

Turgenev and Oxford

By J. S. G. SIMMONS

WHEN, on 18 June 1879, Ivan Sergeevich Turgenev received an Honorary Doctorate from the University of Oxford, he was not merely the first Russian novelist, but—it would appear—the first novelist of any nation to be so honoured. Among the resounding names of sovereigns, military commanders, diplomats, politicians, and prelates which swell the list of recipients of the University's highest compliment, the name of a poet occasionally appears—Wordsworth in 1839, Tennyson and Monckton Milnes in 1855, Longfellow in 1869—but we look in vain for a Scott, a Dickens, or a Thackeray. Turgenev was thus 'the first of the novelists', but he was certainly not—as he believed himself to be—'only the second Russian' to receive an Oxford doctorate.

The story that Peter the Great was given an honorary degree by the University when he visited Oxford in April 1698 is without foundation,¹ and it would appear that Oxford's first Russian Honorary Doctor was in fact Prince P. B. Kozlovskii, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of Sardinia, who spent the first six months of the year 1813 in England. He cut a considerable figure in London society and received an Honorary Doctorate of Civil Law at the Encaenia in that year. In 1814 the Emperor Alexander I and nine members of his suite (*en route* for the Congress of Vienna) received doctorates; Alexander's brothers, Nicholas (the future Emperor) and the Grand Duke Michael, were similarly honoured in 1817 and 1818; General Sablukov received a degree in 1834; and the Tsarevich Alexander and three members of his suite (one of whom, Zhukovskii, was not only a Russian, but also a poet) were given doctorates in 1839. Five years later, the astronomer V. Ya. Struve received the degree—the last Russian to do so before Turgenev's award in 1879.

Of all the Russian authors of his day Turgenev was perhaps the most likely candidate for an honour from an English university, for he was a frequent visitor to England and was well known in English literary society. His first visit had taken place in 1847, he came each year from 1856 to 1860, was again in England in 1862 and 1870, paid three visits in a single year in 1871,

¹ L. Loewenson, 'Some details of Peter the Great's stay in England in 1698', *Slavonic Review*, xl. (1961/62), 442.

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and made another trip to England and Scotland in 1878.² He came for various reasons: to see the exiled publicist Herzen, to shoot partridge, to holiday in the Isle of Wight—and to meet the English ‘lions’. Thus in 1856 he was shooting in Norfolk with Thomas Baring, the banker (who as a young man had himself visited Russia);³ in the following year his ‘bag’—this time of notabilities—included Carlyle, Disraeli, Macaulay, and Thackeray;⁴ and during his 1858 visit his acquaintance with Monckton Milnes gained him an invitation to the Royal Literary Fund banquet at St. Martin’s Hall in London about which he published an article in a Russian journal in order to encourage the establishment of a similar institution in Russia.⁵

Some of Turgenev’s English acquaintances were doubtless Oxford men, but his first recorded meeting with any substantial number of members of Balliol College—the Oxford college which took the lead in obtaining a doctorate for him in 1879—probably did not take place until August 1871. He was then in Scotland, where he spoke at the Scott Centenary Celebrations in Edinburgh, and spent some time at Allean House, Pitlochry, shooting partridge. The Master of Balliol, Benjamin Jowett, was at nearby Tummel Bridge with a reading-party which included the poet Swinburne, then a Balliol undergraduate. Jowett’s friend, Robert Browning, was at Little Milton in the hills above Loch Tummel, and it is known that a party which included Jowett, Swinburne, and Browning dined at Allean House.⁶ However, it was not until three years later that definite steps seem to have been taken to obtain an Oxford degree for Turgenev. His English friend and translator, W. R. S. Ralston, had been invited to deliver the Ilchester Lectures at Oxford in the spring of 1874⁷ and early in that year evidently wrote to Turgenev referring to the possibility of a degree.⁸

Nothing seems to have come of this proposal, and Turgenev next appears in an Oxford context in 1878, when he paid his first recorded visit to the city,⁹ staying with Professor Max Müller—the friend of his fellow-student at Berlin

² For details see M. K. Kleman, *Letopis' zhizni i tvorchestva Turgeneva* [‘Chronicle of the Life and Work of Turgenev’] (Moscow-Leningrad, 1934), *passim*; also N. Gut’yar, ‘Poezdki I. S. Turgeneva v Angliyu’ [‘Turgenev’s journeys to England’], *Izvestiya Kubanskogo pedagogicheskogo instituta*, II-III (1929), 243-52.

³ Letter of 4 Sep. 1856 (*Pis'ma* [‘Letters’], III (M.-L., 1961), 8).

⁴ Letter of 9 July 1857 (*ibid.*, p. 123).

⁵ *Sobranie sochinenii* [‘Collected works’], XI (M., 1956), 321-7, 524.

⁶ E. Abbott and L. Campbell, *Life and Letters of B. Jowett*, II (1897), 12-13; letter of 13 Aug. 1871 (*Pis'ma*, IX (1965), 118-19).

⁷ M. P. Alexeyev, ‘William Ralston and Russian writers of the later nineteenth century’, *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, XI (1964), 88-9.

⁸ See Turgenev’s reply (in English) dated 22 February 1874, welcoming the suggestion (*Pis'ma*, X (1965), 198).

⁹ *Life and Letters of Friedrich Max Müller*, II (Oxford, 1902), 56.

University, F. H. Trithen, who had been Professor of Modern European Languages at Oxford from 1848 to 1854, and whom Max Müller had succeeded in the Chair.¹⁰

The promotion of Turgenev's Honorary Doctorate must have been initiated early in 1879. Ralston, who presumably was again connected with the move, was staying with the Max Müllers in March of that year,¹¹ and the Master of Balliol's official proposal appears in the Hebdomadal Council's Minutes for 2 June 1879. Turgenev mentions the honour—with characteristically modest expressions of surprise—in a letter to P. L. Lavrov of 14 June,¹² and in a letter to his publisher, Stasyulevich, of the same date he writes that he was leaving his home at Bougival near Paris on the morrow to receive 'the great and unexpected honour of the degree of Doctor of Common [*sic*] Law' at Oxford.¹³ In a third letter (to his friend, A. V. Toporov) he conveys the same news, adding 'what will Messrs. Stasov, Mikhaïlovskii, etc., have to say?'¹⁴

Turgenev's Balliol friends were active in their preparations, H. J. S. Smith organizing the presentation to him of the cap and robes which he would need for the Encaenia ceremony in the Sheldonian on 18 June (see PL. v).¹⁵ On that day he was to be one of eight recipients of the Doctorate of Civil Law—among them the Bishop of Durham, the First Lord of the Admiralty, the painter Sir Frank Leighton, and the Scottish historian and Celtic scholar, W. F. Skene. With these Turgenev may have had little in common, but he could easily find topics of common interest to discuss with two of the others—Lord Dufferin, and the Liberal politician, W. E. Forster. Lord Dufferin was our Ambassador at St. Petersburg, and Forster's responsibility for the Education Act of 1870 may have reminded Turgenev of the project for the encouragement of popular education in Russia which he had drawn up in 1860 while holidaying in the Isle of Wight with a number of his Russian friends.¹⁶

At this period the undergraduate members of the audience at the Uni-

¹⁰ Turgenev refers to Trithen in a letter to Granovskii of 30 May 1840 (*Pis'ma*, I (1961), 188). For Trithen's Oxford career see J. S. G. Simmons, 'Slavonic Studies at Oxford, I', *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, III (1952), 142-5.

¹¹ *Autobiography and Letters of Mrs. M. O. Oliphant* (1899), 279-80.

¹² *Literaturnoe nasledstvo* ['Literary Heritage'], LXXIII, II (M., 1964), 44.

¹³ *M. M. Stasyulevich i ego sovremenniki v ikh perepiske* ['M. M. Stasyulevich and his Contemporaries as revealed in their Correspondence'], III (St. Petersburg, 1912), 166. Turgenev wrote the words 'Doctor of Common Law' in English, and the error (for 'Civil law') has proved persistent.

¹⁴ *Literaturnyi arkhiv: materialy po istorii literatury i obshchestvennogo dvizheniya Rossii* ['Literary Archive: Materials relating to the History of Literature and Social Movements in Russia'], IV (M.-L., 1953), 286. Stasov and Mikhaïlovskii were leading Russian critics.

¹⁵ Abbott and Campbell, *Jowett*, II (1897), 150.

¹⁶ *Sobranie sochinenii* ['Collected Works'], XI (1956), 444-51, 555-8. Incidentally, it appears from the *Oxford University Gazette* of 17 June 1879 that John Ruskin would have been one of Turgenev's co-honorands had not indisposition prevented his appearing at the ceremony.

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versity's annual Encaenia still exercised their traditional privilege of voicing their opinion of the University's notabilities and honorands—and though Turgenev was perhaps at the peak of his literary fame in England at the time, he feared that recent memories of the Russo-Turkish War and the bitter divisions which it had engendered in English political life, might lead to embarrassing demonstrations against a Russian Honorary Doctor. But in the event all went well: *The Times* reported that Turgenev 'enjoyed the warmest reception', though it fails to report one of the more striking features of the ceremony and one which may have put the house into a good humour before Turgenev's own presentation took place. W. H. Smith, the First Lord of the Admiralty, who preceded him in the list of recipients, had recently been taken off in a good-natured way in Gilbert and Sullivan's *H.M.S. Pinafore*. When W. H. Smith was presented there occurred (according to *The Standard* of 19 June) 'the event of the day—the descent from the Upper Gallery of an immense pinafore on which were inscribed the Vice-Chancellor's Latin words of admission to the degree: "Admitto te ad gradum D.C.L."'.¹⁷

The Latin text of the speech in which the Regius Professor of Civil Law, James Bryce, introduced Turgenev to the Vice-Chancellor at the ceremony, has recently come to light among the Bryce Papers in the Bodleian, and is reproduced as an Appendix below. The newspapers did not print it in full, but *The Standard* reported that Bryce referred to 'the wonderful genius . . . shown in [Turgenev's] romances, and his description of Russian life, which led to the emancipation of the serfs . . .'. Turgenev's own letters show that he was well satisfied with his reception and also reveal that innocent pleasure in the unfamiliar and colourful D.C.L. robes which is not unknown among foreign recipients of Oxford's honorary degrees.

If Turgenev was satisfied, so were his Oxford hosts. The Master of Balliol, who entertained him, reported that Turgenev gave him 'a terrible account of Russia: twenty-six or twenty-eight thousand of the best of the youth of the country in prison or on their way to Siberia—constitutionalists turning nihilists in their despair. He seemed to see no ray of hope.'¹⁷ Others stress his extraordinary charm. For Turgenev had a tradition of success in English society—he spoke the language well, his appearance was striking and his personality remarkably sympathetic. English literary memoirs contain a number of flattering references to him, but Mrs. Warre Cornish's account of him at Oxford provides one of the liveliest portraits of Turgenev seen through English eyes.¹⁸ Mrs. Warre Cornish's source was Mrs. Evans, the wife of

¹⁷ Abbott and Campbell, *loc. cit.*

¹⁸ Mrs. Warre Cornish was the sister-in-law of Lady Ritchie, the daughter of W. M. Thackeray, the novelist. Lady Ritchie quotes her account of Turgenev in *Blackstick Papers* (1908), 239-40.

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Dr. Evans, Master of Pembroke College, who was Vice-Chancellor when Turgenev received his degree. She wrote: 'He was entertained on the eve of the ceremony at Pembroke College . . . The presence of the tall Russian amongst the University guests, his whole personality, made a great and sudden impression even on those to whom he was but a name. He spoke readily and with great cordiality; his English was exceedingly good, and the amenity of the foreign guest was felt by all . . . All the circumstances of that Commemoration have passed away from Mrs. Evans's recollection. Only Tourguéniéff remains, his look of power, and especially his wonderful eyes, which flashed as he spoke; these stay and cannot fade from the memory of anyone who conversed with him.'

Turgenev returned to Bougival within a few days of the ceremony and was soon retailing his Oxford experiences to his Russian friends. On 24 June he wrote an account of the proceedings to V. A. Chivil'ev in which he reported that he had been applauded more than the other recipients and remarked that the cap and robes which the 'Oxford professors' had presented to him would be handy should he have occasion to take a part in a charade.¹⁹ The charade theme recurs in a letter to Toporov of 2 July,²⁰ and he signs a letter to Stasyulevich of 30 June: 'Ivan Turgenev, D.C.L.'²¹ But behind these flippant references the sense of satisfaction which Turgenev felt at the unusual honour which Oxford had done him is unmistakable. That the honour was unusual is confirmed by the fact that in the more than eighty years which have elapsed since Turgenev received his D.C.L. only two other Russians have been similarly distinguished: the physicist Mendeleev in 1894, and the historian Paul Vinogradoff in 1902. However, Glazunov received an Honorary Doctorate of Music in 1907, and an Honorary Doctorate of Letters was conferred on the classical scholar M. Rostovtsev in 1919. In more recent years, the tradition of giving Honorary Doctorates to Russians distinguished in the worlds of learning and the arts has been happily revived with the Doctorate of Music conferred on Dmitrii Shostakovich in 1958. The honorary degree of D.Sc. was given to Academician N. N. Semënov in 1960, and Doctorates of Letters were bestowed on Kornei Chukovskii in 1962 and — appropriately in view of his services to Turgenev studies—on Academician M. P. Alekseev in 1963. Two years later another great figure in Russian literature, the poetess Anna Akhmatova, received an honorary D.Litt., and in 1966 and 1967 respectively, two distinguished Russian literary historians and critics—Academician

¹⁹ I. L. Brodskii, *Turgenev v vospominaniyakh sovremennikov i ego pis'makh* ['Turgenev in the Memoirs of his Contemporaries and in his Letters'], II (M., 1924), 181-2.

²⁰ *Literaturnyi arkhiv*, IV (1953), 288.

²¹ *M. M. Stasyulevich*, III (1912), 166.

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V. M. Zhirmunskiĭ and Professor D. S. Likhachëv—were similarly honoured. The tradition would now seem not only to have been revived, but to be firmly re-established: the University of Oxford has shown herself to be still the pioneer among universities in the West in her appreciation of the Russian contribution to literature, both creative and critical.

APPENDIX

THE TEXT OF PROFESSOR BRYCE'S PRESENTATION SPEECH

Virum praesento vobis inter hujus saeculi scriptores nulli secundum, qui quamvis sermone fuerit pedestri usus vatem tamen et quidem nobilem alloqui libet. quis enim unquam felicius gentis suae mores ingenium totam denique vitam expressit? quis in genere dicendi exquisitior? quis intimos animi motus depromere lacrimas iram amorem ciere pollentior? quin ut intelligatis quantis possint fati reservari fabulae, quanto plus polleant veritate res ab ingenio sublimi fictae, ab hoc scriptore imperatorem Russiae scitote, quae fuerint colonorum miseriae serviles edoctum, consilium protinus cepisse omnem illam plebem a dominis liberandi. quare si Academicam non sibi tantum sed etiam toti orbi natam censetis, hunc generis humani amicum, hunc tantae suorum salutis auctorem civem nostrum adsciscamus admissio Iohanne Sergii Turgueneff in gradum Doctoris in Iure Civili honoris causa.

PLATE V



IVAN TURGENEV, Hon. D.C.L.(Oxon.), 1879