

## A RUSSIAN-IRISH ARISTOCRAT

Jean Lombard first heard the name Kathleen ffrench in 1988. A native of Dublin, Jean had been living in Australia for twenty years. Now she was on her way to Moscow with her husband, who had taken a job as a foreign correspondent with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation. They stopped off in Tipperary to visit her husband's parents and his mother, Rosamond, handed her a bundle of old letters that had been in the family for years. They were written by Kathleen ffrench to her Irish relatives during the Russian Revolution and Rosamond hoped that Jean would be able to find out more about her life. After a long and arduous search, Jean Lombard found enough pieces of the jigsaw that was Kathleen's story to write a book about her. The result is *An Irish Woman in Czarist Russia* (Ashfield Press), a compelling and enlightening account of a remarkable woman living in remarkable times.

"My mother-in-law, Rosamond, was a godchild of Rosamond ffrench, Kathleen's cousin," Jean explains. "These letters had been passed on to her and she was curious to know more about Kathleen's life in Russia. I didn't get around to doing anything with the letters until the year before we left Moscow in 1992. We had been busy setting up a home there, and an office for my husband, and it was a very exciting time, socially and politically. Glasnost was under way and things were changing very quickly. Eventually I showed the letters to a journalist friend, Masha Kiseleva, and she was very excited. She was kind enough to give up a few days of her time to accompany me to Simbirsk, where Kathleen had lived, about 600 kilometres south-east of Moscow. We visited the local museum and were amazed to find a huge collection of documents and photographs of Kathleen's ancestors, the Kindiakovs. They were considered to be one of the most important families in the region during the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, with a vast estate and lots of servants. The archivist took us to the site of the family home, where unfortunately everything had been destroyed by the Bolsheviks."

Incredibly, over 1,200 letters and documents from the Kindiakov estate had survived both the Bolshevik revolution and the first world war, and had been carefully preserved by the museum. However, as a foreigner, Jean was not allowed to copy them without special permission from Moscow.

"Knowing Moscow as I did by then, I anticipated a lot of red tape and delays. I didn't have any time to waste at that stage, so we agreed that Masha would return to Simbirsk with reams of paper to photocopy the relevant items. She spent several days going through the collection and came back with five hundred documents. They were mostly letters, written in nineteenth-century French, as was the

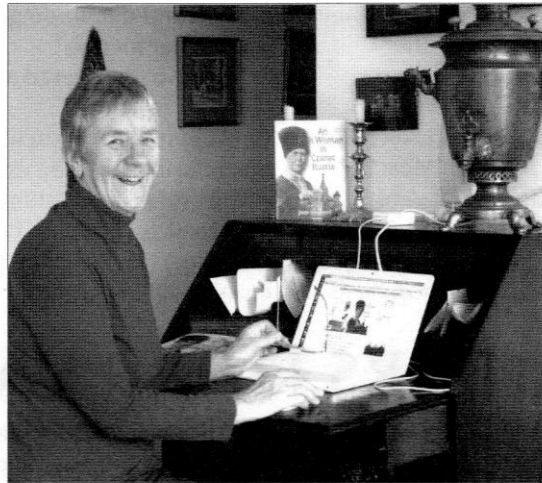
custom for European aristocrats at that time. There are daily letters to the same people, full of everyday trivia, and then you find a gem, another piece of the jigsaw."

What Jean discovered was that, for all the privileges of her aristocratic background, Kathleen ffrench had a difficult life. Her mother, Sophie Kindiakova, was a naïve and indulged socialite of eighteen when she met Robert Percy ffrench, an Irishman in his early thirties serving as a diplomat with the British Embassy in St Petersburg. Robert was the heir to Monivea Castle and its thousand-acre estate near Athenry in Galway, but left his younger brother Acheson to manage it while he broadened his horizons in the British foreign service. The couple married in 1863 and a little over a year later their first and only child, Ekaterina (Kathleen to her father), was born in Brussels. Cracks soon began to appear in the marriage. Robert was often away from home and in his absence Sophie became erratic and deeply jealous and suspicious of her husband. She got involved with a group of radical, unconventional women, dabbled in drugs and was increasingly unstable. When the relationship broke down, Kathleen came to live at Kindiakovka, her grandparents' estate, where she was doted on by her grandfather in particular, while her father continued his travels throughout Europe and her mother lived with friends in Nice.

Occasionally Robert visited Kindiakovka, and when Kathleen was old enough she came to visit him at various places in Europe, accompanied first by her grandmother and later by her governess.

In 1876, when she was twelve years old, Robert arranged for his daughter to be educated at a convent in Rome. After she was confirmed, two years later, she visited Monivea for the first time and developed a life-long affection for her ancestral home. Meanwhile, a dispute over her future was unfolding, involving her mother, her grandparents and her father. Sophie, jealous of Robert's hold over their daughter, was adamant that Kathleen return to Russia with her. She would spend her adolescence travelling between Europe, Ireland and Russia, finally settling at Kindiakovka in 1885 following the death of her beloved grandfather.

Kathleen was now a young woman of twenty-one and the Russia she had left behind as a child was very different to the one then emerging, with rumblings of dissent amongst the peasants and talk of revolution in the cities. Financially, Kindiakovka was struggling and Kathleen worked hard to make it viable, turning her hand to every aspect of farm work and travelling the length and breadth of the far-flung estate. Her father's death in 1896, at the age of sixty-four, was a severe blow, and left her with not one, but two crumbling estates to look after, both threatened by agrarian unrest. It



Jean Lombard: "The Bolsheviks had other ideas"

was agreed that her cousin Rosamond, her uncle Acheson's daughter, would manage Monivea, while Kathleen continued to run Kindiakovka.

When Russia went to war with Japan in 1904, Kathleen threw herself into the Red Cross movement, setting up field hospitals for the wounded and gathering food, fuel, clothing and medicine to keep them functioning. World war one brought further turmoil—Russia lost about four million men during the first year of the war—and by 1916, just when her estate was returning to profitability, it was effectively taken over by the peasants who had previously worked there. With the writing on the wall for landowners in Russia, Kathleen had hoped to ship her remaining possessions and savings out of the country to Monivea, which she hoped to restore to its former glory. But the Bolsheviks had other ideas. Having looted her house, they burned it to the ground, and went on to destroy the surrounding forests, gardens and orchards.

In October 1918, Kathleen was arrested and taken first to Simbirsk prison and then to Burlovsky prison in Moscow. She was detained for three months in a filthy, disease-ridden cell. On her release she tried in vain to seek some compensation for the loss of her property. With the help of friends in high places, she left Moscow in 1920, hoping to

retire to Monivea. But she encountered hostility in Ireland too, from the local people, who regarded her as just another absentee landlord, and from her cousin Rosamond, who made it clear that Monivea was not big enough for two chatelaines.

Her options dwindling, Kathleen decided to take a slow boat to China, where she joined a growing community of Russian exiles in the port city of Harbin, in Manchuria. She lived there in relative comfort until her death in 1938, at the age of seventy-three.

Curiously, Jean Lombard found several links to Kathleen French close to her home in Sydney.

"A lot of White Russians came to Australia via China," says Jean, "and I actually got to meet one of the women who had worked for Kathleen in Harbin. This woman found her quite difficult and demanding, but she was known to be kind and loyal to her friends."

She also discovered an Australian branch of the French dynasty.

"Robert Percy French's uncle Sydney, emigrated to Australia in 1839," she explains. "He established his own estate and called it Monivae [spelling it differently to the Irish Monivea]. Sydney and his wife had thirteen children and there are Frenches from that branch of the family scattered throughout the world."