

A Brief Discussion of Burns's Poetry in Russian Translation

by Diane Jones Osborne¹

The history of the Russian translation of Burns' poetry began less than five years after the poet's death in 1796. This rather swift rise to popularity can perhaps be understood by a look at Russian literary trends. Starting with Peter the Great (1682-1725), there was a tremendous drive towards westernizing Russia. Literature, science, architecture, government and various other aspects of Western European culture, particularly French culture, were deliberately imported to the extent that by the second half of the eighteenth century the Russian aristocracy was more European than Russian. They spoke and wrote French more than Russian. Much of their drama and poetry were imitations of French and German classical works. Their philosophical ideas were influenced by the German philosophers. As they worked to become citizens of Europe, the "inferior" Russian characteristics were minimized.

However, by the beginning of the nineteenth century attitudes were changing. Russia's past was now considered glorious rather than barbaric. Her early literature gained in popularity and after certain linguistic reforms, the contemporary literature was starting to appear in the Russian language and with Russian themes and motifs. A. S. Pushkin (1799-1837), the father of Russian literature, was particularly instrumental in demonstrating that the Russian language could lend itself to producing well-written works of literature.

From this it can be imagined why there was an attraction to Burns' poetry. His simple relaxed style was a fresh change from the stilted formal style previously in vogue in Russia. And the national pride he demonstrated in using the Scots language and folklore and the references to Scottish history was encouragement to the feelings of nationalism coming to life in Russia.

It is this pride in his national heritage that seems to have caught the attention of one of his first translators, Ivan Kozlov (1779-1840), a romantic poet of influential standing within the court literary circles. In 1829, after having read Burns' [Cotter's Saturday Night](#), he produced *A Rural Saturday Night in Scotland*, which Kozlov called a free imitation of Burns. Its concluding stanza is a tribute to "Holy Russia". Later, in 1835, Kozlov wrote a translation of [To a Mountain Daisy](#).

Kozlov in turn influenced the poetry of Mikhail Yurievich Lermontov (1814-1841), who incidentally claimed to be a descendant of a Scottish mercenary of the early seventeenth century. In 1832, Lermontov translated the *Had we never lov'd sae kindly* stanza from [Ae Fond Kiss](#). An intriguing aspect of his translation is the first line. Having confused the word kindly with that of the German word Kind, meaning child, his first line reads, *Had we never been children*. Despite this, he did manage to impart a meaning comparable to that of Burns' original.

Kozlov and Lermontov were the more well-known of the nineteenth century translators. There were others, such as Mikhail Larionovich Mikhailov (1829-1865), who was a revolutionary poet, V. Kostamaroff and P. Weinberg. There were also quite a few poems that were translated anonymously.

Moving into the twentieth century, translation continued with Eduard Bagritskii (1895-1934), a Soviet poet and with Tatiana Shchepkina-Kupernik (1874-1952), a Soviet playwright.

But the most well-known and highly acclaimed twentieth century translator of Burns is Samuil Marshak (1887-1964). Marshak, a writer of children's literature and translator of English authors like Shakespeare and Blake, was so fascinated by Burns' poetry that he spent half of his life translating it. His translations are highly readable, rhythmical and expressive, but he sometimes omits entire verses of the original poems or simplifies the meaning. Nevertheless, they are considered the best of the translations and continue to be the most popular among the people.

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