

THE RUSSIAN ODYSSEY OF LACHLAN MACQUARIE

The Russian ships that came to Australia in the first decades of the nineteenth century always found a warm welcome among the inhabitants of the new British colony. The high point of mutual sympathy came at the time of the visits of 1814 and 1820, when the governor of New South Wales was Lachlan Macquarie, who played an exceptional role in the surge of Australian “Russophilia” in this period. Perhaps in the whole history of Russian-Australian contacts no Australian has earned such enthusiastic regard from the Russians as he did. The Russians were not exaggerating at all when they wrote of the reception given them by the governor in 1820: “It seemed the governor was occupied solely with providing us with continual pleasures” (Vasil'ev); [Macquarie] “asked that we visit him as often as possible” (Al. Lazarev); “The governor endeavoured to anticipate our wishes in everything that could be of use to us” (F. Bellingshausen); “Such a disposition of the English towards the Russians, which happens very rarely, obliges... each of us... to be grateful to the governor and his wife, who in the course of our month-long stay here did not wish to be a single day without us” (Shishmarev). And, finally: “The name of Governor Macquarie must not be effaced from the heart of any one of us” (Shishmarev).

Macquarie's diary also testifies to his desire to receive the Russians in the best possible way — thus, in the course of March 1820, during the call of the ships *Otkrytie* and *Blagonamerenny* at Port Jackson, he made entries about the Russians in his diary 12 times. He wrote of them just as often afterwards. From Macquarie's diary and other documents it is clear how important the Russians' assessment of his reception was to him. Several times he mentions their reaction — “highly pleased”, “highly delighted”, “highly gratified and pleased” — and also describes the reception given to him during his visits to the Russian ships: “I was received ... with the most marked attention and respect”, “[we] were most kindly and politely received”. There is no doubt that the exchange of visits with the Russians was for him something more than a formal courtesy.

Why did Macquarie show such attention to the Russian sailors? Most likely it was connected with his previous contacts with Russia and Russians. In 1807, as an officer of the English army, he made a journey from India to England through Russia. He entered the territory of the Russian Empire at Baku, and then, in a “terrible kибitka” drawn by a troika of horses, crossed the whole country through Astrakhan, Tsaritsyn, Novokhopersk, Tambov, Riazan, Kolomna and Moscow, reaching St Petersburg two months later. Macquarie's journey through Russia was an accident — he had to choose this route because the way through Turkey proved impossible. He was hurrying to England to his fiancée Elizabeth Campbell, and it is not surprising that his thoughts were occupied with covering the distance rather than with any urge to display a traveller's curiosity. Nevertheless, the diary he kept throughout the journey, which has remained unpublished, gives an entertaining portrait of Russia and the Russians.

The pages of this diary are by no means traditional travel sketches. They read like a phantasmagorical nightmare lasting almost two and a half months, for Russia appeared before the Briton as a contradictory and irrational country. All his attempts to apply the standards and experience of a Western man to Russian reality suffered complete fiasco, whether in provincial Baku or in Petersburg, in a collision with a station-master or with a governor-general. Where he expected to find help, or at least civilised treatment, he did not find them; and where he did not count on them, he unexpectedly encountered sincere friendliness and hospitality.



Macquarie's misadventures began when, having entered Russia through Baku, he learned that in Astrakhan he might be placed in quarantine, since a "fever" (probably a cholera epidemic) was raging in Russia at that time. Macquarie, an experienced traveller, at once applied to the governor-general of Baku, Guryev, with a request to issue him and his companions "a clear Bill of health" confirming that they had entered the country in good health, but the governor refused, declaring that he "as not being usual, and adding that if even he gave us one it would not have the effect we wished," Macquarie writes in bewilderment. From an Englishman's point of view this was, of course, a completely unintelligible bureaucrat's answer. Macquarie developed energetic activity and in the end obtained a quarantine certificate, but in Astrakhan he became convinced that Guryev had been right: the local authorities did not recognise the Baku certificate and put Macquarie in quarantine for 25 days. Moreover, the governor of Astrakhan did not even answer his letters, and when the term of the quarantine ended, he did not keep his promise to allow Macquarie to leave the city immediately.

But at last all the unpleasantness was behind him, and the undaunted Macquarie set off from Astrakhan for Petersburg. He hoped "to reach the capital in 12 days", travelling day and night, "although usually such a journey takes 18–20 days". Alas, in the expanses of Russia simple arithmetic did not work, and he reached Petersburg only after 22 days, having been detained several more times by the authorities. The Canadian historian Glynn Barratt asserts that in Kolomna, where Macquarie was held for six days, he was arrested as a spy, but there is no documentary confirmation of this. Had it been so, the actions of his tormentors would have had at least some logical explanation. Here, on the contrary, Russian arbitrariness and bureaucratism appeared before him carried to the point of absurdity. Having finally extricated himself from Kolomna and received yet another quarantine certificate from the Moscow governor, Macquarie was again detained at the very entrance to Moscow, at Lyubertsy, this time by an "ignorant Post master" who decided to send his documents to Moscow for verification; and even after that Macquarie was detained once more by the guard at the gates of Moscow. By an irony of fate, Macquarie's companions, who had left Astrakhan later, arrived in Moscow before him, since they passed all the dangerous places at night, when the guards were fast asleep. Thus Macquarie learned from his own experience the meaning of the Russian proverb "The slower you go, the further you'll get."

Events in Petersburg developed just as dramatically. Having received a commission from the English ambassador to deliver important dispatches to London, Macquarie set off for Kronstadt, where a ship awaited him, and, it seems, completely forgot that he was still in Russia. The vigilant guards at the Petersburg gates immediately reminded him of it, refusing

to let him out of the city without permission from the chief of police. Going to his residence, Macquarie learned that the chief of police “had gone to bed and could not be disturbed” until eight in the evening (this was happening at the beginning of the day). Macquarie developed frenzied activity to overcome this final obstacle and at last, having roused the English ambassador and the Russian minister of foreign affairs, at ten o’clock in the evening received his “permission to depart”. He apparently did not even notice the absurdity of his energetic behaviour in Russian conditions — for if he had done nothing and simply waited for the chief of police to wake up (as Russians would have done in a similar situation), the result would have been exactly the same.

Macquarie’s misadventures in Russia are described by him so vividly that in a Russian reader they arouse the all-too-familiar feeling of complete helplessness before those in power. It seems symbolic that, according to the memoirs of Russian sailors, only one difficult Russian word — *podorozhnaia* [road pass] — remained “indelible” in Macquarie’s memory, “because at every station it was demanded of him”. Though a restrained and cool-headed man, he nevertheless, in describing his Russian experience, uses again and again the expressions “cruel”, “utterly unjust”, “shameful and unjust detention”, “severe disappointment”, “mortifying delay and detention”, “extremely mortified and perplexed”, and, finally, the cry from the heart: “My patience being almost exhausted”, “I’ve never passed a more unpleasant time”, “heartily tired of Russian police”.

It is curious that Macquarie noticed a characteristic trait of the Russian nature: officials were filled with suspicion and xenophobia only in those cases when they had to take a decision on his case. But as soon as the burden of responsibility fell from their shoulders, they became extremely hospitable. For example, the commander of the Kolomna garrison, Captain Dashkov, after Macquarie’s six-day “cruel and unjust detention” under arrest, once it was all over, would on no account let Macquarie leave the city until he had dined at his house. “I was forced to acquiesce and to deter my journey till the evening,” Macquarie notes in his diary. At the same time, he never condemns the Russians as a people, and never forgets to note the benevolence and help of the many people whom he met during the journey. His remark about the reception given him by Commander Veselago in Baku — “true Russian sincerity” — shows that, at least at the beginning of the journey, he regarded the Russians with sympathy.

In his diary Macquarie gives very brief descriptions of the cities he saw in Russia along the whole route from Baku to Petersburg, and only in Petersburg, when the day of his departure for England was at last near, did the state of “overcoming” that had dominated his consciousness throughout the journey give way to an ordinary interest in a new place. After boundless, wild and often incomprehensible Russia, in Petersburg he suddenly returned to the familiar European world: international intrigues, polite manners, brilliant receptions, and above it all, like a fantastic stage-set, majestic Petersburg with its splendid imperial palaces, wide elegant bridges, beautiful gardens and heroic statues. “Most magnificent elegant City which is certainly by far the finest and most beautiful I have ever yet seen, and I believe is the finest and most regular built City in the whole World” is his verdict on Petersburg.

So, instead of the expected direct correlation — a cordial reception of the Russians in Australia in return for a pleasant journey through Russia — Macquarie’s behaviour proves far more complex. It is possible that the Russians whom he received so hospitably in Australia were for him envoys of the European face of Russia turned towards the West, while the details of the journey itself, so vividly described in his diary — the bad roads, the delays and arrests, the rudeness of bureaucrats and police, the drunken soldiers — had become veiled in a romantic haze and almost faded from memory. Macquarie’s words about his visit to Russia — “I was

welcomed everywhere” — said to Vasil'ev, captain of the *Otkrytie*, in 1820, undoubtedly relate to this European image of Russia. Perhaps he had come to appreciate the Russian character and managed to separate it from the behaviour of the bureaucrats.

And in those days of 1820, when the Russians were enjoying the hospitality of Macquarie and his wife Elizabeth at their country residence in Parramatta, where the hosts received their Russian guests amid sunlit golden mimosas and fragrant orange and pomeroanz trees, they did not suspect that clouds were gathering over Macquarie's head, and that his resignation — the consequence of the intrigues of his ill-wishers — was already near... Perhaps, in receiving with special warmth the Russians — allies of England — Macquarie hoped to earn the approval of the authorities of the metropolis and to prevent his dismissal. The Russians themselves realised that Macquarie's attitude towards them deserved a reward from Russia. If Zavalishin is to be believed, after the visits of 1820 a plan arose among the Russian naval visitors to recommend Lachlan Macquarie for an imperial award in gratitude for the reception given. And although no traces of such a recommendation have been found, Macquarie truly deserved it like no one else, standing as he did at the origins of the Russian-Australian friendship, which in all its subsequent history was never again so cloudless and sincere.

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