

A lost translation of Bellingshausen? Rip Bulkeley

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ABSTRACT. Frank Debenham believed, on naval authority, that the first English translation of Bellingshausen's account of his 1819–1821 voyage was made during World War I (Debenham 1945: vii). He may have been misinformed.

The editor

Imagine an entirely fictitious publication:

Vice Admiral Fabian von Bellingshausen. *A voyage of discovery in the southern oceans, 1819–1821*. (ed.) Vice Admiral Richard Collinson, R.N. (Rtd). (trans.) Mr R. Michell. London: J*** M****y, 1873.

No such book was ever published. But according to one authoritative source it could have been. That source is the second part of Dawson's *Memoirs of hydrography*, which confidently records that 'The voyage of Captain Bellingshausen . . . was translated from the Russian, under the supervision of Admiral Collinson' (Dawson 1885: 33).

Collinson was certainly the right man for the job. He was a famous polar explorer himself (Barr 2007). More importantly, between his retirement from the Royal Navy in the 1860s and his appointment as deputy master (that is director) of Trinity House in 1875 he took a diligent part in the affairs of the Royal Geographical Society. He was also a member of the council of the Hakluyt Society, for which he prepared the volume on Martin Frobisher (Collinson 1867). He is not known to have taken any particular interest in the annals of Russian exploration.

A possible translator

Dawson neither identifies the actual translator nor implies that the text was intended for publication. On the first point, the catalogue of the British National Archives, which also lists the archives of the Royal Geographical Society, names several British translators of published, unpublished and secret Russian documents in the nineteenth century. But between them three brothers, Thomas, John, and Robert Michell, account for many of the entries, as well as for publications elsewhere in their own right (for example Michell 1865; Kühlewein and others 1865). The brothers were born in Russia in the 1830s to John and Amelia Michell. In the 1881 British census Amelia, a Londoner whose maiden name could not be traced, described her late husband as a physician. Dr John Michell, senior, may have been connected with the Russia Company's factory at St Petersburg or else employed by the Imperial Navy.

Of the three brothers, Thomas and John were both diplomats at St Petersburg by the 1860s. The youngest, Robert, was still a junior civil servant in 1871, namely, a 3rd class clerk working as a translator at the India Office in London. That makes him the most likely brother to have collaborated with Collinson on such a lengthy project.

The British community at St Petersburg in the 1830s mostly lived on or near the English Embankment in the city proper. But as a candidate for the present investigation Robert Michell has the added 'qualification' of having been born on the island fortress of Kronstadt itself, about a year before Bellingshausen became its military governor in 1839. His sister Amelia was also born there in 1840. It is possible that all the Michell children spent their early childhoods on the island, and may even have met the Admiral himself.

A possible problem

The fact that no trace of the 'Collinson translation' now exists at the National Archives suggests that Collinson may have been contemplating publication. If such a project fails for any reason, a publisher does not have the same incentive to retain and preserve the manuscript as does a government department or a learned society.

Over and above the normal vicissitudes of the book trade there was one plausible reason for abandoning the translation in the early 1870s, even before Collinson took on his new role at Trinity House, and even if it had already got far enough to justify Dawson's 'was translated', above. One or two items in Robert Michell's series of 'Russian abstracts', prepared for the Military and the Political and Secret Departments of the India Office, may have been created before 1870. But the series really took off in 1872, shortly after the new German Empire was proclaimed at the end of the Franco-Prussian War. In a radically altered Europe there would have been an urgent requirement for fresh intelligence about Russian economic and military capacity, and for re-assessments of Russian foreign and military policy. And that demand would have been followed, for the rest of the century, by further pressing questions about Russia's continuing economic and military modernisation and expansion into central Asia. From 1872 until at least 1898, fifteen years after Collinson's death, Robert Michell, if he it was, was probably kept far too busy to get back to Bellingshausen (see for example Lebedev 1898).

It took Debenham 25 years to create and publish his translation of Bellingshausen. Fortunately he never found out about Collinson's.

References

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