



Douglas Smith. *The Pearl: A True Tale of Forbidden Love in Catherine the Great's Russia.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008. Illustrations. xiv + 328 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-12041-7.

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Forbidden Love in Eighteenth-Century Russia

The Pearl in this dual biography was the female serf Praskovia Ivanovna Kovalyova, daughter of a blacksmith. Her owner, in due time her Pygmalion, was perhaps the richest man in Russia, Nicholas Petrovich Sheremetev. Praskovia was selected in childhood for domestic service in the Sheremetev palace, which soon evolved into training for the stage in the Sheremetev private theater. Blessed with a remarkable soprano voice, she soon became a star, granted the nickname Pearl (Zhemchuzhina) by her owner. He became her lover, apparently while she was still prepubescent.

Rather than play with and subsequently discard her, the pattern for such cases, Sheremetev fell deeply in love with his Galatea and eventually married her—in secret, to be sure, and years after the affair started. It is hard to understand today how great was the perceived gap in Russian high society between their stations. Other singers and actresses in the Sheremetev theater also received nicknames, and there is evidence that at least one other household serf bore Sheremetev children, but “The Pearl’s” situation was unique. Unfortunately pulmonary-related illnesses cut her career extremely short. Only after it was clear Praskovia was dying early in 1803, not yet thirty-five years of age, following protracted labor and delivery of the couple’s firstborn son, did Nicholas Sheremetev seek the blessing of the emperor for their marriage. Somewhat reluctantly, Alexander I granted it. Nicholas, seventeen years Praskovia’s senior, outlived her by more than five years. Their son Dmitry had a

lackluster career, nearly reaching his threescore and ten years.

The basic love story told by Douglas Smith in *The Pearl* was known, if more in legendary than absolutely historical form, to virtually every Soviet school boy and girl. What Smith has done is to separate fact from legend and place the whole in the context of Russia’s social and cultural history. Many more published and archival materials exist for the Sheremetevs than for the family of one of their serfs. Furthermore, like other biographers of Praskovia before him, Smith found that someone early on carefully culled from the documentary record of Praskovia’s life anything that might be construed as negative. Resorting to conjecture, Smith enters the inner emotional lives of both Nicholas and Praskovia, a strategy he admits is “not widely employed by historians [but] common among biographers” (p. 7). Enough survives in family records and the memoirs of close associates to reconstruct the relationship between them, but hardly more than to merit the thinnest of biographies of Praskovia.

For this reason Smith added two valuable “interludes” in keeping with his theatrical theme, one discussing the uniquely Russian phenomenon of the serf theater and the other providing stories of other serf actresses to demonstrate that Praskovia’s role was hardly unique. For Russian cultural history these asides are equally as valuable as the details of Nicholas and Praskovia’s love affair. This

strange conjuncture—or should it be termed a clash? — of traditional Russian social stratification and aristocratic eighteenth-century European culture has been studied in detail by specialist scholars but is still in process of working its way into mainstream historiography. It was, as Smith colorfully describes, “simultaneously alluring and repellent, magnificent and squalid, and shot through with the paradoxes, injustices, and cruelties of a society in which millions ... labored to provide a life of luxury and leisure for the noble elite. Few art forms have ever displayed so nakedly the inequities of wealth, power, and status that made their existence possible” (p. 97). That opera, perhaps the highest and most artificial genre of the dramatic arts, could be and was performed entirely by artists belonging to the most degraded group of people in Russian society was not the least of the paradoxes. Smith has given us far more than simply a “true tale of forbidden love.”

In lesser hands this topic might have remained a simple romantic tale. As he did with his earlier history of Freemasonry in Russia (*Working the Rough Stone: Freemasonry and Society in Eighteenth-Century Russia* [1999]), however, Smith exhaustively investigated archival sources in both Moscow and St. Petersburg. Furthermore, the three architectural complexes most important to the story still exist, with many of their furnishings intact—Kuskovo and Ostankino at the edges of Moscow

and the Sheremetev palace on the Fontanka in St. Petersburg. Most important, the theater Nicholas constructed at Ostankino in homage to Praskovia not only stands but is also the venue from time to time for the same repertoire that played there in the 1790s. Smith was able to get the “feel” of those places as well as examine documents still housed there and “read” the material culture.

When writing about forbidden love in Russia, associating the tale with Catherine the Great provides a certain cachet. While it is true that the affair between Nicholas and Praskovia began in Catherine’s reign, it took its most daring steps in the reign of Alexander I, first with the secret wedding and then in asking the emperor’s blessing. What happened between the serf and her master in Catherine’s reign was typical of power relations among male masters and female serfs—and had typified Nicholas’s relations with serf women in the years of his youth. How might Catherine have reacted to the request placed before Alexander I? Might she have recalled that her predecessor on the throne, Peter the Great, had himself done something quite similar in marrying the former Marta Skavronska? It took Nicholas six years following Catherine’s death in 1796 to reach the decision—find the courage? —to marry Praskovia. It was unthinkable under Paul, but may not have been utterly forbidden under Catherine.

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