



КУЛЬТУРА И КУЛЬТУРНЫЕ СВЯЗИ

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DANISH JOURNALIST ROBERT WATT AND HIS *LETTERS FROM RUSSIA*

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Letters from Russia by Robert Watt, published in Denmark in 1867, were born as a result of the Danish writer's trip to Russia to cover Princess Dagmar of Denmark's arrival in Russia and wedding with Grand Duke Alexander Alexandrovich in 1866. Robert Watt was a journalist, a writer, a translator, and the artistic director of Tivoli Gardens amusement park from 1866 to his death in 1894. *Letters from Russia* contains seventeen chapters, in which the writer describes his impressions of his trip to Russia, from the moment he said farewell to Denmark standing on the deck of "Mermaid" frigate, which was raising sails heading to Kronstadt, to the ceremonial reception of the Danish Princess. Road diaries of those who travelled across Russia have always been an important source of information about the country and the epoch, and Robert Watt's book is no exception. Watt's book is partly a guidebook — he describes all places of interest in Moscow and St Petersburg, but he also ponders on specific features of life in Russia and the national character. Most of his characteristics are highly positive, he doesn't pay much attention to unsightly sides of life. The observer's assessment depends on their personality, previous experience, the recipient (in this case the book was aimed at the Danish reader), and the political situation. We could assume that as the writer was sent to Russia to cover Princess Dagmar of Denmark's wedding he did not intend to pay attention to the ugly sides of the Russian life. Nevertheless, Robert Watt's

book, unknown to a wide audience in Denmark and Russia, is an important cultural monument which supplements the history of relations between Denmark and Russia.

Keywords: Robert Watt, Denmark, Russia, Princess Dagmar, cultural contacts, travel notes, 19th century.

Danish journalist Robert Watt was born on October 28, 1837, in the estate of Holmstrupgård not far from Aarhus. Watt's grandfather was a native of Scotland, hence his "non-Danish" name. Robert's father died when he was six. After his death the family moved to Aarhus. After the real school Robert started learning the trading business, yet at the same time pondered over going to stage. In October 1857, he went to Australia, where his uncle lived, and returned to Denmark only in summer 1861. Over those years he changed at least sixteen jobs — he was a stableman, a gravedigger, a private secretary, an accountant, and in the end a stagecoach coachman, and liked to talk of the latter activity to his friends in Denmark [Topsøe-Jensen, 1971, s. 111].

After he returned home Watt settled down in Copenhagen and soon realised what he wanted to do. He was a brilliant story-teller, and one of his relatives, editor C. C. Lose, co-owner of newspaper *Illustreret Tidende*, offered to publish a series of travel notes on Australia. These travel notes enjoyed success, as at those days travel was not a common thing, and for the Danish audience description of faraway Australia was a novelty. Those travel notes were collected in two books, *From Australia* (1862) and *On the verandah* (1864), and published under the pseudonym Bob. From then on the life of Watt changed — he totally devoted himself to journalism and literature. He was a correspondent of the *Dagbladet*, went on the newspaper's assignment to Vienna and other European cities, spent some time in Paris, wrote notes and satirical articles, many of which were published as separate books. In 1866, Watt founded literary newspaper *Figaro*, which in 1868 got a new name — *Dagens Nyheder*. At the same time he got involved in translation from English and published a row of popular novels and novellas by W. M. Thackeray, E. A. Poe and M. Twain.

It is widely known that for many years Robert Watt communicated with Hans Christian Andersen and accompanied the latter during his trip to Paris in 1867. In the H. C. Andersen centre one can find information of more than sixty letters of the Danish storyteller to Robert Watt.

Not all of these letters have survived, yet the rest are in public access on the Centre's website.

These letters with detailed comments were published by H. Topsøe-Jensen¹, one of the most famous researchers of Andersen [Topsøe-Jensen, 1971, 1972].

In the 1870s, Robert Watt published a series of travel notes of his travel to the US, some of which were published separately.

Watt was always interested in the theatre, he even wrote small plays and sketches for theatres. In 1876, he headed the *Folketeatret*. In 1886, he became the artistic director of the Tivoli Gardens amusement park and held this position until his death in 1894.

According to J. C. Jørgensen, Watt was a pioneer of the Danish journalism, and owing to him the language was enriched with the words like a reporter and a special correspondent [Jørgensen, 2021]. He had the knack of describing life in those countries which his readers could not visit and had a rare ability to make acquaintances, interact with people of various social circles and talk about what he saw and heard in an interesting way [Topsøe-Jensen, 1971, s. 112].

According to Olaf Harsløf, one of the organisers of a virtual exhibition dedicated to Georg Brandes and his epoch, Robert Watt was definitely an important figure of the Breakthrough movement [Harsløf, 2002].

“Letters from Russia” were published in 1867. This was a kind of a report of his travel to Russia in 1866. Watt got an assignment as a special correspondent to cover the arrival of Princess Dagmar of Denmark in Russia and her wedding with Grand Duke Alexander Alexandrovich.

The book contains seventeen chapters, in which the writer describes his travel to Russia from the moment he said farewell to Denmark standing on the deck of “Mermaid” frigate, which was raising sails heading to Kronstadt, to the ceremonial reception of the Danish Princess.

Travel notes of those travelling across Russia have always been an important source of information of the epoch and the country, and the notes of Robert Watt are no exception. On November 8, 1493, the first peaceful agreements were signed between Denmark and Russia [Poulsen-Hansen, 2018, s. 171], which established official relations,

¹ Topsøe-Jensen (1896–1976) also studied letters of Andersen to other correspondents and published autobiographical works of the writer.

but owing to relative geographical vicinity the countries had already had numerous contacts. Numerous factors obviously influenced the development of stereotypes of perception of the Russian culture in the Danish society, but according to P. Ulf Møller travel notes for a long time were the main source of information about Russia for the Danes; only later, starting from the second half of the 18th century, works of literature and journalism in translation started to form the image of the Russians in the country [Møller, 1993, p. 108].

Out of predecessors of Robert Watt, with whose memoirs he might have familiarised himself before his travel, we should mention the Danish ambassador to Ivan IV the Terrible J. Ulfelt [Ulfelt, 2002], sea commander and ambassador to Peter I Just Juel [Juel, 2020], the Danish preacher P. von Haven, who visited Russia in 1736–1739 [Haven von, 2007] and prominent Danish linguist R. Rask, who was in Russia in 1818–1820 [Rask, 2018].

Most detailed memoirs of Russia belong to P. von Haven. His notes differ from many other memoirs of his contemporaries, as the author was able not only to see the life of St Petersburg and Moscow, but also “non-festive” Russia. He made quite long journeys, both in winter and in summer, stayed in common peasants’ houses, he watched the provincial life, he had enough time to obtain information from Russians and foreigners living in Russia as well, he managed to get acquainted with the style of life of various population groups [Krasnova, 2014, p. 497]. It can be assumed that going to an unfamiliar country Watt could familiarise himself with travel notes of Danish travellers, though in “Letters from Russia” there is no direct evidence of it.

In travel notes comparisons with the life at home are inevitable. In perceiving foreign culture people are always selective, as a person pays attention to all phenomena different from what they are used to and inevitably circles out one or several objects.

Unlike other notes of travellers who often evaluate what they see and compare it with what they know well (see: [Krasnova, 2014]), Robert Watt rarely relies on comparisons with his country’s realities, but if he does, he does not give any assessment, as a rule: he doesn’t categorise things into “better” or “worse”, “right” or “wrong”, “more understandable” or “less understandable”. First of all he evaluates the size of building, squares and gardens. Owing to these comparisons (which are often hyperbolised) he tries to make what he sees closer to his reader, to give an

idea of the city and its plan. Below are three fragments characteristic of his description of the city landscape.

*Without slackening speed, the steamer enters the Neva, and immediately on the right opens the Imperial Engineering and Shipbuilding Works on **an area so vast that it could accommodate two Danish provincial towns** [Watt, 1867, s. 16].*

*Although each of the palaces mentioned is of **such a size that one must imagine our largest public building multiplied by a considerable number** to get a scale for it, the Admiralty Building crushes them all. Its open courtyard faces the Neva, and the actual facade faces the church. A slender tower rises in the middle, and its entire length, shaded by rich lime trees, **is about three times the size of our municipal hospital** [Watt, 1867, s. 22].*

*Imagine a straight street, about as long as from Østerport to Charlottenlund Holdeplads and **of a width three times that of Bredgaden**², flanked on each side by a row of buildings which, without shame to their owners, could well be transferred to the Boulevard des Italiens, and you have a kind of concept of the main artery of the Imperial City [Watt, 1867, s. 24–25].*

Robert Watt, who by then had visited several European capitals, is amazed by the fact that in St Petersburg a tourist can get only meager information about the city sights and there is no city guide to help a foreigner learn about all historical churches and monuments. The city seems self-sufficient and not willing to show itself to the world.

St Petersburg is quite outside the usual travel route. Chance or business drives most foreigners here, and it is strange that the splendid capital on the banks of the Neva has found so few, not to say none, who have considered it worthwhile to describe the wonders one sees there [Watt, 1867, s. 18].

Reader of the book has a feeling that the author is trying to fill the cultural gap and create his guide hoping that his book will help other travellers — he gives a very detailed description of the city, central streets, churches, monuments, museums and theatres. The text could well be used for excursions even now (if one excludes certain details, for example, the chapel on the Nikolayevsky bridge which does not exist now). Below are two fragments from the third chapter called “The first impression of St Petersburg”:

On the left hand there is the beautiful granite Vasileostrovskaya Embankment, named after the neighbourhood it surrounds, and along it a number of public buildings: the Academy of Sciences and Arts, Cadet Corps, University and

² A street in the centre of Copenhagen.

so on... And further ahead is the huge Nikolayevsky bridge with a magnificent marble chapel and huge spans... [Watt, 1867, s. 16].

The three main streets, the Nevsky Prospect, Gorokhovaya Street and Voznesensky Prospect all lead to Admiralty Square, the main point of the city, which forms part of Isaac Square, on which the church is located [Watt, 1867, s. 21].

In the last fragment the author gives a bird's eye view of the city, creating a city map he then supplements with enumeration of all buildings important for the territory around the Admiralty, as well as sights and monuments: Palace square, the Alexander Column, the Senate, the Manege, the Mariinsky palace, the monument to Nicholas I and so on.

This map “enlarges” in the following chapters, in which Watt enthusiastically describes the Nevsky prospect and all its major buildings, as well as other sights and Peterhof. Sometimes his description is almost poetical:

A couple of ladies in the most luxurious costumes are reclining in the canopy; every fashion that appears on the banks of the Seine is immediately reflected with renewed splendour in the waters of the Neva, and one gets a scent of the Champs Elysées by seeing the equipage departing [Watt, 1867, s. 26].

His description of Moscow is as excited, but Watt points to the difference between the two cities. He sees Moscow as a “more Russian” city, while about St Petersburg he writes:

St Petersburg is as little Russian as a city in Russia can possibly be. You walk from the English Club to the French Theatre and end the evening in a German beer hall [Watt, 1867, s. 100].

It is interesting to mention that the author pays almost no attention to the ugly sides of life, negative phenomena are rarely described, there are only some fragments about non-festive life, for example, he mentions poor people in rags several times; in several chapters Watt casually mentions the fact that a small sum of money can often help to solve seemingly insoluble problems; a meager meal of port workers in Kronstadt does not cause any enthusiasm as well [Watt, 1867, s. 10]. However, all dark sides of life pass unnoticed against the background of exhilarated descriptions of St Petersburg and Moscow.

Watt's enthusiasm is expressed with the help of rather unvaried language devices. However, the lexical capacity of the Danish language is quite restricted in such situations. He uses a lot of positive adjectives: *prægtig* ('marvellous', 'magnificent') is used 16 times (a marvellous view,

marvellous Anichkov bridge, marvellous Kazan Cathedral), *imponerende* ('grand', 'impressive') is used 8 times (about the city, the sight, the forts). Being impressed by the size, Watt also uses adjectives which characterise it: *uhyre* ('very big', 'gigantic') is used 26 times (about parks, embankments, sums of money), while *umådelig* ('huge', 'gigantic') is used 19 times (about squares, buildings, bridges). Frequent repetitions give the text somewhat monotonous character.

Just like the author sees things which are unusual, he also sees what is familiar to him — everything connected with Denmark. Looking at posters and advertisements he finds some Danish names, though not in full confidence.

By the way, St Petersburg's largest saddler is a Dane by the name of Løvengreen, and little by little one discovers that Denmark has a lot of representatives here, from doctors, architects, composers and sculptors down to the most even craftsmen, not to mention many merchants [Watt, 1867, s. 29].

During his visit to the Imperial library (its collection of books impresses him) he is surprised to find out that its director knows the Royal Danish Library very well, expresses respect to Professor Rafn and corresponds with many Danish scientists [Watt, 1867, s. 47].

In order to help future travellers Watt in most cases transcribes or transliterates the names of streets and monuments (yet sometimes not in the correct way, Morskaya street becomes *Murskoi-Gaden*) but at times he uses calques: Gorokhovaya street becomes *Ærtegaden*, while Vorobyevy Gory becomes *Spurve-Høie*.

Apparently, to help future travellers he also transcribes several words he considers important: "a ruler", "a hotel", "a coachman". Among these words for some reason is "bashlyk" — a women's headdress.

The chapter called "Execution", dedicated to the execution of Karakozov which Watt decided to attend, seems completely alien, it disrupts the general tone of the narrative, yet to some extent it proves the author's impartiality — he recorded everything he saw.

The last, seventeenth, chapter culminates the text. It is dedicated to what Robert Watt came to Russia for — the arrival of Princess Dagmar of Denmark and her ceremonial reception. Watt makes an interesting attempt to try to see the ceremony through the eyes of Dagmar:

From the quiet and cosy life on board the "Slesvig", with the beautiful evening strolls on deck when the sailors sang, there was an abrupt transition to the shouts

of the thousands of mouths that sounded on the water and on land and to the roar of the cannons; and that was only the beginning of the series of festivities to come [Watt, 1867, s. 141–142].

The description of all stages of reception of the Danish princess, specific features of the court protocol of those days, magnificent decorations on the way of the cortege and a lot of small details will definitely be of interest to historians.

A specific feature of Robert Watt's style is extraordinary airiness, the text has no complex archaic constructions (which one could expect because of the time the book was written), and syntax is mostly simple and clear. The author can distance himself from the situation and may be ironic. Sometimes he slightly laughs at himself as a foreigner who knows few Russian words and therefore occasionally finds himself in difficult situations.

Texts in Robert Watt's book are not homogeneous. Though all seventeen chapters were published under one cover, at first they were published in installments in *Dagbladet* from September 8 to November 1, 1866 [Mediestream]. Some chapters provide a kind of a travel guide the author lacked so much when he came to Russia. Other contain observations and reflections of the Russian life, in particular, the chapter in which he describes his twenty-hour journey from St Petersburg to Moscow. In some chapters we see both. Most of his characteristics are highly positive, he pays almost no attention to unsightly sides of life. The observer's assessment depends on their personality, previous experience, the recipient (in this case the book was aimed at the Danish reader), and the political situation. We could assume that as the writer was sent to Russia to cover Princess Dagmar of Denmark's wedding he did not intend to pay attention to the ugly sides of the Russian life. Nevertheless, Robert Watt's book, unknown to a wide audience in Denmark and Russia, is an important cultural monument which supplements the history of relations between Denmark and Russia.

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ДАТСКИЙ ЖУРНАЛИСТ РОБЕРТ ВАТТ И ЕГО «ПИСЬМА ИЗ РОССИИ»

Для цитирования: *Gurova E., Krasnova E. Danish journalist Robert Watt and his Letters from Russia // Скандинавская филология. 2024. Т. 22. Вып. 2. С. 351–361. <https://doi.org/10.21638/11701/spbu21.2024.210>*

Книга Роберта Ватта «Письма из России», опубликованная в Дании в 1867 г., написана по результатам поездки датского журналиста в Россию для освещения приезда датской принцессы Дагмары в Россию и ее бракосочетания с великим князем Александром Александровичем в 1866 г. Роберт Ватт — журналист, издатель, писатель, переводчик, а также художественный руководитель парка развлечений «Тиволи» с 1886 г. и до своей смерти в 1894 г. Сборник «Письма из России» состоит из семнадцати глав, в которых автор описывает свои впечатления от путешествия в Россию — с той минуты, когда он, стоя на палубе поднимающего паруса фрегата «Русалка», прощается с Копенгагеном и направляется в Кронштадт, и до торжественного приема датской принцессы. Путевые заметки путешественников по России всегда служили важным источником информации об эпохе и о стране, и заметки Роберта Ватта не исключение. Ватт отчасти пишет путеводитель, подробно описывая все достопримечательности Санкт-Петербурга и Москвы, отчасти размышляет об особенностях жизни в России и о характере русских. Большинство его характеристик крайне положительны, и он почти не обращает внимания на неприглядные стороны жизни. Оценка наблюдателя зависит и от его личности, и от его предыдущего опыта, и от адресата (в данном случае заметки были рассчитаны именно на датского читателя), и от политической ситуации. Можно предположить, что автор, которого отправили в Россию для освещения бракосочетания датской принцессы, не стремился обращать внимание на какие-то неприглядные стороны российской жизни. Как бы то ни было, книга Роберта Ватта, до настоящего времени неизвестная широкой аудитории как в Дании, так и в России, является важным культурным памятником, дополняющим историю контактов двух стран.

Ключевые слова: Роберт Ватт, Дания, Россия, принцесса Дагмара, культурные контакты, путевые заметки, XIX век.

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