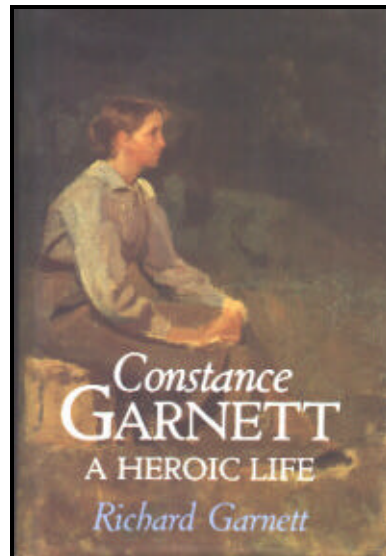


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CONSTANCE GARNETT: A LOVER OF LITERATURE



Introduction

Constance Garnett (1861-1946) is a Victorian British translator of Russian literature. Her translations of literary works of Russian Masters as Tolstoy, Chekhov, Turgenev, Dostoevsky, Gogol and many others have contributed in introducing Russian literature into Britain and the western world. Her distinguished translations recognised for their superior quality made her a landmark in the world of literary translation. Despite her poor health, the weakness of her eyesight and the sad conditions and difficulties that wrapped her childhood life, Constance was a woman of determination and strong will. She pursued her study and work as a translator even at the most difficult junctures of her life. She was outright and straightforward in presenting her points of argument and tolerant in accepting criticism. Her power that was driving her was her inner motivation of challenge and love of knowledge that were vehement enough to conquer many of the obstacles that stood in her way. She was a woman of intellect and had political and social interests at certain stages of her life. She was a Socialist, a Fabian and a defender of women's rights. Her ultimate message in translation was bringing people to understand and enjoy literature regardless of geographical borders or ideologies.

Biographical Review

Constance Black was born on 19 December 1861 in Brighton. Her family was known for its love for education. Her grandfather, Peter Black, was a Scottish engineer and sea-captain. As a navigator, he was a pioneer in the history of commercial navigation and played a considerable role in linking Russia with the west; a mission that Constance sought to complete. Her father, David, received excellent education at a school in Lubeck and took up law. Her mother Clara Patten was well-read, intellectual and intelligent. She came from a family of artists. At that time, the notion that women had cultivated minds as men was regarded by most parents as an offensive paradox (Garnett 1991:15). Not the Blacks who believed strongly in education for boys and girls. Her father did some translation of the novels of Adalbert Stifter from German and he used to write articles to Thomas Freeman journal. Her mother did some translation from French, too.

Connie's Education

Connie – the nickname of Constance – had three brothers and four sisters (Vennewitz 1991:C17). She came as number six. Although she was born a healthy baby, she soon developed abscesses near the optic nerve which might have damaged her sight. She was extremely short sighted. At the age of three, she was inflicted by tuberculosis of the hip-joint. Her legs were operated on and put in a splint for almost a year. She recovered at the age of seven but still had fits of feebleness all her life. Thus, her mother took over educating her at home with the help of Constance's brother Arthur and her sister Clementina. Her family implanted the seed of love of education inside her. She was taught Mathematics, Geography, French, German and Science. When her mother died, her father sent her to a boarding school. She spent a miserable year there although her educational performance was good. She joined the Girl's Public School in 1876 and was proud to be there. When she sat for the Senior Local Exam in 1878, she passed with First Class Honours in Religious Knowledge, English, Latin, French, German and Mathematics. As a result, she received a scholarship for Newnham College in Cambridge in October 1879 and was the youngest girl in the college. Constance enjoyed all the years of her study and was awarded First Class Honours for her outstanding performance. At the beginning of her study, she took up Classics and concentrated on Latin and Greek. She enjoyed the richness and beauty of old literature. Then she shifted to philosophy, archaeology and ancient history. Much of her teaching was still linguistic. So, Constance gained a rigorous training in the art of translation and developed great skill in expressing precise meanings (Garnett 1991: 29-31).

Constance and Religion

Constance's parents did not teach their children about religion. When Constance's mother died in 1875, she was only fourteen. She was shattered by her mother's death. She lost confidence in life and felt that life was worthless. That was the final blow to her religious belief. She became sceptical of and lost faith in all dogma. But

it endowed her with a certain kind of sensitivity towards people's sufferings and miseries.

Constance's journey into the realm of Translation

For three years after graduation Constance worked as a family teacher. She started her social and political activities by going to meetings held at Karl Marx's house. She met George Bernard Shaw, a socialist and became attracted to socialism and its main cause; alleviating the standard of life of workers through socialism. She read Karl Marx's *Das Kapital* but rejected his theory of surplus value. She also went to the Fabians' meetings which addressed the question of "Why are the many poor?", but did not become a Fabian (*ibid.*:42). Like Shaw, she believed that "much of the world of politics, social justice, religion and morals was wrong" (*ibid.*:46). In 1879, she met Edward Garnett, the son of Richard Garnett, a well-learned man of extraordinary repertoire of knowledge who worked as the Superintendent of London's Reading Room. She worked as a librarian herself at People's Palace Library. Edward had his own interest in literature and wrote a number of novels as *Light and Shadow* and *An Imaged World*. Edward became more established as a critic and reviewer of literature. Edward and Constance got married on 31 August 1889 at which time she resigned from the library. In 1891, Constance gave birth to her only son David whom she tried with her best means to educate in the following years.

In the same year, the Garnetts met with Felix Volkhovsty who played a vital role in Constance's life by opening her eyes to Russian language and driving her towards the realm of translation. Volkhovsty was a Russian political exile who escaped from Siberia and settled in London (*ibid.*:74). The Garnetts became very fond of him. He gave Constance lessons in Russian language. By that time the Garnetts were already interested in the Russian literature and Constance read Turgenev. She was excited about the complexity of Russian language. She started translating Goncharov's novel *A Common Story*. Her translation was very slow at first. In 1892, Volkhovsty introduced the Garnetts to the editor of *Free Russia* journal Sergy Stepniak. Stepniak encouraged Constance to pursue her translations and paved

the way to establish her as a translator. It was due to him that she started to have “a sense of vocation to translate Russian literature” (*ibid.*:86). Edward encouraged his wife. Stepniak and his wife also introduced her to other Russians in order to promote her learning of Russian. She spent more time on learning Russian and started her translation tasks by translating Ivan Turgenev’s *Rudin*. She saw a challenge in Turgenev’s writing and beauty of style (*ibid.*: 96). It was difficult but to her it had to be done. Then she onset on *A Sportsman’s Sketches*. In 1893, she found herself a publisher. William Heinemann accepted her translations. She worked on Tolstoy’s novel *The Kingdom of God is Within You*. At this time, she had prospects of permanent work as a translator and she needed help in correcting her work. Stepniak agreed to be her coadjutor. Stepniak proved to be the cornerstone on whom she relied on understanding difficult fragments in the works she translated. His death in 1895 was a big blow to her. As much as she lamented him, she was resolved to carry on the task of translating *Virgin Soil*.

In 1895, her earnings enabled her to build a house in the country, which she named ‘Cearne’. She lived in that house for the rest of her life and found it a place of solitude to repose at in her old age.

After two years of involvement in Russian literature, Constance left to Russia in 1893. Her main aim was to perfect her Russian language and expand her knowledge of Russian literature. She visited Tolstoy who requested her to translate his novel *The Four Gospels Harmonised* which she couldn’t as she was engaged in translating Turgenev. During the following years she witnessed very laborious years with translation. She did many translations for various writers, but her work shrank at the beginning of the 1900s, as her sight was failing rapidly. She translated Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, as it was her life ambition to translate his works. She translated a sonnet by Pushkin (*ibid.*: 240). With the help of her friend’s daughter, Juliet Soskice who undertook the task of reading books and writing what she dictated her, she managed to translate *The Revolt of the Potemkin* and Chechov’s tale *Peasant Wives* and play *The Cherry Orchard*. The latter play was performed in English based on Constance’s translation (*ibid.*: 257). In 1909, the king awarded her a Civil List Pension “in consideration of the merits of your translations from the

Russian”(ibid.:247). Later, her interests shifted to the Russian novelist Dostoevsky. She translated *The Brothers Karamazov*, *The Possessed* and *Crime and Punishment* between 1911 and 1912. In 1921, she translated Chechov’s *Tales*, *The Cook’s wedding* and *Love*. In the following years she became frail and sick with Rheumatism and Turgenev’s *Three Plays* was her last attempt in translation.

Constance’s Philosophy of Translation

Constance established her own method in translation. She would read through the Russian work, looking up the unfamiliar words and phrases and noting the English in pencil between the lines. Once she had finished, she would set to write out the translation fairly rapidly. When she had completed a sufficient batch she would go through it with a Russian friend before taking it to press (Garnett 1991:132).

Constance knew that there are constant difficulties in trying to find the right word in English, but one never has a mental block (ibid.:133). Sometimes she would struggle with a text or fragment, but her “conscience would be uneasy and I am putting it in as it is almost impossible to do justice in English to beauty and poetry of the original”(ibid.:183). She considered it her business not merely to translate what came her way but to bring the most important Russian literature to English readers (ibid.:160). Despite the praise she used to receive she did not consider herself a success. She believed that she was “still learning her trade. The task of the translator is free of the chief frustration of the creative writer” (Garnett 1991:182).

When she was criticised in a critical notice in *Literature* for the mistakes she made in her translation of *The Torrents of Spring*, she commented that she agreed with the reviewer because she translated it “with disgraceful haste” and had a “painful consciousness of its being inferior to the other volumes”(ibid.:183).

At one occasion, she was translating *A Spokesman Sketches*. She gave Spaniak the first draft of six stories to check. He lost them and she had to translate them once more. He found the drafts later and Constance compared the two versions to choose the best passages, only to find that both versions were identical. She had difficulty translating the same problematic words. She concluded that “I had done the only version that I was capable of”(ibid.:182). Constance said at the end of her

life that “the qualifications for a translator are to be in sympathy with the author he is translating and most important of all to be in love with words and interested in all their meanings” (*ibid.*:184). She was a true example of her philosophy. Despite her relative inexperience and incomplete knowledge of Russian, particularly at early stages of her work, she was qualified to translate Turgenev, an author with whom she felt particular sympathy. Again, all her health frailties did not impede her from translating Tolstoy’s works at the late stages of her life.

Constance was sensitive to the language and beauty of style and she had an extraordinary sensitivity to the nuances of meanings and flavours of words, but she was often criticised, as Glyn Turton, a critic of Turgenev’s works, puts it, “for failing to make an adequate distinction between peasant and normal speech. She justified this by sensing that the coarse rustic speech was unfitting for a writer so poetical as Turgenev”(Garnett 1991:185). Her usage of classic language could also be attributed to her education and training in Greek and Latin languages. Constance always found dialogue more difficult than description (*ibid.*:185).

Turton found that “she occasionally gave up the struggle to translate puns and faulty Russian, and while her omissions were few, There were careless and obvious slips”(*ibid.*:185).

She would customise her strategies of translation according to the stylistic features of each writer as she believed that she has to be faithful to the original text. For instance, one of the difficulties of translating Dostovsky “was to make the English as vague, imprecise in meaning and rambling as the original. She was always having to stop herself from giving way to the temptation of putting what he was trying to say more clearly than he had succeeded in doing. This is a long way from Muchnic’ plain style”(*ibid.*:266).

Of all her translations she found Turgenev the most difficult one and she regretted that she did not onset her translation with Tolstoy as the latter was much more straight forward in style (*ibid.*:182). When she worked on *Anna Karenin* her sight was deteriorating and she could not even read the pages. She had to have someone to read the Russian versions. She could not forgive herself for the mistakes she made in translation. To her, translation emanates from an inner powerful source

of inspiration that enables the translator to convey feelings through words. She believed that translation was a message. Constance was occasionally frustrated to find that unqualified people were translating literary works without fully grasping the text. She did not translate only for the sake of earning money as it was not her first priority. A good example is when Heinemann refused to entrust *War and Peace* to her in 1903 as the novel was a million words long, and she was overworked, suffering from deteriorating eyesight and frequent headaches, with other responsibilities in her hand (*ibid.*:203). He wanted it to be translated through collaborative group of translators. Her dreams were confined to Tolstoy. So, she undertook the translation on her own without being paid for the work and despite the fact that her ophthalmologist neighbour Amy Sheppard forbade her from reading and writing. Instead she used a typewriter to make the letters more legible as she became unable to read her own handwriting. Fortunately she finished *War and Peace* before her eyes broke down (*ibid.*:204). She was praised for preserving the syntax and repetitions of Tolstoy, but her translation was inferior to her previous ones as she relied on other people's eyes, through mishearing or misreading.

When translation became too difficult for her and to determine the correct interpretation of a word or fragment, “ she preferred to reproduce in English even the rough and awkward passages that sometimes occurred in the originals, for she knew that by preserving those aspects, she was also preserving the poetry and emotional quality of the Russian language” (Vennewitz 1991: C17).

Constance in the eyes of critics

Edward Crankshaw, a critic of literature, said after quoting a passage from *The Tryst*: “This is the kind of thing which you have to throw your hands in acknowledgement of magic. There is no knowing how it is done. The translation is no less than the original. And if that is not genius, then I don't know what that is” (Garnett 1991: 184).

By comparing the two translations of *The Kingdom of God is Within You* by Constance Garnett and Scott Aline Delans, a reviewer in the *Academy* journal found

fault with the latter's version for translating the text without considering what the author was trying to say and praised Constance in comparison (*ibid.*:132).

When *Rudin* was published, a reviewer in the Daily Chronicle wrote:

Translations are no longer executed by people who are equally ignorant of the language. Perhaps we may regard it as a merciful interposition of providence that Turgenev, half of whose charm resides in his gracious silver-tongued style... has been entrusted to Mrs. Constance Garnett, and could not have fallen in better hands (Garnett 1991:184).

Joseph Conrad was prejudiced against all Russians. However, he admired Turgenev because "Turgeniev to me is Constance Garnett and Constance Garnett is Turgeniev. She has done the marvellous thing of placing the man's work inside English literature" (*ibid.*:167). In another review her translation was described as faithful and correct. It is full of ingenuities unsuspected by the casual reader and it has quiet and modest grace.

In 1900, the Academy nominated her to "Award for Authors" for her translations of Turgenev's novels. An anonymous reviewer, praising *A House of Gentlefolk* in the *Athenaeum* wrote "She is both literal and spirited, an unusual combination. She saw it her first duty to be faithful to her original. She refused to improve Tolstoy's arguments by presenting them in a way more acceptable to the English reader" (*ibid.*:183). Her translation of *Byezhin Prairie* was taken as a textbook for teaching English literature to Japanese students"(Garnett 1991:184).

Glyn Turton, remarked, after reading a number of her translations that "she did the difficult very well, failed at those that were nearly impossible and occasionally slipped up on the easy ones"(*ibid.*:184). Kent, an editor of Russian literature (1964:XI) points out that "the decision to use Constance Garnett's translation (of Nikolai Gogol's works) was determined by one critical factor: eminent scholars of Russian literature with whom I consulted agreed with my point of view that despite occasional errors and the often debilitating effects of Victorianism, her work remains a remarkably competent and wonderfully conscientious accomplishment".

Diligence & Commitment

Constance's son, David, describes how he used to watch the changing expressions on his mother's face, "eager, frowning, puzzled or amused. The Russian words were translated not only on the foolscap sheet of paper in front her but into English features of flesh and blood. Her face was so expressive that he could guess at the emotional tension of what she was reading"(Garnett 1991, 191).

The year 1895 was a very busy year for her. Nonetheless, she worked hard on *On the Eve, Fathers and Children* and two volumes of *A Sportsman Sketches* (*ibid.*:149). In 1901, the Garnetts were shorter in money than usual. She made do with candles in her work, which she knew would harm her deteriorating eyesight. Her brother Robert died and she had a sharp little attack of sciatica". Nevertheless, she persevered in her work on Tolstoy's *Anna Karenin*. Her life story displays repetitive similar periods of pressure to which she responded with more determination. She had never had her hands free of responsibilities. However, she had always managed to find time for all her family responsibilities, social and political activities and translation work.

A Word of tribute

After her long years of experience, Constance Garnett no longer thought of herself as "bound to England or Scotland. She had come to see things from an international point of view"(Garnett 1991:180). She was a humanitarian. She had faith in humanity and had always been sensitive to people's miseries. She would always give hand whenever she could. Her massive bulk of translations had brought the world closer as she struggled to lead people to believe in the power of literature as a universal code that can be felt and enjoyed by the different nations of the world. She ended her life in near-blindedness but she was still the heroine of her day.

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