

My Own Life^{III}

Dorion Cairns

I was born July 4th, 1901, in the village of Contoocook, in the town of Hopkinton, New Hampshire. My father, James George Cairns, was the pastor of the Methodist Church in Contoocook, and I was the first child of my parents. During my first three and a half years of life, my father moved from one place to another as pastor of Methodist Churches in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. My brother, Stewart Scott Cairns, currently Professor of Mathematics at the University of Illinois, was born May 8th, 1904.

My father felt that there was no future for a young minister in New England, and he decided to move his family—which consisted of my mother, my brother and me—to California. He shipped all of our family goods, all of our furniture and things, to California on the very day of the San Francisco Earthquake, or “Fire,” as they like to call it in San Francisco.

The California Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church at that time controlled what was called the “Utah Mission.” This was a mission to Mormon Territory, needless to say. My father, since there were so many people of longer standing in the California Conference who had no churches left owing to the earthquake, was given a church in Utah Mission, in Salt Lake City itself. It was there in 1907 that my sister Mary, who is the wife of James Wilkinson Miller,

currently Professor of Philosophy at McGill University in Montreal, was born.

When they wanted to transfer my father from this little church in Salt Lake City to a church or mission in Provo, Utah, my father went and looked at the set-up in Provo, and he came back, and it was the first time I had seen a grown man cry. He lay on the couch there, and he said to my mother: "Laure, I just can't take you there." They had packed all our goods for a short trip to Provo from Salt Lake City, and I can clearly remember that night—I was six years old—they began unpacking and repacking the things to go into storage or for a longer move.

My mother, brother and baby sister and I went to live with my mother's sister in Cleveland, Ohio. My father went down to Cincinnati and started working at his trade. Before he had decided to become a minister of the gospel, he was what is called a "metal spinner," and there was a metal spinning concern there. By this time it was not lamps for carriages but lamps for this newfangled thing the automobile. So father went there and worked, meantime looking around for some opening to go back into the ministry.

After a few months or maybe a year, I can't say, he found a chance to have a church in the so-called Holston Conference in Tennessee. This was a church in an industrial suburb of Chattanooga, Tennessee, and he picked up his family and was for some years minister of the Methodist Church in Alton Park near Chattanooga. He got promoted to District Superintendent, which then was the novel title for what used to be called a Presiding Elder in a conference, and traveled extensively, even far up into the mountains, to visit churches in the Chattanooga District of Holston Conference.

He took me with him on one of these trips because he wanted me to see how people up there lived. I happen to remember clearly that in the house where we stayed the night there were no windows. There were shutters that you could raise to let the air in. There wasn't a privy in the whole community. People—men, women, and children—when they had to relieve themselves went out into the woods and hid. As I learned later, these people were mostly Scotch-Irish whose ancestors had emigrated to the United States very early, in the Seventeenth Century, I would judge. I've never seen a Negro community in the South that approached in primitiveness and poverty the condition of that place.

I had schooling, first in Alton Park and then in Chattanooga itself, through the eighth grade, when one normally went into high school in those days. I started high school at Central High School in Chattanooga. My father, for reasons that are too complicated to explain, wanted to live in New England. And so once again there was a big transition for him and his wife and three children, this time to the town of Westboro, Massachusetts. This is in the New England Conference of the Methodist Church. Before I had gone to more than perhaps a couple of months more of high school there, my father was transferred to a church in Cliftondale, which is part of Saugus, Massachusetts, and I continued high school there through the fourth year and was graduated.

My first interest in philosophy, to come at long last to this point, was aroused by the lady who was principal of the high school in Saugus, a Mrs. Lucy Mears Norris. She did so in the following manner. Among the things that she had us read in Senior English were Emerson's *Essays*. That was the first philosophical book that I read. And I think that my interest in philosophy was aroused because I thought that I

could understand it and that the other kids *could not* understand it. I thought—although I was a good student all around—“This is for me. Philosophy is the thing for me.”

A lady who lived in Cliftondale—I must tell you by the way that my father’s salary was extremely small even then—gave a one hundred dollar scholarship to the most promising student who graduated from Saugus High School every year. That year I got the scholarship. I took the College Entrance Board Examination, which existed even in that time, 1919, and I applied for admission to Harvard. My scores on the College Entrance Examination must have been *bad*. But the high school I had gone to was also by ordinary standards bad. So that Fall I was admitted to Harvard College as a Freshman-on-trial.

In those days at Harvard anyone who was concentrating in philosophy had from his very inception of work in his freshman year a tutor. And my first tutors, because they alternated semester by semester, were the late Ralph Eaton and the late Raphael Demos. I got good enough marks, so that by the beginning of the second semester I had a full scholarship covering all tuition at Harvard and was no longer on trial.

Ralph Eaton was my first tutor and I went around to his room—he was a proctor in one of the dormitories then—for my first tutorial. Ralph had on his desk a plaster of Paris reproduction of the Venus de Milo. He also smoked, lighting his pipe with old-fashioned kitchen matches, and it was his habit to light the match on the Venus de Milo’s belly, so that scarified ... it was practically eliminated! I had grown up with such a reverence for art that I was shocked at this irreverence on Eaton’s part.

I can’t say just what I got in the way of philosophy from Ralph Eaton. But while I was still his “tutee,” as we

say, I ran into Raphael Demos in the Harvard Yard, and I started talking with him, or he started talking with me, and I talked about something, what it was, I've forgotten. And Raphael, who had nothing to do with me—I was somebody else's tutee—said: "Write me a paper on that and bring it around to me." Well, I worked harder on that paper than I did in any of my courses. (I no longer know what the subject was.) I brought that around to Raphael and even before I became his tutee we were plunged in philosophical discussions.

Raphael Demos was a poor Greek from Smyrna and had his B. A. from Anatolia College in Asia Minor. He got this Ph.D. from Harvard in 1916 and had shown such promise that he got the Sheldon Traveling Fellowship in philosophy from Harvard to England in 1917-1918 and 1918-19. During the First World War Bertrand Russell, as you know, was put in jail for his pacifist anti-war pronouncements. Among the people who did go and see him in jail and learn philosophy from him was Raphael Demos.

The strongest influence on Raphael was the influence of Arthur William, the man that Whitehead always used to refer to as "Bertie." (When speaking of Russell they would always refer to him as Arthur William; his name was Bertrand Arthur William Russell. In one of Whitehead's lectures, a formal lecture, he was about to criticize some of Russell's things, and he said "Russell has said such and such, and such and such, but, you know," he said, "Bertie is wrong!") The earliest influence on me in philosophy came from Raphael Demos or it came from Russell by way of Raphael Demos. Early Whitehead—*The Concept of Nature*, those early works of Whitehead—came to me the same way. I doubt that I have read more than two or three of

Emerson's *Essays* in my life since I graduated from high school!

Russell had written an article that appeared in *Mind* which was primarily concerned with Meinong but also mentioned and said something favorable about Husserl. It was common in those days for people in the English speaking world to construe Husserl as a realist and in consequence of Russell's highly favorable remarks on Husserl for me to think that I would like to learn more about Husserl. My German, although I had passed the reading examination, which was required for the doctorate at Harvard, was extremely bad. I thought: "Well, if I get a chance I will go to hear Edmund Husserl"—among others, of course.

During my first year of graduate work at Harvard a young lecturer was having his first year in the philosophy department, a man by the name of Winthrop Bell. Winthrop Bell was a Canadian, actually a Nova Scotian, and he had been a student of Edmund Husserl's at Göttingen. Bell had finished his doctoral dissertation, submitted it, and it had been approved by three members of the Göttingen philosophy department when World War I broke out. As a Canadian Bell was interned. Edmund Husserl persuaded his two colleagues to go with him to the internment camp and have Winthrop Bell, technically a prisoner there, defend his thesis. And they did. Winthrop Bell got his doctor's degree from Göttingen in the earliest year of the war because, after all, the university stands independent of the state. Those were the days!

Bell had written his dissertation on Josiah Royce. Not because he was interested in Josiah Royce but because Husserl told this young graduate student to write on someone in the American tradition and he had complied. The first year that Winthrop Bell taught at Harvard was the year 1923-1924. I was one of a handful of students who attended his main course, which was on general theory of value, and was indeed from a phenomenological point of view.

I went on struggling through Husserl in the original—there was no translation at that time—doing my best, which was very bad.

The end of my first year of graduate study, I was awarded the Sheldon Fellowship in philosophy for study abroad. The current holder of the Sheldon Fellowship was then Marvin Farber, and I can't remember whether I ran into Farber again in Freiburg or he had already left Freiburg before I got there. At all events, in time for the beginning of the Fall semester of 1924 I was in Freiburg equipped with two letters of introduction to Herr Geheimrat Professor Doktor Edmund Husserl—one of them from William Ernest Hocking, who had also studied a short time with Husserl at Göttingen,^[2] and the other was from Winthrop Bell.

At first I had intended to follow the pattern of my predecessors as Sheldon Fellows, such as George Santayana and William Ernest Hocking, and so to speak make a grand tour of European universities. So many weeks here, so many weeks there, so many weeks some place else. And in Germany, France, England, and in that way—well—spend the time. I decided that the first philosopher to look up and visit was Paul Natorp. Inconveniently but fortunately for me, Natorp died while I was on my way to Europe, and number

two man on my list for this quick run-around was Edmund Husserl.

So I went around to Edmund Husserl's apartment and I did not realize that the proper time for making a formal call in Freiburg—at least in those days and, I think, throughout Germany—was exactly twelve o'clock noon. I got there at about three o'clock in the afternoon, and rang the doorbell. A young man who looked like a prematurely aged Emmanuel Kant answered the door. His name was Ludwig Landgrebe and he was Husserl's assistant at the time. I said as best I could, because my German was still pretty bad, that I'd like to speak to Professor Husserl. He took my letters and asked me: "Wen darf ich melden?" "Whom shall I announce?" I no more understood "Wen darf ich melden?" than nothing at all! I made a big guess and said "Herr Cairns." Apparently that was all right; he went in and I waited in an anteroom. The doors to Husserl's study were closed.

There came out from the study a little man who introduced himself in a light, calm voice as Edmund Husserl; incidentally, he had taken the time to read the letters. He then took me into his study, and though I can't reproduce everything he said in that first conversation, part of what he said was, to translate into English: "You have come to Freiburg at a time which is most dangerous for phenomenology." The gist of what he said from there on was, I shan't say a diatribe, but a very acerbic criticism of Martin Heidegger.

This was 1924-1925. Heidegger, then professor at Marburg, was exerting what the Germans would call a "colossal" influence on students. I can remember students during that first year coming back to Freiburg and lending me their notes on Heidegger. Husserl told me, probably at a

later time with reference to *Sein und Zeit*, “I thought he was with me and that I simply could not understand his language.” This “I thought he was with me” attitude must have lasted into 1929 when Husserl became Emeritus and Heidegger moved from Marburg to Freiburg to take over Husserl’s chair.

To go back to my first meeting with Husserl, he asked me what I had read of his work and I said, “Well, my German as you see is not very good, but I have attempted to read the *Logische Untersuchungen*.” He turned around in his desk chair, took down the first part of the second volume of the *Logische Untersuchungen*, and said: “Study this. Study it pen in hand. If you don’t understand or if you object, write down your question or objection. Come to me next week with what you have done and we shall discuss it together.”

My plan to do the grand tour of all the universities of Germany, France, and the United Kingdom went completely by the board. Soon I became immersed in studying Husserl, and talking with him, and I decided to remain and study with Husserl. The first thing that made me believe he had something that nobody else had was his analysis of perception, imagination and memory. I had never seen anything like it before. I felt: “The guy is right! and nobody else. He’s right, at least about these things, and I’m going to stick with him. Who cares about a grand tour,” etc.

I spent my first year as Sheldon Fellow with Husserl. Husserl must have written a very adulatory letter to Harvard about me, because, for the first time since Raphael Demos had been Sheldon Fellow, I was awarded the Sheldon Fellowship for a second year. So I stayed a second year in Freiburg, working with Husserl. I heard, of course, the lectures of every philosopher on the faculty there, but I worked with Husserl on Husserl’s work.

At that time I had a letter from the then chairman, Ralph Barton Perry, in quasi-humorous vein: "I hope when you come back after having studied two years with Edmund Husserl that you won't tell us that phenomenology is the only true philosophy." I came back and told him that the only true philosophy, or, rather, that the only valid philosophical method was Husserl's phenomenological method! I then continued at Harvard for two years as what we used to call a "section hand." It was during this time that I made the acquaintance, and more than the acquaintance, of Alfred North Whitehead, who had come to Harvard during the time that I was in Germany. I attended all of his lectures and seminars, but apparently the phenomenological virus had bitten me so deeply that I must say that the philosophical influence of Whitehead on me was minimal. I still went on studying Husserl and started writing a dissertation. At this moment I cannot remember even the theme of that dissertation, but I worked very hard on it, and then, eventually, destroyed it.

On the second occasion of my stay in Freiburg I studied with Husserl from the early Fall of 1931 through November 1932. At that time Husserl was Professor Emeritus and Martin Heidegger had succeeded to Husserl's chair. Husserl was most generous in allowing me to read his unpublished manuscripts and several times a week I would go with Husserl and Eugen Fink on Husserl's walk around the Lorretoberg, during which time we discussed or, more exactly, Husserl held forth on whatever problems were uppermost in his mind at that time.^[3] I also attended the lectures and the seminars of Martin Heidegger, but social relations between Heidegger and Husserl were already, to say the least, estranged, and academic life in Germany being what it was in those days, I never met Martin Heidegger

personally, to say nothing of being a guest in his house as I was frequently with my new wife a guest at the Husserls’.

During this time I made the acquaintance of Eugen Fink who was then Husserl’s assistant. My conversations with Fink, whom I saw frequently without seeing Husserl, were also of great advantage in making known to me some of the later developments in Husserl’s phenomenology not touched upon in the manuscripts which Husserl lent me, and indeed allowed me to take home to study. As a consequence I can say in fact that Eugen Fink was indeed the second most important personal source of whatever acquaintance I acquired with the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl. I might add that during this time that Husserl gave me access to unpublished material, I began not just listening to Husserl but actually on occasion I was able to discuss various points in phenomenology with him.

The *Ideen* had been translated into English and that translation had appeared—I’m speaking of what is today called *Ideen*, I.^[4] I read it critically and told Husserl some of my objections to the published translation, and Husserl said (translating almost literally): “If that’s the way that translation runs, instead of being a bridge to an understanding of my philosophy it will prove to be a wall against such understanding.” The French translation of the *Cartesiansche Meditationen* had come out shortly after my arrival in Freiburg,^[5] and that translation is a comparatively good one. From that translation I gained insights into further aspects of the phenomenology of Edmund Husserl in addition to those I had acquired from Husserl himself and from Eugen Fink.

As regards the so-called *Ideen*, II and *Ideen*, III, there was extant among Husserl’s unpublished manuscripts one that had been put together for Husserl by Miss Stein as a

basis for the announced second and third volumes of the *Ideen*.^[6] Parts of Miss Stein's manuscripts were used by Husserl as a basis for continuing what would have been *Ideen, II*, but he dropped this work of completing the *Ideen* and turned to writing a logic. Among his manuscripts assembled by Fink there was one small manuscript which Husserl thought could be used, elaborated, as a preface or introduction to this logic which he expected to write. He took this small manuscript and, he told me, in the course of six weeks wrote on the basis of his manuscript the volume called *Formale und transzendente Logik*.

Husserl once told me that the desire to write a book was something that came over him now and then and that when that desire came over him he shoved aside all of this work—which consisted in his daily meditations—and wrote a book at a furious pace, like someone in a trance, that he would write a page and put it to one side on his desk, another page and put it to the side on his desk, without numbering any of these pages. He would just throw them aside and leave to himself or his assistant the later task of going through them to find the order of the pages for the book he had finished. Incidentally, this can hardly apply to the *Logische Untersuchungen*. It applies, however, to the *Ideen*, “Einleitung,” and Band I, the *Formale und transzendente Logik* and the manuscript for the *Cartesianische Meditationen*, as the context of what Husserl was saying indicates.

His daily work, however, which was thus interrupted, consisted in daily meditations, *Meditationen* as he called them. And he said to me once: “When I go back to what I have written in an earlier meditation, I always go back to that which is most obscure to me and I wrestle with that problem. I never go on and leave a problem unsolved and

that is why I shall never write a philosophy. My work is not that of building but of digging, of digging in that which is most obscure and of uncovering problems that have not been seen or if seen have not been solved.” All of his works are, therefore, *introductions* to phenomenology, introductions with the aim of uncovering and, if possible, solving the most profound problems. On my second visit to Freiburg, and in one of my first talks with him after I returned, Husserl said: “Herr Cairns, I am writing two introductions to philosophy, one is for philosophers and one is for non-philosophers and, you know, it is harder to write introductions to phenomenology for philosophers than it is to write an introduction to phenomenology for laymen.” These two introductions, of course, never saw the light of day. Even *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* bears the subtitle “an introduction to phenomenology.” Everything was an introduction.

At the time that I left Freiburg in November, 1932, Husserl’s main objective was to go on with the *Cartesianische Meditationen* and supplement those that had been translated into French by additional meditations. Shortly after I left, however, he turned his attention to a completely new work, the *Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie*. And although Fink had written out a full outline of what topics were to be dealt with in the additional Cartesian Meditations, Husserl pushed these matters aside and became immersed in the writing of the *Krisis*.

My interest at that time was a naively ambitious one. It was to master the whole of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, and I had already chosen as the title of my doctoral

dissertation eventually to be presented at Harvard: *The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl*.

I left Freiburg in November, 1932, because I felt the necessity of completing my doctoral dissertation and at last getting my doctor's degree because almost ten years had elapsed since I had been graduated from Harvard College in 1923. I went to Cambridge, Massachusetts, and worked unremittingly on my doctoral thesis. I completed the thesis and turned it in to Professor Ralph Barton Perry, the chairman of the philosophy department at Harvard at the time, at five minutes to twelve midnight on the last day when theses were accepted. I then had the usual oral examination on the thesis and received my degree in June, 1933.

My wife's family, more particularly her father and sister, were living in New York, and I came to New York with her accordingly to look for a job. 1933 was at the depths of the Great Depression. I was able to get three jobs, all of them part-time: a part-time job in the evening session at Hunter College, another at New York University at Washington Square, and a third at New York University in the Bronx. The consequence was that I spent a large proportion of my time familiarizing myself more intimately with the New York subway system.

All the while I was, of course, looking for some sort of permanent position. A permanent position did turn up and I was, chiefly on the recommendation of Professor William Ernest Hocking, appointed Professor of Philosophy and Psychology at Rockford College in Rockford, Illinois, a college for young women. I remained Professor there until 1950.

In the meantime, the Second World War had drawn the United States into itself, and I applied for and received a

commission in the Army Air Corps. At first I was an instructor in navigation at an air station near Waco, Texas. I had no desire to fight the war in Texas, however, and I pulled various strings. Eventually one of the strings got me into the Air Corps Intelligence School at Harrisburg, where I completed the regular course for Intelligence Officers and the course for Prisoner of War Interrogators, more particularly the course as it was given for persons who were going to interrogate German prisoners. After this schooling at Harrisburg, I was sent over to the Mediterranean Theatre and was a prisoner of war interrogator in Africa and later in Italy, first in the Naples area and then in Rome after its fall to the allied troops. Between these two assignments I was prisoner of war interrogator on the island of Corsica. Toward the end of my activity as a prisoner of war interrogator I began to have various symptoms which were at first diagnosed as symptoms of virus pneumonia. I was in and out of several hospitals in Italy, in Rome, in Naples and eventually in Leghorn where I had been sent to be returned to the United States. A doctor at the hospital in Leghorn eventually diagnosed my ailment not as recurrent pneumonia, but as tuberculosis. I was returned to the United States on a stretcher and spent the next two years first in Army hospitals and then during the final six months of the two years in a civilian sanatorium for the tubercular. I was a year and a half at bedrest.

Upon being discharged from the sanatorium, I resumed my job teaching at Rockford College. At that time Rockford College was undergoing great financial difficulties and was having to make drastic cuts in salaries. Eventually it was told me by the president of Rockford College that my salary for the following year would be approximately what I was paying the college for a

place to live. This seemed rather the opposite of feasible and I returned to New York without a job, was supported by my wife, who was a psychiatric social worker, and eventually I was invited by my friend Alfred Schutz to teach at the New School, on the Graduate Faculty—which I was more than happy to do. I was there at first as a Visiting Professor, 1954-1960, then as Full Professor of Philosophy, 1960-1969. I retired from the Graduate Faculty in September, 1969.

The course that I developed and gave parts of at various times at the New School for Social Research under the title of “Husserl’s Theory of Intentionality” is a development from that first over-ambitious and very bad doctoral dissertation of mine. I also took parts of the work in progress and used them as the basis for three other systematic courses that I gave at the New School. In addition to “Husserl’s Theory of Intentionality,” my course on the “Phenomenology of Thinking,” my course on “General Theory of Value,” and my course on “Advanced Theoretical Ethics” are really parts of the complete systematic exposition and criticism of the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, which I may say has been my life’s work.

I am leaving out the historical and critical work that I did for courses that I offered at the New School on each of the British Empiricists, Locke, Berkeley, and Hume, on the Scottish School and Hamilton, on the History of Philosophy in the Nineteenth Century, and the expository and critical work that I did for my course on Emmanuel Kant.

My life has been the attempt to understand and criticize the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, and as I went further and further in this enterprise my criticisms of certain aspects of Husserl’s philosophy, in particular his account of intersubjectivity, became more and more radical, so that as a

matter of fact the title of my course “Husserl’s Theory of Intentionality” has become a misnomer. At most I could call it directly “A Husserlian Account of Intentionality” because it contains perhaps as much criticism as exposition of the great man’s work.

^[1] On two evenings in July, 1969, Dr. Lester Embree visited Professor Cairns to collect information with a tape recorder for a sketch of Professor Cairns’ life to be written by the editors. However, as Professor Cairns told about his life it became apparent that a transcription of his own words was possible and indeed preferable to anything the editors might make from them. In collaboration with Dr. Embree, the editors have added punctuation, emphasis and paragraph divisions where necessary. Where it seemed called for, some rearrangement of the material has been made. The title was added by Dr. Embree.

^[2] Dr. Bell’s recollections of his work under Husserl have been published in Herbert Spiegelberg, *The Phenomenological Movement. A Historical Introduction* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1960), Vol. I, p. 145. Dr. Hocking’s recollections have been published in *Edmund Husserl 1859-1959* (La Haye: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959), edited by H. L. van Breda and J. Taminiaux, under the title of “From the early days of the ‘Logische Untersuchungen’,” pp. I-II.—Ed.

^[3] See Dorion Cairns, *Conversations with Husserl and Fink*. *Phaenomenologica* 66. Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976.—Ed.

^[4] The translation is by W. R. Boyce Gibson, 1931. The rights for a new translation by Dorion Cairns have been secured by Martinus Nijhoff, The Hague. — Ed.

^[5] The translation is by J. Pfeiffer and E. Levinas, 1931.

^[6] See the posthumously published *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie*, Zweites Buch, and *ibid.*, Drittes Buch (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952). *Husserliana* Bd. IV, V. Herausgegeben von Marly Biemel. Cf. “Einleitung des Herausgebers,” pp. XVIff.