different strategy. Margaret says that 'He was an expert in slipping out of a room if the conversation bored or displeased him.' One assumes that Michael did not bolt from tables when he was Archbishop of Canterbury, but Frank employed his own particular escape mechanism all his life.

Arthur dined in College two or three nights a week, as was expected of a fellow. This was some relief to his family, if not to his colleagues at Magdalene. Agnes could have the luxury of making scrambled eggs instead of a big meal. When he was home in the evenings, Arthur would retire to his study to write his textbooks, ignoring his children, who followed him there, where the only fire burned. Like Benson, they could see that although he didn't show it much, their father was fond of them. Of all the children, it was Frank who was most aware of this side of their father, and who made the greatest effort. As Margaret put it, Frank was very nice to their 'very difficult, withdrawn, irascible' father. Arthur was a compulsive worker and his only interest was gardening and going for walks in the afternoon. Frank often accompanied him on those walks and both father and son seemed to enjoy them.

Family Values

'Thrift' was a family watchword. The Cambridge stipends might have been suitable for bachelors living in college, but not for men with dependants. Arthur experienced life as strenuous, taking a large number of private pupils and more than his share of examining and administrative work. He fretted about finances. Agnes was economical with the household budget, and the children followed suit. They all watched their small change.

Frank was born in 1903, shortly after Agnes and Arthur were married. Michael followed in 1904; Bridget, in 1907. Margaret was a late addition, coming fourteen years after Frank's birth. As was typical for their class and time, they had help—a nanny, cook, and housekeeper, all from the same family. Once the fees from private pupils expanded, along with the number of offspring, Arthur purchased a plot of land from Magdalene, just round Castle Hill. There he built a larger house which they called Howfield. It had three storeys, a big hall, three large rooms on the ground

floor, and extensive servants' quarters with a separate staircase. When the Great War came in 1914, family finances became tighter, as private income from students evaporated as they left for the front. The Ramseys made ends meet by taking in and tutoring young Southeast Asian and Belgian lodgers who were studying for the Cambridge entrance exams. At times the house resembled a hotel.

Frank and Michael got on well with the lodgers, who they would ask for 'piggyback trots' round the gardens. A Prince of Siam once gave them a large toy ocean liner. Arthur got permission for his children to sail it in the Emmanuel College pond. When it sank, Frank sent Bridget behind a bush to strip to her bloomers so she could dive in and retrieve the prized vessel. Arthur had to write to Emmanuel and apologize.

Howfield felt old-fashioned, even though it was brand new. It was a tasteless house with heavy furniture—comfortable but unexciting. The dining room was decorated with drab sepia prints and the table centrepiece was a bowl of light bulbs. Margaret said that the house was decorated on the principle that one should be able to throw a cup of coffee over anything without it showing. The children, however, were oblivious to fashion, and found the house excellent for hide and seek because of the two staircases. The garden was even better. It had forty apple and other fruit trees, which Arthur took special care over, and a vegetable garden. Best of all for Frank, it had a lawn tennis court. Richard Braithwaite remembered that in those days it was thought not quite proper to give tennis lessons to boys, as it was a girl's game. Frank nonetheless got proficient at it with his siblings and the neighbour children. He and Michael also played an endless game of their own making, hitting a tennis ball against the wall above the veranda.

To outsiders, the inhabitants of Howfield appeared as strange as the décor. One of Wittgenstein's nephews, Thomas (Tommy) Stonborough, would be a frequent guest at Sunday lunches when Frank was a young don and Tommy an undergraduate. He called it 'old Professor Ramsey's home', The Ramseys were always kind and friendly towards him, but Tommy thought them odd and incomprehensible, especially Arthur and Michael. He found Agnes not so much odd as 'big and mighty', with a quiet and contained exterior. The food was always the same, leg of lamb, and Arthur's carving of it was a formal and ponderous operation. To Tommy, the Ramseys seemed 'from another planet', and in a way, they were. Tommy was part of one of Europe's most wealthy families, and was used to different standards of living, customs, and humour. The Ramseys talked about mathematics, politics, and other intellectual topics, whereas at the Stonborough/Wittgenstein Sunday lunches, the conversation was about music, art, and other forms of high culture.

But one did not have to be from a different world to find the Ramseys strange. After going to a Howfield Sunday lunch, Benson gave this glimpse into the household:

> Curious how the amenities are neglected. The drive is like a sea beach, the shrubs sprawl, dead leaves pile up, flowers struggle. The house is bare & unbeautiful. It was something of an ordeal. R. genial but a little frozen, Mrs. R. very voluble and emphatic, Frank solid and very clever, Michael a distressing object—so sharp-faced, dull-eyed, spotted—Bridget charming and long-legged & Margery (6) really pretty…I talked feverishly. They gave me an excellent lunch—fish, duck, marmalade pudding, cheese straws, and much whisky. But the silent circle was alarming & I grew nervous in the drawing-room after. But they welcomed me warmly and I'm glad I went.

Michael said, in his old age, when he heard this description, that it was unkind, but not unfair.

One thing that put Arthur in a good mood was the precociousness of Frank and Michael. One of the family stories has the three-year-old Frank 'much excited' about the General Election in January 1906. Banners of the Liberal Campbell-Bannerman and the Conservative Balfour were hanging from ceiling to floor in the Ramsey home, and as the results came in, Frank was allowed to move figures up the rungs of a ladder. Another story has Frank unwittingly summarizing the Oedipus Complex. Michael, still in the nursery, clung to his mummy and announced that when he was grown up, he was going to marry her. Frank replied 'How can you be so silly, Michael? Don't you know that you can't marry your mother till she's a widow?' Arthur told another story that showed Agnes's influence on Frank's politics when he was still in short trousers:

> Quite early Frank began to share his mother's keen interest in politics and one day came to her saying 'I'm afraid that after all Michael is a conservative'. You see, I asked him, 'Michael are you a liberal or a conservative?' And he said 'What does that mean?' And I said 'Do you want to make things better by changing them or do you want to keep things as they are?' And he said – 'I want to keep things'. So he must be a conservative.

Michael soon came to share his brother's interest in politics and lined up his toy soldiers not in actual war, but as a House of Commons war, 'and made them harangue one another'. They were unusual little boys, headed for unusual careers. They would both be on their mother's liberal-left side of the political spectrum, with a keen sense of justice and injustice. Michael's legacy, when he died in 1988 at the age of eighty-three, was that of one of the most liberal Archbishops of Canterbury.

Frank and Michael shared other characteristics. As adults, both were amusingly absent-minded gentle and genial giants, with a love for exercise and sport, despite being rather uncoordinated. They had guffawing laughs, subtle senses of humour, and soft voices and accents. Their handwriting was atrocious. Michael, especially, was plagued with a general clumsiness with his hands and he lived long enough to have the terminology of disability used to describe it. In Frank's case, his school reports bemoaned his penmanship from early on. While at Winchester, he was told to give up on cursive and stick to printing. His handwriting never grew up, as a Winchester school friend put it.

Agnes was said hardly to be able to boil an egg, but with help from the servants, she would host groups of Magdalene undergraduates twice during the week for lunch, and for tea on Sundays. Those Sunday open houses would often draw thirty students, who stayed on until Arthur reared up at 6:00 to say that it was time to go to Chapel. Kingsley Martin, Magdalene undergraduate and friend of Frank's, published a piece in *The Granta* about a Howfield tea, saying 'It was the usual don's dreary Sunday afternoon tea', with 'everyone trying to look as if they were enjoying themselves'. Agnes was understandably offended.

Arthur and Agnes were strivers and had clear ideas about appropriate behaviour and aspirations for their children. They worried over the education not just of the boys, but the girls as well. While his siblings kept up their end in terms of education and also behaviour, Frank would pull hard against his parents with respect to the latter.

The First Born

Frank did not come easily into the world. He was two weeks early, and there was anxiety over whether he would survive the birth. He was jaundiced and not easy to feed. As he grew, his parents continued to fret about his health. His personality, too, was delicate. Arthur recalled that he was 'a rather timid child', the sight of a headless lead soldier causing him to shrink to the other end of the nursery and turn pale with agitation.

But, even accounting for the distortion of parental pride, it was clear that their first born was highly intelligent. Arthur recalled:

> He learned to read almost as soon as he could talk. He learnt his letters from a bag of alphabet biscuits into which he could dive, extract one and hold it up to be named, chortling when one came up which he had had before.

It was soon 'tiresome' to take him out, as he insisted on identifying letters of the alphabet on billboards from his pram. But he was a normal little boy in other respects, growing rapidly and interested in trains and (intact) figurines of people and animals.

He was sent to Miss Sharpley's school when he was five years old—a modern-thinking school, largely for the children of academics. There were a dozen pupils at different stages in one room, with Miss Sharpley allowing them to read at their own pace and teaching them French verbs. Frank stayed at this cosy school till he was eight. Miss Sharpley noted that his exercise books were untidy, but she thought him a charming and wonderful pupil, soaking up novels and encyclopedias. He also made a good beginning at Latin and mastered recurring decimals. Agnes began to teach him the piano, although he had little aptitude.

In October 1911, at the age of eight, Frank started a two-year stretch at King's College Choir School. While a few of his contemporaries later described it neutrally as 'orthodox' or 'traditional', most of them remembered 'the tyrannies of the Jelf regime'. Jelf was the new headmaster, a strict disciplinarian with little sympathy for small boys, and with a determination to rid the school of all frivolity and joy. But all seem to remember getting a solid education, mostly delivered by Cambridge undergraduates. The Latin and Greek were excellent. The maths master, Reinhart, a German who was an undergraduate at Trinity, taught by hitting the students over the knuckles when they made a mistake. But he was a good mathematician and helped Frank advance. He was also the owner of an Indian motorcycle that could go 60 mph on the track and was rigged up so that he could drive it when sitting in the sidecar. The boys were suitably impressed.

Frank was a reserved, dishevelled little boy, shoelaces undone and hair askew. One of his classmates could tell even then that 'attention to sartorial matters had no place in his life'. What he had a 'tremendous zest' for, said his father, was cricket, football, schoolwork, and 'everything new'. His classmates recalled that his skill on the sports fields did not match his enthusiasm. But they saw that 'intellectually he outshone us all'. Frank did well in every subject, with special strengths in Latin and mathematics. He would ask to be excused from church so he could do trigonometry. None of his classmates was at all surprised when he became a renowned mathematician. He had it written all over him at the age of eight.

Then, as with so many English families of a certain class and financial means, the decision about boarding school was made. They chose Sandroyd, where Uncle Charlie Wilson was Headmaster. Frank was offered reduced fees, and although his parents were loath to see him go, they figured that Uncle Charlie and Aunt Lily

would make this a soft landing for a first boarding school. In most ways, it was. Frank enjoyed the camaraderie of sport and the open-air life. He wrote home about goals scored, fouls committed, and chances missed. He caddied for golf and asked for a set of clubs for Christmas. The outdoor swimming pool was a special pleasure. He also loved the Boy Scouts, then a new organization, adopted by Sandroyd straightaway. Charlie's aim to recruit talented athletes to the school meant that Frank was in high-end company, and his success on the Sandroyd fields, pitches, and pool indicates some raw talent, if not the fluid athletic ability so characteristic of the Wilsons.

There were the usual public school privations of the time, such as cold baths, winter and summer. Frank got chilblains on his hands, a painful condition of the skin caused by cold. Fruit sent from home would often be nicked, which made him cross. But he wasn't anywhere near as miserable as Michael was when he arrived at Sandroyd a couple of years later. One letter home is so extreme, you don't know whether to laugh or cry:

> Tuesday Evening just after tea
>
> My dear mother,
>
> I never were more utterly miserable. I have just had Greek before tea; It is horrid. we did translation, Xenophon, I do not know a word of it I do not think Greek alone makes me miserable, I am always miserable.
>
> I cannot bear it any longer, I am crying now.
>
> I cannot stand it any longer, if someone does not come to me I will give up and be miserable for ever and perhaps go home of my own accord, write or wire to Uncle C. and say you are coming at once pleas darling, and come on Saturday or I will give up altogether and always wretched.
>
> Do not tell any about me nor anyone except father and possibly Frank, write at once if you are going to.
>
> I am too miserable for words.
>
> I beleive that you will take pity and come at once,
>
> Your loving son
>
> Michael
>
> I am crying like anythinke
>
> Come at once
>
> never mind anything else
>
> I am utterly miserable

Agnes rushed to the school. Michael said that his Uncle Charlie's response was to tell him that if he wrote another letter like that he'd beat him so hard he'd have no skin on his bottom.

This was no empty threat. Corporal punishment was delivered at Sandroyd by both the headmaster and the head boy. Frank detested the violence. The head boy, he wrote home, 'whips lots of people' and even worse was when the boys would have to decide themselves on the punishment. In Frank's first year, the class had to vote on how many strokes a boy was to get for a minor infraction, with the average to be meted out. Frank and another boy voted 0, but the others didn't concur and the boy had two strokes with a hard cricket stump. Frank thought that terribly unfair. But as far as Charlie would have been concerned, this was all light stuff—nothing like what happened to him at Uppingham, where the small boys would endure 'roasting over the big fire in the hall on Saturday nights', so that for weeks Charlie 'could only sit askew, as my tail-end was lamentably short of skin'.

Frank kept quiet about whatever homesickness he may have experienced. He was especially young, having been sent away to school early because of his intellectual precociousness. The fact that he was a large boy may have obscured his youth to his classmates. He stayed, without major incident, at Sandroyd from 1913 to 1915. He sent letters regularly both to his parents and brother, sometimes even to little Bridget, writing of home matters and wishing success for his mother's suffrage meetings. On the whole, his letters bore out his parent's hope that their child was happy. He told them, in response to their questioning: 'I don't know if this is what you call sociable, but I'm kind of friends with lots of boys.' Those classmates remembered him decades later as being the top student, taking 'quite a prominent part of all other activities', and being 'very well liked and greatly admired'—a gentle, kind boy with an outsized head, a grin stretching between his big ears, and eyes blinking whenever he had to take off his glasses.

He raced ahead with the academic work, especially mathematics. One holiday, 'just for the fun of it', Arthur set Frank an advanced exam in mechanics. He scored a 70 per cent (a high grade even for those old enough to take the exam), often correctly guessing the kinds of solutions to problems he had never before encountered. It seemed time to move their young son ahead in the public school world. As Arthur recounted:

> It was decided that he should try for a scholarship at Winchester in the summer of 1915 – he was 12¼ at the time of the examination and staying in lodgings at Winchester made it rather a strain for him & he slept very badly while it lasted and consequently did not do himself justice on the harder mathematical paper though he was easily top in Classics. He made a good impression by his personality also. I met the outside examiner in Classics … some weeks later and he asked me if that round faced smiling boy who had done so well at Winchester was my son. He said that after reading his