Leila Vennewitz

Compte rendu

Richard Garnett, *Constance Garnett. A Heroic Life,*
McClelland & Stewart, 402 p.

AN OUTSTANDING WOMAN OF LETTERS

The name Constance Garnett (née Black, 1861-1946) still reverberates as that of the pre-eminent English translator of Russian literature of her day. Her translations, phenomenal in number, superb in quality, may be considered by some to have been superseded, nevertheless, in England and America they were undoubtedly, in the first half of this century the engine that powered a strong new interest in the Russian prerevolutionary novelists, poets, and dramatists whose voices carried dissident messages of Socialist reform.

Now her grandson, Richard Garnett, publisher, translator and author, has given us a beautifully conceived, finely structured account of her long, extraordinarily fruitful life.

Connie, as she was known to her family, seems never to have known robust health. Her eyesight deteriorated steadily throughout her life, but her triumph over this and other infirmities clearly warrants the epithet “heroic” in her biographer’s chosen subtitle. She was educated first at home, then at a girl’s school in Brighton, and eventually at Newnham College for women at Cambridge. She had learned French and German and studied Latin and Greek, but her study of Russian still lay some way off in the nature.

In 1989 Constance Black, by then a librarian, married Edward Garnett, six years her junior, who became an influential publisher’s reader in London. Of her future husband, Constance Garnett wrote in her memoirs “I have never seen a face so full of mischief.” With her father-in-law, Richard Garnett, who became “Keeper of Printed Books” at the British Museum; she always remained on affectionate terms. In fact, her fondness for the members of both families, the Blacks and the Garnetts, formed an indestructible strand in the whole cloth of her life.

The pages of this biography are studded with such names as George Bernard Shaw, Joseph Conrad, Virginia Woolf and Henry James, but the author also shows us in detail how

intimately Garnett became involved in the socialist and feminist causes of her day. She became an active member of the Fabian Society and thus kept abreast of current thought. Without her dedication to the socialist cause in pre 1917-Russia it is hardly conceivable that she would have devoted the major part of her output ot the works of such writers as Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Tchehov, and Turgeniev. (The transliteration of Russian names used here corresponds to that adopted by the author).

It was one of the many close friends she made among the dissident Russian literati living as exiles in London who first suggested she learn Russian. She was then already in her late twenties, but from then on she never looked back in her pursuit of mastery of the Russian Language. She made two extended trips to Russia, knowingly running the risk of arrest as the foremost interpreter of subversive exiles, but no such disaster occurred. There she improved her conversational Russian and observed at first hand the effect of the famine then ravaging much of the country, which in turn led to her active support of famine relief – another of the causes, lost and otherwise, to which she always found enough time and energy to devote herself, despite the prodigious quantities of translation she managed to turn out at the same time.

As the years went by, however, her belief in socialism in Russia underwent a change: Richard Garnett tells us that for Constance “the failure of the spring revolution (1917) was the great lost cause of her life.” Although Russian politics never ceased to influence her work, she could write a letter to her son David in 1923. “Central heating at the moment seems to me a much more hopeful solution of our miseries than Communism!”

For Constance Garnett the work of translation was always laborious. Not for her the convenience of the typewriter, let alone the word processor. Over time, her failing eyesight required that the original texts be read to her by speakers of Russian, then occasionally mishearing and thus misinterpreting a word or two, she would either write down her translations on the spot or, when even that became too difficult, dictate them. Disdaining all flattening, all emasculating, of the originals, she preferred to reproduce in English even the rough and awkward passages that sometimes occurred in the originals, for she knew that, in boldly preserving the poetry and emotional quality of the Russian language.

Toward the end of her life she obeyed her deep urge for peace and solitude and lived more or less independently at her home in the country, tending her beloved flowers and welcoming the many friends and relatives who cherished her to the end. Despite her near-blindness and crippling rheumatism, she endured until almost the eve of her 85th birthday. Ten years earlier, E. S. Bates, author of *Modern Translation*, had provided her epitaph, which her grandson fittingly appropriates to conclude his remarkable biography "It would be hard indeed," Bates has written, "to find any record of a full life yielding fuller value."

Notes, a bibliography, a list of her translations, and index, the indispensable Black and Garnett family trees (although these lack the dates that would have made them more useful still), together with many photographs, round out this highly readable account of the life and career of one of England's outstanding women of letters.

Source : Leila Vennewitz, *Globe and Mail*, June 15, 1991, p. C17