Introduction: Scotland and Russia since 1900

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INTRODUCTION:
SCOTLAND AND RUSSIA SINCE 1900

Anna Vaninskaya

The history of literary encounters between Scotland and Russia – whether conceived in terms of personal connections, reading and publishing networks, or ideological and formal influences – is a long and fascinating one. In the last few years, as the rate of new encounters has intensified – including innovative Scottish productions of Russian and Ukrainian plays, Scots translations of Russian poetry and original poetry by Russian Scots, the Scotland-Russia Sonnets Exchange project, and radio and television documentaries about Scots in Russia – academic exploration of the historical roots of these twenty-first-century synergies has lagged behind.¹

The papers collected in this special issue, focusing on major figures such as Burns, Stevenson, MacDiarmid, McGrath, and Lochhead, offer a timely intervention, advancing the critical understanding of Scottish-Russian literary interaction from several methodological angles. Patrick Crotty and Natalia Kaloh Vid explore poetic translation and reception, Rania Karoula’s and Ksenija Horvat’s essays consider dramatic adaptation and influence, and Rose France looks at conjunctions in the novel form.

Versions of all five papers were first delivered at symposia in Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee, from 2014 to 2016, for the project “Scotland-Russia: Cultural Encounters Since 1900.”² Patrick Crotty’s contribution, presented here in expanded form, is the first appearance in print of new research arising from his forthcoming definitive edition of Hugh MacDiarmid’s Complete Collected Poems (Carcanet). The project through which his findings and those of the other four contributors were first aired was launched in 2014 to bring together scholars from Russian Studies, English and Scottish Literature, Drama and Performance, History, Politics and Musicology with translators and theatre and music professionals. It aimed to provide a platform for sharing the most cutting-edge research in all areas of modern Scottish-Russian cultural exchange. Investigation of the mechanisms of the Russian reception of Scottish writers, especially the institutional and individual forces behind their popular appeal during the Soviet period, and the reciprocal engagement of Scottish authors and practitioners with Russian literature and drama, has constituted one of the project’s more prominent strands.³

The current need for the reflections gathered in this special issue, as well as the project’s overall rationale, are best understood in perspective. The last decade has seen a mounting tide of publications, conferences and research networks dedicated to Anglo-Russian cultural relations, especially in the twentieth century.⁴ But against this backdrop, Scottish-Russian

² Project funding has come from the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the University of Edinburgh. The project website, http://www.scotland-russia.llc.ed.ac.uk, provides a digital gateway to previously unavailable or dispersed cultural materials dealing with Scottish-Russian relations. It gathers an extensive array of texts, images, websites, recordings and films, including a series of specially commissioned translations of articles on Scotland from pre-revolutionary and Soviet-era periodicals; a photographic exhibition of Russian theatre in performance; specially digitised books; and a wide selection of scholarly and primary texts dealing with Robert Burns, Arthur Conan Doyle and other Scottish writers in Russia.


engagement since 1900 has received relatively little attention, either as part
of the broader trend or as a separate field worthy of independent study. The
pre-1900 period is much better served in this regard: the Scottish diaspora
contributed significantly to Russia’s military, medical and industrial
development in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and
this is widely recognised in studies of Scottish emigration. Books of
popular history, such as Jock Gallagher’s *Scotland’s Global Empire,*
predictably dedicate many pages to the Scottish presence in Russia prior to
1900, and not a single page to the years since.\(^5\) This chronological
imbalance has not always been typical, nor is it equally representative of
all disciplinary areas which touch upon Scottish-Russian cultural
engagement, and yet the comparative neglect of the Scottish dimension by
Anglo-Russianists remains palpable.\(^6\) There is, of course, no historical
justification for such disregard. Wherever one looks, whether to
ethnographic, social and political perceptions and their impact upon public
discourse, or to direct artistic, musical, theatrical and, of course, literary
interactions, the cultural conversation between Scotland and Russia in the
twentieth and twenty-first centuries has been no less vibrant than that
between Russia and England.\(^7\) A brief narrative of the development of this
conversation, using some of the key examples addressed by the project,
will situate the case studies presented in the following five essays.

The twentieth century opened with the Glasgow International
Exhibition of 1901, attended by over 11 million visitors.


attended the London Olympics of 2012. Its star attraction was the “Russian Village,” designed by the art nouveau architect Fyodor Shekhtel and artists from the Stroganov School.\(^8\) It was described at the time as “the largest and most costly section ever staged by the Tsar’s government at any exhibition.”\(^9\) The English felt left out: journalists from the south complained that the exhibition had been turned from a properly international enterprise into a “Scotto-Russian” one, and insisted on confusing Glaswegian and Russian styles.\(^10\) The confusion was symptomatic, for the exhibition did indeed inaugurate collaboration between Scottish and Russian avant-garde artists, and Charles Rennie Mackintosh and the MacDonald sisters were accordingly invited to the Moscow Exhibition of 1903, where they reciprocated with a Scottish display. But English journalists were not the only ones to raise national questions in response to the exhibition. Among the millions of visitors to Glasgow in 1901 was Semyon Rapoport, the British correspondent of the leading Russian periodical, The Herald of Europe, who used the exhibition as an occasion to reflect on Scottish national identity and consciousness in a lengthy account of his Scottish travels published the following year.\(^11\)

The intense mutual interest of these opening years of the century marked what was to come. In 1916, as part of a wartime delegation, the journalist and writer Korney Chukovsky visited Inverness. Later on, touring the camp of the Australian survivors of Gallipoli, Chukovsky met Andrew Fisher, High Commissioner of Australia in London and three times Australian Labor Prime Minister. He recounted the meeting in the pro-British propaganda book he published upon his return to Russia in 1917, England on the Eve of Victory. Fisher was a Scot, who had started life as a strike leader with the Ayrshire Miners’ Union in the 1880s, and Chukovsky emphasised his Scottish provenance:

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The son of a coalminer, he worked in Scottish mines from the age of 10; he dragged coal carts down such narrow underground passages that his head scraped the ceiling. Then when he grew up he became not quite an agitator, but a restless person, and the owners sacked him. He could not find a job anywhere and was forced to emigrate to Australia, where in a few years he became Prime Minister, the uncrowned king of a whole continent.  

Chukovsky was amazed by Fisher’s down-to-earth attitude: in a work of wartime ally propaganda, who better to praise Britain’s fight for “world democracy” than a former East Ayrshire pit boy turned Australia’s “Peter the Great”? In fact, Chukovsky was no stranger to using Scottish images in the service of Russian pro-British propaganda. Just two years previously he had published another book about “English” soldiers whose cover illustration – a portrait of a stereotypical Scottish private – was taken from the cover of Private Spud Tamson by R. W. Campbell, “the Scottish Captain” as Chukovsky called him. Scotland thus literally became the face of the British war effort for the tens of thousands of Russian students and soldiers for whose reading Chukovsky’s book, in its four lavishly illustrated editions, was governmentally approved. Scottish images appeared inside the book as well.  

If the Scottish Spud Tamson replaced the English Tommy Atkins in the imagination of some Russian readers during the Great War, this was indicative of a wider trend, and Scotland remained the object of the fascinated gaze of Russian observers for the duration of the twentieth century, several changes of political system notwithstanding. In the Soviet period, this fascination flowered most luxuriously in the field of literature. Walter Scott and R. L. Stevenson, already household names in tsarist Russia, became staples of Soviet childhood reading (and viewing);
Stevenson in no small part thanks to the translations of Chukovsky’s son, Nikolai. Even émigré writers like Vladimir Nabokov could not escape from Stevenson’s shadow, as Rose France demonstrates in her essay. Arthur Conan Doyle’s creation Sherlock Holmes, in the meantime, was turned from a pre-Revolutionary literary and theatrical phenomenon into a much-loved character of Soviet cinema.¹⁵

Robert Burns was probably more popular in Russia than anywhere else outside of Scotland in the twentieth century. The USSR had a Robert Burns stamp before Britain did.¹⁶ Burns was naturalised as a Russian “bard” largely thanks to the translations of Chukovsky’s fellow anglophile poet and man of letters Samuil Marshak, as discussed in Natalia Kaloh Vid’s essay below.¹⁷ Marshak and Burns biographer Anna Elistratova even toured Scotland under the auspices of the Scotland-USSR Society during the International Burns Festival of 1955.¹⁸ The Society sponsored a steady stream of visitors and delegations from the Soviet Union during the decades of the Cold War and encouraged interaction between Soviet and Scottish cultural figures. On one such trip, Marshak met Hugh MacDiarmid, who himself owed significant debts to Russian writers ranging from Pushkin to Shestov, and was but one of a series of poets (including Edwin Morgan, the translator of Mayakovsky) to render Russian verse into Scots. Patrick Crotty’s contribution explores the Russian inflections of both MacDiarmid’s Scottish nationalism and his poetics, uncovering the variety and complexity of his engagements with the country, which long predate his notorious Cold War Stalinism. Crotty unpicks the textual and aesthetic detail of this “decades-long involvement,” as well as its intellectual and biographical underpinnings, and throws up some genuine surprises along the way.

As the case of MacDiarmid vividly demonstrates, Russia was as much an object of fascination for Scotland as the other way about. Major


¹⁸ Elistratova’s visit was covered by the Kilmarnock Standard. For a modern-day equivalent, see “From Russia with Love of Robert Burns,” University of Glasgow, 3 November, 2017, https://www.gla.ac.uk/news/headline_557310_en.html.
historical upheavals such as the Revolution left a strong mark on Scottish public discourse, and Russia proved crucial to Scottish socialist and communist activity, both political and literary. The political dimension of literary engagement was especially prominent in Soviet times: MacDiarmid and Naomi Mitchison are two of the best-known examples, but communist Russia was in the background of many lesser-known writers’ minds as well. The 1926 play by West Fife miner and poet Joe Corrie, In Time o’ Strife, is a case in point. Performed by a local drama troupe composed of miners and their wives to raise morale and money for soup kitchens, Corrie’s play dealt with the effects of the General Strike on his and the actors’ own mining community. It toured Scotland with great success, and mining village and music hall audiences were asked to reflect for themselves on the following exchange:

TAM (To Jock): Was you on the picket?
JOCK: Too true I was. Up at the pit at five o’clock.
JEAN: He’s been singin’ “The Red Flag” since he came hame.
JOCK: This country’s gaun to be a wee Russia if this strike lasts much langer.
TAM: And would you like to see it a wee Russia?
JOCK: Yes! and the sooner the better.
TAM: You had ay plenty to say against the Bolshies and Russia before.
JOCK: Ay, but my brains seem to be in my stomach.
TAM: Weel, I don’t want to see this country made into a wee Russia, it would bring it to ruination.

More talk about the role of the “Bolshies” in the strike follows, and government propaganda depicting Russia as the spiritual home of political agitators is deftly skewered.

1926 was, of course, neither the first nor the last time that developments in Russia served as a point of reference in local Scottish politics (real or fictional). But Corrie’s play was also one of many nodes in the network of connections between Scottish and Russian performance traditions: naturalist, socialist realist, agit-prop or avant-garde. Those connections stretch from 1909, when the first-ever British production of a Chekhov play (The Seagull) took place at the Royalty Theatre in Glasgow, and 1914, when the Russian actress Lydia Yavorska toured Scotland with

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20 For sources, history and criticism on Scottish-Russian theatrical connections, see: http://www.scotland-russia.llc.ed.ac.uk/archives/art/teatre/.
productions of Anna Karenina and Maxim Gorky’s The Lower Depths, via Glasgow Unity Theatre’s ground-breaking working-class Scots production of The Lower Depths in the 1940s, to the contemporary Chekhov adaptations of Scottish playwrights Liz Lochhead and John Byrne, translations of Sergei Tretyakov’s Constructivist plays by Scottish-based theatre director Robert Leach, and the Scottish-Russian collaborative work of award-winning playwright and director Nicola McCartney. Rania Karoula’s and Ksenija Horvat’s essays below pick up and develop some of these threads. Horvat focuses on one of the latest instalments in the long tradition of Scottish stagings of Chekhov – Liz Lochhead’s Three Sisters – and Karoula on the cross-over between popular and political theatre in the work of the early Soviet Blue Blouse Group and the 7:84 Scottish Theatre Company.

The five essays between them give a tantalising glimpse of a few pages from the story of Scottish-Russian literary engagement since 1900. They will, it is hoped, serve as inspiration for further research in this area.

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