

An Irish Woman in Czarist Russia

Review: Peter Levy

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By Jean Lombard

Ashfield Press; €20.00

THE lives of the author and Kathleen ffrench, the subject of this book, span some of the most momentous periods of 20th century history – the dying days of czarist Russia, the revolution, the ending of an Ireland dominated by landed gentry and, finally, for the author, the beginning of glasnost and the end of Russian communism.

Not surprisingly, the book earns the praise of Thomas Keneally whose book Schindler's Ark – later made into the Steven Spielberg film Schindler's List – came about as a result of a chance meeting in a shop in Los Angeles.

Like Keneally, author Jean Lombard discovered the story of Kathleen ffrench more by accident than design. Jean Lombard (née McMurtry) originally came from Dublin where she met her future husband John, a journalist. After working in Moscow as a nanny, Jean migrated to Australia and married John. In 1988, they opened the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's first bureau in the former Soviet Union.

Jean soon learned that John had a very interesting ancestor, his cousin Kathleen ffrench, the headstrong child of an Irish diplomat and a Russian heiress, who grew up on her family's estates by the Volga, touring the capitals of Europe with barons and princesses, and visiting a home away from home, her father's castle at Monivea in Galway.

While husband John reported the collapse of Soviet communism, Jean researched Kathleen's life and letters. These letters revealed that Kathleen's mercurial life was rich in trials and scandal. She suffered much heartache from the betrayals of her disturbed mother and witnessed the atrocities of the Great War while serving in the Red Cross.

In the 1917 Russian Revolution she was lucky to survive peasant uprisings and the brutality of Bolshevik prisons. Later, she was the first woman to drive into eastern Siberia, where she spent months searching for her missing lover.

The candid letters of Kathleen and her family take the readers into a world which vanished, both in Russia and in Ireland.

Translating the letters, 1,200 of them, written longhand in a mixture of French, Russian and English, was a major translation task, achieved with the assistance of Russian journalist Masha Kiseleva.

Kathleen ffrench's father, Robert Percy ffrench, a member of one of Galway's 14 "tribes",

was a British diplomat, based temporarily in the British embassy in St Petersburg, when he met Sophie Alexandrovna Kindiakova at a ball in Moscow. They were quickly married, but almost as quickly broke up, though not before their daughter Kathleen was born in Simbirsk in 1864 and reared by her grandparents when her parents separated.

Simbirsk, situated on the river Volga 560 miles east of Moscow, was the birthplace of a man who helped changed Russia from czarist feudalism into a communist state – Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, otherwise known as Lenin. Simbirsk had long been renamed as Ulyanovsk, after its famous resident, when Joan Lombard discovered that Leninist ideology had a profound impact on Kathleen's life, with her father reduced to desperation in a Russian prison in the year after revolution when his estates were acquired by the new political order.

Robert Percy French made frequent visits to Ireland with his daughter, but struggled to keep the house and lands at Monivea. On his death Kathleen had a grandiose Carrara marble mausoleum to her father built on the estate. Ironically, it's the only building left standing at Monivea. In 1939 Kathleen died and left Monivea to an Irish state which refused it. The castle was then left to a spinster who lived in England and on her death the castle and estate were sold to the Irish government for virtually nothing. The house was subsequently demolished, its stones broken up and used for road-making.

One forested area of the estate subsequently came under the control of Coillte which, in 2005 tried to sell part of the land for a hotel and leisure centre and nursing home. Galway County Council gave planning permission and the plan was only halted after a successful appeal to An Bord Pleanála by An Taisce, with the support of locals.

The episode was a fitting epitaph to a woman who had witnessed an age of revolutions and their consequences.

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