

**HOLY RUSSIA AND OTHER
POEMS; TRANSLATED
FROM THE RUSSIAN**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649325948

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Cover @ 2017

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BY

P. E. MATHESON

HUMPHREY MILFORD

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

LONDON EDINBURGH GLASGOW NEW YORK
TORONTO MELBOURNE CAPE TOWN BOMBAY

1918

PG3237

E5M29

PRINTED AT OXFORD, ENGLAND
BY FREDERICK HALL
PRINTER TO THE UNIVERSITY

To the Russian People

ONLY by knowledge won through toil and pain,
Through sympathy into the spirit wrought
Of two great peoples, can their lives be brought
To work together for that priceless gain,
The rule of freedom in a world at peace,
Wherein shall live and move, unfolding still
Their noblest gifts and powers of mind and will,
All nations and the clash of arms shall cease.
Too little we have tried to know your mind ;
Have read and judged you ill, and some have deemed
Your day's eclipse a night that will not end.
God grant your hour of need new strength may find
To win the great deliverance that you dreamed,
And stand by England's side a trusted friend.

PREFACE

It may seem an impertinence for one who has but lately begun the study of Russian to offer translations to the public. My excuse must be that my reading, such as it is, of Russian lyrics, to which I have been guided by Mr. J. D. Duff, *Russian Lyrics* (Cambridge University Press), Messrs. Semeonoff and Tillyard, *Russian Poetry Reader* (Messrs. Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co.), and by the Anthology published in St. Petersburg by Porphirov in 1895, for which I am indebted to Dr. Hagberg Wright, has given me much pleasure, and that those to whom I have read my versions seem to think that they convey something of the distinctive spirit and atmosphere of Russian life. For the moment the rude shock of disappointment caused by the failure of the Revolutionary Government has given rise to a violent reaction which threatens fatally to hamper our future relations with Russia. Anything therefore which may help in the smallest degree to make Russian life and ideas better known in England seems worth attempting. We pinned our faith unintelligently enough on the Russian people as a military force, and when that failed us, though not until after some splendid and heroic achievements, we are inclined with equal want of intelligence to despair of Russia altogether and

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refuse to have anything to do with the Russian people. And yet the future of Eastern Europe and of Asia must depend very largely on the question whether the Russian people reorganized in its national life, shall stand by the side of France, Italy, England, and America to guarantee the free life of the future by an invincible league of nations.

Most of the poets included in this volume belong to the past, but if one may believe the evidence of modern writers on Russia, whether Russian or English, these poems illustrate what are still characteristic features of the Russian spirit. They are simple both in form and expression; sometimes elemental in their conciseness and reserve of language. They are full of a true love of the beauty of the material world, and in particular of the glory of Spring, with its radiant greenery and rushing waters after the frost-bound stillness and monotony of the Russian winter. With this love of nature is bound up the sense of the part played by the seasons in the life of the country folk; and the peasants, it must be remembered, are the main population of Russia. Their life of hardship and struggle is a perpetual burden in the background of Russian poetry, and finds poignant utterance in two poems of this collection, while in a third, the beautiful 'Harvest' of Koltsóv, the story of the corn-crop from the storm that prepares the soil to the thanksgiving which crowns the harvest is told in a few vivid phrases which call up a succession of pictures more effectively than whole periods of picturesque language would do. There are the suggestions of frontier-life in the lovely Cossack

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cradle-song and the death of the Georgian novice, and of the monotony of travel in the 'Post-House'; while the 'Road Picture' and the 'Winter Night' illustrate features of country life in its tranquil and stormy aspects. But the poems which have most to say to those of us who are reading to-day are those which emphasize the harder aspects of life—such as 'The Convicts' and 'The Exile', and above all the 'Cry of the Peasant'. If the prevailing note of these poems is sad, it is not hopeless. 'Holy Russia', in twelve short lines, sums up the fine thought that Russia, poor desert country as it is, is a consecrated land; and the great poem of Nadson, 'O my brother, my friend', is a noble protest against the bankruptcy of civilized life and an appeal to mankind not to lose faith in its ideals, in goodness and the spirit of love. If the general impression left is a little melancholy it is relieved by touches of humour and humanity such as one finds in the 'Post-House' and in Pushkin's poem to his old nurse, the friend and the companion of his youthful exile: and several poems in this collection show that Russian poetry can express the fire and the pathos of the passion of love with sincerity and force.

There has been much discussion of late whether the Russians are truly a religious people. The poems in this selection show that religious belief and worship are an element in the daily life of the peasant folk, but apart from the more definite religious allusions the view of life expressed in the more serious lyrics shows a profound sense of the greatness and mystery of the world, of the processes of