By the Neva, By the Aire*

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One cannot but feel, given the present situation in British universities, that an invitation to deliver an inaugural lecture is an opportunity to celebrate survival, not primarily of oneself but of one’s department, subject and discipline. The feeling is especially acute when the subject in question is Russian Studies, which has been the recent victim of some of the U.G.C.’s most exquisite surgery. At the same time, the unpredictability of the line which that particular surgeon’s knife might follow explains the almost indecent haste, within the Leeds context, in delivering an Inaugural in the year of one’s appointment. A colleague in another university entitled his own lecture some years ago ‘Will Russian Literature Survive until 1984?’; I was not in fact tempted to entitle mine ‘Will Russian Studies Survive until 1984?’, although I confess I was reluctant to wait until that apocalyptic year. To Russian Studies, especially as they have developed at Leeds, I shall nevertheless return at a later stage in my lecture, but I would like now to turn to a subject more remote in time and distance, although near to me as the field of much of my research, to travel in the mind’s eye from a city by the River Aire to a city growing up along the very banks of the River Neva.

Autocrats, dictators and indeed itinerant Mormon leaders have traditionally decreed that ‘this is the place’ for the creation of cities — and Peter the Great of Russia was no exception. Few, however, have chosen as lugubrious and unhealthy a site as Peter selected in the swampy Neva delta for his city of St Petersburg. One of his jesters was to describe, and not in jest, its position as ‘on one side the sea, on the other sorrow, on the third moss, on the fourth a sigh’. Wolves, floods, fire, human suffering, and countless deaths notwithstanding, the city, founded in 1703, grew steadily; the Tsar, inordinately pleased with its progress, moved his family and court there in 1710, and in 1712 declared it his imperial capital. But St Petersburg truly became Russia’s ‘window on the West’ in 1723, when it was also made the country’s trading centre. Merchants of the British Factory moved from the old capital

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Moscow and from Archangel, and the foundations were laid of a significant British community in St Petersburg. The association of the British with St Petersburg was to continue for nearly two hundred years until the Bolshevik Revolution brought the dissolution of the community and deprived the city of its status as capital (and ultimately of its name).

Of course the presence of the British in Russia long antedates Peter’s reign. As early as 1553 the survivors of an ill-fated expedition, led by Sir Hugh Willoughby and Richard Chancellor to discover a northern trading route to China, found themselves in the White Sea and made their way from Archangel to Moscow for an audience with Tsar Ivan IV ‘The Terrible’. Anglo-Russian relations thus began by chance rather than by design, but the formation of the Muscovy, later Russia, Company in February 1555 allowed chance to be gainfully exploited. It is not my intention here to relate developments throughout the late sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries — these have already received detailed attention from English and Russian scholars. Suffice it to say that in addition to the merchants trading from Archangel and Moscow, numerous other Britons made their careers in seventeenth-century Muscovy as mercenaries, craftsmen and specialists of all kinds, including notably doctors. But it was a ‘strange and barbarous kingdom’ in which they lived and worked, and they were regarded with a high degree of suspicion and presented with numerous difficulties by a cautious Russian government, church and people. In Moscow they were segregated, together with other foreigners, in the Nemetskaia Sloboda, or Foreigners’ Quarter, well away from the city’s centre, so that their strange habits should not infect the natives.

Let us not imitate too much the curious and painstaking cleanliness of the foreigners, who so often wash the floors of their houses, and where a guest may not spit or spew on to the floor. And if by chance he does so, straightway a servant wipes it up. Such men, in their voluptuousness and carnal cleanliness, attempt to make a heaven out of a mere earthly home.

It was only after the accession in 1689 of Peter I, a young Tsar who imbibed more than conservative Russians considered good for him of grog and ideas in the company of foreigners, that a new, more open era of intercourse with the West began. Effective as symbol and in purpose was Peter’s Great Embassy to Holland and England in 1697–98: it allowed Peter not only to see for himself the achievements of the West, but also to begin the recruitment of naval officers, shipbuilders, engineers, and other specialists, essential for the westernization of his country.

These years also saw changes in the structure of the Russia Company, which, originally a joint stock company, had operated as a ‘regulated’ body since 1613, but with an inexorably dwindling membership. An Act of Parliament in 1698 enabled any British subject to become a freeman of the Company on payment of £5, since ‘ease of admission would tend to increase the trade for the public good’. Membership grew rapidly, and the British merchants of the Russia Company in Russia itself, known as the British Factory, were poised to dominate the Baltic trade when the new capital became the centre of their activities. Mutual trading advantages were the true foundation of Anglo-Russian relations, the stimulus to the concept of ‘the true allies’ that emerged later in the century, the overriding factor in all negotiations. Britain depended on Russia in a very real sense more than on any of its overseas colonies, and particularly so when all the Baltic littoral fell into Peter’s hands (including the ports of Narva, Reval and Riga). Naval stores were the first priority: timber for masts and planks, tallow for candles, flax for sailcloth, hemp for caulking and rigging, iron for cannon and much else. It is no exaggeration to say that, although some of these essentials were obtainable from other countries, notably Sweden, without Russia it would have been impossible to have maintained our navy and merchant ships in good order throughout the century. Russia had much more to offer than naval stores: we needed vast amounts of iron for our foundries; we were anxious to obtain leather and hides, furs and bristle, rhubarb (the medicinal kind), and oil. It is obvious that we imported vastly more than we exported, but Russia was delighted with the money and equally provided a market for our woollen cloths (for uniforms), tobacco, pottery and industrial machinery, and later in the century, increasingly for finished goods and luxury items of all kinds. Although trade statistics are more properly the province of a professor of economics, a few figures from different periods in the eighteenth century will illustrate the increase in volume of trade as well as the import/export gap. If in 1701, imports into Britain totalled £90,581 and exports £69,201, by 1725 (the last year of Peter’s reign), they were £250,315 and £24,847 respectively; by 1750 they had reached £584,091 and £111,846; by 1770, £1,046,610 and £145,743; and by 1795 (the last
full year of Catherine’s reign), £1,857,977 and £862,265.\(^3\) The status of the British as ‘the most favoured nation’ was confirmed by the signing of the first Anglo-Russian commercial treaty in 1734, renegotiated in 1766 and again in 1793, which both regularized the trade, eradicating many of the abuses of which the British merchants complained, and gave the British privileges and immunities far in excess of any enjoyed by their rivals. Cronstadt and St Petersburg became virtually British ports, as ships plied their way across the Baltic from London, Hull, King’s Lynn, Yarmouth, and Leith from the spring through to autumn. Between 1791 and 1798 there was an annual average of 560 British ships arriving in St Petersburg, more than the combined total of ships of all other countries including Russia.\(^4\)

The expansion of Anglo-Russian trade was an obvious factor in the growth in both size and importance of the British community in St Petersburg during the eighteenth century. It is difficult, however, to provide more than very approximate figures for its rate of growth and ultimate size. If the English community in Moscow numbered, according to one contemporary source, sixty-eight in 1709,\(^5\) a figure around 150 would seem appropriate for its early years in the new capital. Although there was a steady increase in the middle decades of the century, the real growth came in the reign of Catherine, when Anglo-Russian relations flourished on all fronts and many an Englishman came to Russia to seek his fortune. We have figures from a variety of sources giving 482 residents in 1782–83, 930 in 1789 and 1,500 in 1792.\(^6\) These somewhat unreliable figures, which nevertheless do give some indication of the acceleration in the community’s growth in the last two decades of the century, should be seen in the context of the general increase in the city’s population: 95,000 in 1750, 192,000 in 1784 and 220,000 in 1800. Finally, it needs to be emphasized that the British were numerically not among the best represented foreign groups: of the 32,000 foreigners comprising one-seventh of the city’s population in 1789, there were, for instance, some 17,660 Germans to 930 British.\(^7\) But numbers are not all: the British were undoubtedly, in the eighteenth century at least, the most influential and respected among foreign residents, far superior to the Germans, as one perhaps biased English visitor put it, ‘in riches and in interest with the great’.\(^8\)

The British in St Petersburg did what the British have always done overseas — they organized themselves for their mutual benefit and comfort, surrounded themselves by what they liked and respected, i.e. British things, imposed their way of life and view of the world on an alien environment, closed ranks, built walls, and hoisted the flag.

The English stationery at St Petersburg are mostly merchants, acquire and expend a great deal of money, live like their countrymen at home. [...] In the houses of the Britons settled here a competent idea may be formed of the English manner of living. Furniture, meals, establishment; everything is English — even to the chimney-fire. Here where wood is in such plenty, the Englishmanfetches his coals from home.\(^9\)

A visiting English lady was even more condescendingly complimentary:

I find English grates, English coats, English coal, and English hospitality, to make me welcome, and the fire-side cheerful — I have never yet been fortunate enough to make any acquaintance in the world of commerce; but if all English merchants and their families are as well informed and civil as those I find here — I should be very glad to be admitted into the city of London as a visitor, to enjoy a little rational conversation, which at the court-end is seldom to be found.\(^10\)

Not all reacted quite so positively — ‘a money getting unlettered race’ was one comment\(^11\) — but in general the British presented a united and impressive front at a time when Anglomania was becoming the fashion throughout Europe and received particular support from the Empress Catherine herself.
Availing themselves of a provision in the 1734 treaty which allowed them to build, buy or rent houses anywhere in St Petersburg (and other cities), the British merchants acquired some of the best locations, along the ‘Linii’ on Vasili Island on the right bank of the Neva, and even more impressively, along the very embankment on the left bank. The latter, now called the Quay of the Red Fleet, was originally called Galley Quay and in the early days of the city had been an unattractive collection of workers’ huts together with a tavern frequented by craftsmen from the nearby shipyards or Admiralty. Its transformation came early in Catherine’s reign with the establishment of the Commission for the Stone Construction of St Petersburg and Moscow, and in the 1770s was built the row of three-storied stone houses into which the English moved. Not surprisingly, therefore, towards the end of the century, this stretch of the embankment became known as the English Quay or Line. These houses, overlooking the Neva with ‘balconies large enough to drink Tea in’, in Baroness Dimsdale’s quaint phrase,12 were entered from a back courtyard in Galley, now Red, Street, where more of the less affluent British craftsmen plied their trades. The commercial centre for the British merchants was on Vasili Island, where the British Factory had their meeting room to the left of the great Exchange Building, but the English Line was the true heart of the community’s social activities.

In the centre of the Line stood the English Church. Formerly belonging to Count B. P. Sheremetev, the house was acquired by the Russia Company in 1753, and after conversion, was opened for divine service the following year. Despite complaints in the 1780s that it was not sufficiently well-equipped or large enough, given ‘the great Increase in the Number of British Subjects within these few years past’,13 it remained virtually unaltered for the rest of the century. An engraving, showing it to be ‘a regular structure of Italian architecture’, was published in Gentleman’s Magazine in 1796.14 Although plans for a new church were drawn up, they were eventually abandoned in favour of repairs and substantial alterations and enlargements to the existing building, carried out by the Italian architect Giacomo Quarenghi in 1815. A visitor to a service a few years later describes it as follows:

...a very handsome and substantial edifice, situated about the centre of the English Quay, where it presents a noble front to the river, being decorated by a colonnade, placed on a massive and well-distributed basement story, in which are the apartments of ... the Chaplain to the Factory. [...] The entrance, properly speaking, is from a street at the back of the Quay, through a handsome gateway. The interior is neat and simple, and has the great advantage of being well warmed and comfortably fitted up. There is a state pew for the British Ambassador on the right of the altar and opposite to the pulpit; it is surmounted by the Royal Arms of England. The altar-piece is a Deposition from the Cross, a very creditable painting, on the sides of which are two handsome Corinthian pillars of marble. The female part of the congregation, as in Lutheran churches, sat apart from the rest, and occupied the left side of the church. [...] The church has no gallery, and, although capacious, is insufficient to accommodate more than a part of the English residents.15

The church, given a face-lift in the 1870s, survives today, a rare monument to the British community in St Petersburg. It is now occupied by the Leningrad City Tourist Administration, but if you are fortunate enough to gain admittance and prevail upon them to draw back the curtains around the walls, you will find the organ, religious texts in English and commemorative plaques to residents who died in the city in the nineteenth century.

The complex of church buildings contained accommodation not only for the chaplain and his family but also for a subscription library, yet another of those typical late eighteenth-century English institutions
which the Petersburg English, in this case the ladies, were quick to introduce. The first reference to it which I have been able to discover dates from 1787 and mentions a catalogue, probably manuscript, a bookstock of 2,000 volumes, and a part-time librarian.\textsuperscript{16} The library certainly remained an important feature of the community’s life throughout the nineteenth century: printed catalogues were published in 1821, 1837 and in 1882, when the number of titles had reached 10,000. The ultimate fate of the library after the Revolution is not known: the books were probably absorbed into the English-language holdings of the Leningrad State Library.

Observing their religion and feeding their minds, the English were perhaps even more concerned with other rituals and forms of social intercourse. It was inevitable that within easy reach of the church there should be an English inn that offered beds to visiting Englishmen and beer to all and sundry: the worthy Bishop Coxe, visiting St Petersburg in 1778, affirmed that he had ‘never tasted English beer and porter in greater perfection and abundance’,\textsuperscript{17} and it must be remembered that Burton ale, shipped through Hull, made as useful a ballast as coal. There was also a coffee-house where the merchants could foregather, imitating the Russia Company merchants in London who frequented Batson’s in Cornhill Street. The English inn was also the venue for the annual series of winter balls organized by the Factory to which members of the Russian nobility and distinguished foreigners were only too pleased to be invited. An amusing description exists of the first ball of the 1787–88 season, which was attended by Prince Potemkin and a galaxy of other nobles:

Country Boamkin, as they call Country Bumpkin, is a very favorite dance, tho’ they make it quite different from the dance so called in England. The supper is very elegant, but so much in fashion is everything English that Beefstakes, Welsh Rabits & Porter is much the most fashionable meal. I myself saw the Duke of Capriola, the Neapolitan Embassador, in his red heeled shoes, very busy at a great Beef Stake, a dish I dare say he never tasted in Italy. These dishes are as fashionable among the ladies as the Gentlemen; the former, tho’ they do not eat many sweetmeats at Supper, pocket them & apples without Scruple.\textsuperscript{18}

The inn was a house owned by a Russian nobleman on the very Quay; in rooms hired on Galley Street were held meetings of another characteristic English institution, the English Club, founded in 1770 by
the English merchant Francis Gardner. It provided cards, billiards, a
library, and a good supper, and members of the English community and
of the highest Russian nobility met on terms of easy familiarity. The
club prospered and in the 1790s (when the membership stood at 300
with a waiting list of 100 ‘candidates’), moved to permanent quarters by
the river Moika. Many of the members of the club were also members of
a much more widely based movement — Freemasonry; and it
occasions little surprise that the British erected their own Lodge, called
‘Perfect Union’, at almost the same time as the English Club was
founded. Limited to twenty-four masons because of the smallness of the
rooms in which it met, the Lodge had from the beginning a cosmo-
politan membership, although the majority of its officers were British.

Church, subscription library, coffee-house, inn doubling as assembly
rooms, club, masonic lodge: there was, however, no permanent
playhouse, but in 1770, a good year for the British, an English touring
company arrived in the Russian capital and for two seasons presented a
series of plays, including Jane Shore, Douglas and Othello, the first
performance of Shakespeare in English or any other language in Russia.
The Empress was present on at least one occasion and also gave
financial support to the company, which, however, could not hope to
attract to performances of plays in English a consistently large enough
audience to survive. The English players are just one example from the
steady stream of English performers, acrobats, jugglers, and trick
horsemen who visited St Petersburg during Catherine’s reign. Among
the last was the famous Charles Hughes of the Royal Circus, who was
instrumental in organizing some of the first horse races in Russia for
Count Aleksei Orlov, founder after the English example of one of the
most celebrated Russian stud farms.

Mention of horse-racing allows me to turn briefly to sport, and
particularly organized sport, without which no civilized Englishman’s
existence, wherever he might find himself, would be complete. The
English made sport sociably acceptable and desirable, and the Russian
nobility watched with rapt attention the antics of the British, and
imitated many of their sporting pursuits. A British hunt was soon
established, and long flourished in St Petersburg and was later imitated
in Moscow. As one writer put it: ‘the members consist of Englishmen
and a few Russians of rank, and in the season they sport their pink
before the admiring mooziks’. They hunted fox and hare and wolf,
perfectly happy to make the most of the local wild animals. A
German author was to say somewhat later with heavy irony, although
the comparison he uses is an apt one: ‘they hunt bear on the shores
of the Neva, as they do the tiger on those of the Ganges’. The
English shot snipe and other game birds. They fished in the Neva, a
pastime much indulged in by the British Ambassador, Sir James
Harris, in the 1770s. Predictably, ‘these sons of Izaak Walton’
eventually founded a Piscatorial Society and rented a clubhouse at a
place called ‘The Mill’, some twenty miles from the capital. More
surprisingly, I found recently the following entry for May 1778 in the
unpublished diary of Katherine Harris, the Ambassador’s sister: ‘went
to the Tennis Court saw my Brother & Mr Oakes [his secretary] play
two sets’. This was of course Real Tennis. In the late nineteenth
century, however, the British were prominent in spreading the
popularity of lawn tennis, and a Briton was inevitably the President
of the newly formed St Petersburg Tennis Club — and, incidentally,
commodore of the Yacht Club. Cricket we successfully imposed as
the colonial power on India and the West Indies, but the climate and
other factors told against us in Russia. Catherine the Great,
nevertheless, concerned with the education of her grandsons, the
future Alexander I and his brother Constantine, and informed about
the curricula of English public schools, approached her Court
Engraver, an Englishman named James Walker, hailing not from
Yorkshire but from a Minor County, Norfolk, and asked about ‘an
amusement she had heard talked of, called cricket, enquiring whether
it would not be a good exercise for the young princes’. Walker was
requested to demonstrate the game to General Sacken, the Grand
Dukes’ tutor:

I procured the apparatus, and waited upon his excellency, who viewed them
with great attention, and, taking up the bat, exclaimed, ‘Call you this
amusement! why, it is the club of Hercules’: then, feeling and weighing the
ball in his hand, he pronounced it as dangerous as a four-pounder; and,
turning to me, said, ‘No, no, my dear Mr W., no cricket for their Imperial
Highnesses my pupils; it is too much to run the risk of a death-blow in
play.

What a missed opportunity to have changed the course of Russian
history! In the late nineteenth century the British built a golf-course
at Murino near St Petersburg, but there is no indication that Russians
became at all interested in the game. On the other hand, the games of soccer played by English workmen at the famous Thornton works in St Petersburg at the beginning of the twentieth century certainly introduced and helped to popularize that subsequently most international of games.

Characterizing with a fair degree of complacency Russian Anglomania at the very end of the eighteenth century, the Cambridge don Edward Daniel Clarke wrote:

whatever they possess useful or estimable comes to them from England. Books, maps, prints, furniture, clothing, hard-ware of all kinds, horses, carriages, hats, leather, medicine, almost every article of convenience, comfort, or luxury, must be derived from England, or it is of no estimation.

In 1790 there were twenty-eight British merchant houses in St Petersburg and by 1797 fifty-two, the majority of which not only exported but also imported all manner of goods for the English community and the Russian consumer market. While sales were held at the Factory's warehouses and the Exchange as well as in the capital's retail centre, the Gostiny dvor, after 1782 a relaxing of regulations allowed private shops to spring up in various parts of the city. By 1791 there were four shops that bore the name 'The English Shop', and certainly the principal one on Nevskii Prospekt remained throughout the nineteenth century an essential calling-point for fashionable Petersburg. When Catherine prohibited the import of French goods in 1793 in reaction to the execution of the French King, English goods came even more into their own and the St Petersburg News thereafter carried an increasing number of advertisements of English goods and of services offered by English tradesmen and craftsmen. Watchmakers, shoemakers, saddlers, stonemasons, blacksmiths all conducted their businesses from shops and yards on Vasilevsky Island and on the mainland; more and more English tutors, nannies and governesses were taken into aristocratic homes. At a higher level, Englishmen were setting up all manner of manufactories and works in the city and its environs: breweries, rope-walks, sugar, starch and indigo factories, linen mills, iron works.

If, however, the British community had solely comprised members of the British Factory and an assortment of craftsmen and tradesmen, its influence would have been great but far more restricted than it actually was during Catherine's reign, which was described as 'a time when almost everyman of Genius in Europe is offering at the Shrine of this most Illustrious of Sovereigns'. Not all the British who entered Catherine's service were geniuses, but there were many who served her well and whose standing added lustre to the British community of which they were members and increased the general prestige of the British nation.

The Russian navy was the creation of Peter the Great, but without the great and continuing British contribution its development would have been much retarded. By the 1790s a Russian diplomat could suggest that it was now 'sur le pied anglais', mindful of a long line of British shipbuilders and officers, but particularly of Admiral Sir Charles Knowles, who helped to re-organize the navy in the early 1770s, and of Samuel Greig, Catherine's much-loved Scottish admiral, who served her for twenty-five years and died in 1788 during the war against Sweden.

It was Greig who had been instrumental in securing for Catherine the services of Charles Gascoigne, the inventor of the gasconade or carronade, who arrived in Russia in 1786. A former director of the Carron works near Falkirk, Gascoigne set about re-organizing the Russian cannon foundries with the help of a team of Scottish workers he had brought with him. In their number was Charles Baird, who in 1792 joined forces with Frances Morgan, an outstanding instrument maker, to set up their own iron foundry. Baird was to create one of the major industrial empires of nineteenth-century St Petersburg.

A team of Scottish stonemasons and craftsmen also assisted Catherine's favourite architect Charles Cameron, whose name is perpetuated in the 'Cameron Gallery' which he built for the Empress at her summer palace of Tsarskoe Selo. He also worked at the nearby palace of Pavlovsk. At Tsarskoe Selo and Pavlovsk English gardeners, John Bush and Joseph Meadows, were responsible for laying out the parks in the English style, which the Empress confessed to Voltaire in 1772 were a vital part of her 'anglomanie'. Within the city itself another Englishman, William Gould from Ormskirk, laid out the gardens for Prince Potemkin at the Taurida Palace.

British doctors had held positions of high distinction in Russia from the times of Ivan the Terrible. Catherine in general had a great antipathy towards doctors, but the few who earned her trust were all British. The Hertford doctor Thomas Dimsdale came to Russia in 1768.
to inoculate the Empress and Grand Duke Paul against smallpox and was made a Baron of the Russian Empire for his success. Her personal physician for many years was the Scotsman John Rogerson, who among other duties was said by scandal to have examined the Empress’s potential favourites to ensure that they possessed the necessary stamina.34

Examples such as these could be multiplied, but I think I have provided enough evidence to indicate why the British community was held in such high esteem during the eighteenth century and particularly its last decades. In contrast, the first months of the new century up to the assassination of Paul I in March 1801 saw the first real crisis in the life of the British: as a result of the Tsar’s alliance with Napoleon, British ships were seized, merchants’ goods impounded, and sailors and merchants marched off into the interior. Alexander I, however, restored all their rights, and for another quarter of a century the British enjoyed their traditional privileges (a fourth commercial treaty was signed in 1813), the community increased to an estimated 2,500 by 1825, and Russian Anglomania reached its zenith. But the nineteenth century slowly brought a number of changes, both in Russia and in England, that affected the life and character of the community. In England, the Russia Company, although it continued its activities up to the Revolution and indeed still exists in name today, gradually lost its power and influence, particularly as a pressure group heeded by Parliament, and the Russian market, while still important, was no longer indispensable. Within Russia, the British found positions of responsibility and distinction, such as they had enjoyed under Catherine, more difficult, even impossible to obtain; fewer tradesmen and craftsmen were in evidence; and the number of merchant houses dwindled. The Russians squeezed out the British from the houses along the English Quay and virtually from the English club. The English Church of course remained as the focal point of community life, but the purity, as it were, of the community was becoming diluted.

Herbert Swann, the father of Donald Swann of Flanders and Swann fame, provides a glimpse of the community at the turn of the century:

The small colony of Britishers in St Petersburg, probably not more than four to five hundred strong, could be divided into two groups — those who had integrated into Russian or Baltic German society, and those who held themselves aloof, mixing almost entirely with others of their own nationality.35

The latter lived in the grand style, sent their children to an English preparatory school in the Russian capital prior to sending them to public schools in England, and kept up their contacts with England. The former, to whom Swann belonged, intermarried with Germans and Russians, spoke German and Russian better than English; some took Russian citizenship with the third generation. Swann’s father, married to a German, attempted to keep an uneasy balance:

Yet Father also tried to maintain his links with his native country. He would say grace in English before dinner, though he would then immediately lapse into German or Russian. We would sometimes have English food — a Christmas pudding sent from the old country, or a Stilton cheese bought at the English shop (though Mother would then carefully remove the ‘mouldy’ green bits), for ‘Surely that must be poisonous’, she would say.36

For the British of both groups, however, the Bolshevik Revolution signalled the end of a way of life. Meriel Buchanan, daughter of the last British Ambassador to pre-revolutionary Russia, describes the community’s last days in her book The Dissolution of an Empire.

And it was not only the Russians who were being swept away in the cataclysm, for the British colony in Petrograd was a very large one and there were families who had been settled in the city for over a hundred years, carrying on a prosperous business from father to son. But now the factories were closing down, the mills were idle, trade and commerce were at a standstill, men found the fortunes their fathers had amassed and which were passed on to their sons, crumbling to ruins, were brought suddenly face to face with penury and unemployment. Every Sunday the English Church along the quay grew emptier, familiar faces were missing from the weekly working parties in the Embassy, there was sadness, separation, dispersal everywhere.37

The repatriation of the British from Russia after 1917 is a pathetic episode, far more distressing for those involved than subsequent repatriations from our colonial territories. They came to a Britain in the last stages of an exhausting war and tried to survive in a country entering the Great Depression. The plight of many without material resources of any kind was desperate and many relief organizations were established to try to help them: such were the British Russia Club, Relief for British Refugees from Russia, Lady Georgina Buchanan’s Workrooms, Women’s British Russian Help Association, British Refugees from Russia Comforts Fund, and the Association of British Creditors of Russia.38 The efforts to gain compensation from the Soviets were

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unending and generally futile — and involved were not only the repatriated British but British businessmen living in Britain whose often large-scale investments were lost.

In the years following the Bolshevik Revolution a frequent visitor to Lloyds Bank in Threadneedle Street in the City was a Yorkshire businessman, besieging a clerk in the bank's Colonial and Foreign Department with enquiries about reparation payments for his considerable losses in Russia. The Yorkshireman was Sir James Roberts, Bart. (1848–1935), the clerk T. S. Eliot. A reminiscence of their meetings, if the more persuasive arguments are to be believed, was later encoded in a famous simile in *The Waste Land*:

He, the young man carbuncular, arrives,
  A small house agent's clerk, with one bold stare,
  One of the low on whom assurance sits
  As a silk hat on a Bradford millionaire.

Sir James Roberts is perhaps best known in Yorkshire for another literary association. Born in Haworth and remembering as a young boy his meetings with the Rev Brontë and Charlotte, he was ultimately able to buy Haworth Parsonage and present it to the nation and the care of the Brontë Society in 1928. His portrait now hangs in the hallway of the Parsonage. But Sir James has among other claims to fame one that is of particular relevance to the present occasion: in 1916 he provided the princely sum of £10,000 for the establishment of a chair of Russian at the University of Leeds. Sir James knew his Russia not from afar but from first-hand experience. Before becoming the owner of the alpaca manufacturing works and the model town of Saltaire, he had been a successful wool merchant and textile manufacturer and had visited southern Russia frequently from the 1870s to buy merino wool. Although I am told by members of his family that no records or letters survive from this period of his life, an interview he gave to the *Yorkshire Observer* in June 1916 contains interesting details about his visits to Russia, his positive reaction to the Russian people and the fluency in Russian which he himself acquired.

The long twilight of Imperial Russia was the short dawn of Russian studies in Britain. Oxford had recognized Slavonic studies in 1889 with the appointment of W. R. Morfill as Reader in Russian and Slavonic: he was given a personal chair in 1900, the first professorship in Slavonic

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Fig. 4. Sir James Roberts, Bart. (1848–1935).
studies in Britain. But it was only in 1904 that Russian was included in the recently established Honours School of Modern Languages: Nevill Forbes, graduating in 1906 as the first student to offer Russian with first class honours, succeeded Morfill as Reader in 1909 and became Professor in 1921. Cambridge, ‘placidly asleep to everything Slavonic’, according to a writer in 1894, eventually appointed after considerable controversy A. P. Goudy in 1900 as Salomons Lecturer in Russian, later converted into a University Lectureship. Goudy continued until 1936, when he was succeeded by Dr (now Dame Professor) Elizabeth Hill, who became in 1948 Cambridge’s first Professor of Slavonic Studies. It was outside Oxbridge, in the north of England, that the really exciting initiatives were being taken in the period up to and including the First World War; and it is to one man in particular that due credit should be given for his energy and vision. Bernard (later Sir Bernard) Pares, a Cambridge graduate with a third-class degree in Classics, almost overnight decided to dedicate his life to the study of Russian history and, subsequently, to the encouragement of Russian studies in Britain and to furthering Anglo-Russian relations. Spending many years and parts of years in Russia between 1898 and 1919, Pares put his time and effort in England initially into the work of University Extension. He was appointed Staff Lecturer in Modern History to the University Extension Society at the University of Liverpool in 1902, but with the agreed intention ‘that in this way we might hope to introduce the study of Russia for the first time into the full curriculum of a university’. This dream was realized in 1907, when the School of Russian Studies at Liverpool was officially inaugurated. Pares, who had been made honorary Reader in Modern Russian History and became Professor of Russian History, Language and Literature in 1908, was above all interested in what is now known as ‘area studies’, and within a few years was able to recruit specialists, not only in Russian language, but also in Russian laws and institutions, Russian economics, and Polish language and history. He also began the quarterly Russian Review, to which many distinguished Russians of the Pre-Revolutionary period, whom Pares knew personally, contributed. Liverpool was a great beginning, and in the years that followed, first the University of Manchester, then Armstrong College, Newcastle, and in the first months of 1916, the University of Sheffield, all established Russian departments. Sheffield can thus claim precedence as the first university in Yorkshire to begin Russian, but it was a close run thing, for discussions were already underway at Leeds about the provision of Russian.

Evening classes in elementary Russian had been started in 1915 by both the Bradford and Leeds Education Committees and were well attended. Recognizing the commercial needs behind the study of the language and well aware that it was from the business sector of the community that financial support for any university development had to come, the Vice-Chancellor of the University, M. E. Sadler, was nevertheless anxious that a university department should not be merely a language school but should offer instruction ‘on a very high level, . . . interpret[ing] Russian life and thought to the great communities of the West Riding’. In this same letter of 27 April 1916, he said in words which have for us a very familiar sound: ‘the financial position of the University needs at present the utmost care. By drastic economies we have kept everything going so far . . .’, and added ‘I wish some wealthy Yorkshireman would endow a Chair of Russian here. It would be a great service to the country and a permanent memorial of the donor’s foresight and public spirit’. He had not long to wait: on 11 June there came a note from Sir James Roberts, asking the Vice-Chancellor to visit his home, Milner Field, near Bingley, to discuss the question of Russian, and on 15 June, there followed this momentous letter:

Dear Professor Sadler,

Referring to the question of the founding of a Russian Chair at the University of Leeds, which we discussed together the other day, I have since thought this carefully over, and am of the opinion that it would be an illusion to expect that adequate advantages could be taken of Russia as an outlet for our manufactures, unless we can be represented out there by our own countrymen, equipped with a knowledge of the Russian language.

As a nation it is a deserved reproach to us that the sale of our productions in Russia has been almost entirely in the hands of foreigners. Great attention has been paid in Germany to the study of Russian, and every facility provided for the same.

I am so convinced of our national need in this matter, that I am constrained to offer to hand over to the University of Leeds the sum of Ten Thousand Pounds, for the foundation and maintenance of a Professorship of the Russian Language and Literature. This sum to be funded, and the income to be applied solely for the maintenance of the Chair.

Leeds thus became the second university after Liverpool to have a specially endowed chair of Russian, and the hunt for a suitable
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candidate was on. The special committee set up by the Council met for the first time on 28 June; the Vice-Chancellor consulted widely and received influential and important advice from Bernard Pares; in July he attended a meeting of Russian teachers and others in Cambridge, where he met Dr Hagberg Wright of the London Library, Jane Harrison, Staff Lecturer at Newnham College, and members of the Russian Embassy. In October he was able to report that a number of applications for the chair had been received and that he had further names as a result of his Cambridge visit. The complete list has not been found, but the names of two front runners are known and are of particular interest. One, appropriately enough, was Arthur Ransome; the other, Harold Williams, a New Zealander with an incredible facility for languages, who, in the estimate of Ransome, Pares and Maurice Baring, 'knew more of Russia and the Russians than any other living Englishman'. Both Ransome and Williams were all correspondents for English newspapers in Russia during the early years of the war; and Ransome describes in his autobiography how Pares 'used to come to Petrograd brimming over with plans for an Anglo-Russian Institute and for planting out Professors of Russian in every English university'. In a letter to his mother, dated 11 July 1916, now in the Ransome Papers in the Brotherton Collection, he wrote that Professor Pares is just back from England and tells me that they are seriously thinking in Leeds of giving me the Russian professorship. All the other universities are already booked, and, of course, I would much rather have Leeds than any other. [...] It won't be till after the war anyhow and the idea they have would suit me most wonderfully. They will want me to spend part of my time in Russia every year. Pares went to Leeds about it, and Sadler himself brought up the question of me.

In November that year Ransome went to Leeds to talk to Sadler about the professorship, but there the matter seems to have ended. At all events, neither Ransome nor Williams, who informed Leeds at the beginning of 1917 that he did not wish to be considered, were appointed. On 22 March 1917, Sadler wrote to Sir James Roberts that an appointment to the chair could not be made, 'owing to war conditions': 'The men who are most suited for the post are at present engaged in Government work, either in this country or in Russia, and cannot be liberated wholly for new duties'.

The compromise solution was to appoint on a temporary and half-time basis A. Bruce Boswell, Acting Head of the School of Russian Studies at Liverpool during Pares's absence. Boswell, pre-eminently a specialist in Polish language and history but also with considerable knowledge of Russian, carried out part of the original grand scheme, which was to give public lectures in Leeds, Bradford and other towns, liaise with teachers of Russian throughout the West Riding, as well as teach at the University and advise on courses. On 26 April 1917, sixty-five years ago to the day, Russian officially began at Leeds. In May 1918, Boswell was able to report that the work of the Department was going well, in fact there was 'actually more life in it than there is at Liverpool at the present time'. Liverpool had lost Pares to London in 1917, where he was to found the School of Slavonic and East European Studies two years later, and for a time Boswell continued as Acting Head of both the Liverpool and Leeds departments. In 1919, however, he was made Professor at Liverpool, and the Leeds department passed to J. Kolni-Balozky, who had been appointed Assistant Lecturer to Boswell from 1 January 1918. Kolni-Balozky, a native of Odessa and a musician by training, had been in England since 1900 and was teaching Russian at a school in Walsall at the time of his appointment. He was to guide Russian at Leeds up to the Second World War, retiring on 30 September 1939 as a Senior Lecturer.

The Bolshevik Revolution was a shattering blow to the long-established British community in Russia; it was no less so to the infant Russian departments in Britain. Anti-Soviet feelings and lack of cultural and commercial contacts could not but damage the cause of Russian studies, and all universities report minuscule figures of students throughout the 1920s and 30s. By a cruel irony the Committee on the Position of Modern Languages in the Educational System of Great Britain, convened in 1916, reported only in 1918. It condemned the general situation of language learning in Britain at all levels, noting in particular the almost complete 'national ignorance' of Russia and Russian, but its recommendations had no chance of being acted upon. It is a sad reflection of the lack of progress that the Committee's report, Modern Studies, was reprinted in 1928 without any alteration or attempt to bring it up to date. If at Leeds there were eight students taking Russian courses in 1917–18 and even ten in 1920–21, thereafter it is a matter of ones and twos, at most four. By 1939 there had been only two single-honours graduates in Russian. In that same year, with the retirement of Kolni-Balozky, the work of the
Leeds Russian Department was suspended and no appointment was made until the end of the Second World War.

1945 brought new hopes, new beginnings. The Professor of Spanish at Liverpool, E. Allison Peers, greeted the new era with a little book entitled 'New' Tongues or Modern Language Teaching of the Future, in which he put the case for modern languages with wit and force, but also inevitably repeated many of the old arguments of Modern Studies. In the sections on Russia and Russian, which had been read by his colleague Professor Bruce Boswell, he makes an eloquent plea for their study on educational, cultural, political, and commercial grounds. The Scarbrough Report of 1947 began the slow rehabilitation of Russian, and although the situation did not look especially promising in the 40s, the Joint Services intensive language courses, followed by the Hayter and Annan Reports of 1961 and 1962, seemed at last to have ensured a fitting place for Russian within the British educational system.

Leeds resumed its teaching of Russian in October 1945 under the direction of M. Walshe, who was succeeded in 1947 by Rolf Shaftlin. During Shaftlin's first year there were three single-honours students in Russian, one of whom, Alfred Dressler, received the first first-class degree in Russian awarded at Leeds and was appointed to an Assistant Lectureship. On Shaftlin's death in September 1951, Dressler continued alone for a year until the appointment of Max Hayward, who was followed in 1956 by Frank Borras. It was under Borras that the Leeds Russian Department grew and flourished and realized many of the ambitious plans conceived way back in 1916. The 1960s were the heyday of Russian studies in Britain, and Leeds very properly was in the van. The Department's strength reached a total of ten lecturers and academic-related staff, and there were over a hundred students reading Russian to honours level and a number of postgraduates. The standing of the Department and of its Head was consolidated with the appointment of Borras as the first incumbent of the Chair of Russian on 1 May 1965, almost forty-nine years after its original endowment. It was my misfortune not to have met Frank Borras on more than one occasion, and it is a matter of great sadness to me that he died so suddenly and tragically within months of his early retirement and that he is not present this evening as I attempt to celebrate a department which under him became worthy of the name and which I am privileged to inherit.

I inherit it at a time when the recommendations of a U.G.C. sub-committee, chaired by a man whose name for once I shall not utter, have to some extent been overtaken by the more general swingeing cuts affecting all universities. The Leeds Department, unaffected by the sub-committee's report and poised, if anything, to grow stronger, finds itself instead about to lose two posts in language teaching, an area in which it has achieved a just and enviable reputation. But it continues as a strong and vital teaching unit; it edits two academic journals; it is involved with the University Library in the imminent launch of the Leeds Russian Archive, which will make more widely known the University's rich and important archive holdings, greatly enlarged in recent months by the efforts of a former member of the Department now holding a 'pool post' in the Library. These are some of the grounds for a continuing, if cautious, optimism in a country which seems at both school and university levels willing to cede what has been slowly and painfully achieved during this century. Unlike the British community in Russia, Russian studies in Britain must ride out its Bolshevist Revolution.

In conclusion, Acting Vice-Chancellor, I wish to avail myself of what I consider to be a legitimate if little used privilege in an Inaugural — that of stating in public a request I wish to make, in this case to Senate and Council. In its acceptance of Sir James Robert's gift in 1916, the Council of this University asked leave 'to associate the name of the donor in perpetuity with the new Professorship'. When the first professor was eventually appointed in 1965, this matter was seemingly not considered, although a precedent existed in the case of the Cowdray Chair of Spanish, for which funds were provided in 1917 but the chair instituted only in 1953. I would naturally be honoured if my chair were to bear the name of Roberts, but the request for the association is made in the belief that the University would be as willing to perpetuate the name of one of its earliest and most generous benefactors as it is eager to forge new and ever stronger links with the city and region.

REFERENCES
1. The opinion of the Croat Jurij Kržanič, writing in Russia in the 1660s. See my Russia Under Western Eyes 1517-1825 (London, 1971), 22-3.
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47. References to developments at Leeds come from the University Archives, C.F.O./H. Russian, unless otherwise indicated. See also P. H. Gosden and A. J. Taylor (eds.), Studies in the History of a University 1874–1974 to Commemorate the Centenary of the University of Leeds (Leeds, 1975), passim. I am extremely grateful to Mrs A. M. Pulley for her assistance in providing essential documents.


49. Ibid., 188.


52. At their meetings on 7 and 20 July 1982 the Senate and the Council of the University of Leeds approved a recommendation that the Chair of Russian be designated the Roberts Chair of Russian.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The quotation from Herbert Swan, Home on the Neva, 1968, pp 29–30, 31, is reprinted by permission of John Farquharson Ltd.
