

## The Mysterious Mrs Townsend

Michael Pursglove

In 2014 of two new translations of *Anna Karenina*, by Rosamund Bartlett and Marion Schwartz, were published . They were reviewed in this journal (14.2.39 Autumn 2015) by Muireann Maguire, who began her review thus:

Translations of *Anna Karenina* may never before have been compared to the Number 10 bus, yet there is a similarity between both phenomena: one gets accustomed to waiting years for the next one, and then two come along at once.

In a fascinating blog on the subject of the Bartlett translation (<http://russiandinosaur.blogspot.co.uk/2014/07/if-it-squelches-like-snipe-its-anna.html>.) Dr Maguire performs the considerable service of listing all thirteen English translations of the novel, given that Wikipedia only lists eleven of them. For some reason Wikipedia omits the 1904 translation by Leo Wiener and the 1912 translation by Rochelle S. Townsend, which was, chronologically, the fourth English translation to be published. It was first published in two volumes by J. M. Dent in London and E. P. Dutton in New York and was reprinted 15 times by these publishers between then and 1968/69. The same translation was issued as a single volume by the Book Society in 1943, with an introduction by C. Day Lewis, and in 1958 the translation was distributed by Heron Books with an introduction by Nikolai Andreyev.

This was by no means Townsend's only translation. The year before *Anna Karenina* Dent in UK and Dutton in US published her translation of Turgenev's *Virgin Soil*, the last such translation to appear for over a hundred years, when my own translation was published by Alma Classics in 2014. Townsend's translation went through 14 printings between 1911 and 1976. She returned to Tolstoy with *Tolstoy for the Young* (1916) and the following year Alfred Knopf in New York rushed out her translation of Leonid Andreyev's novel *Confessions of a Little Man* which had only appeared in Russian the previous year. Both Andreyev and Tolstoy were represented in *Short Stories by Russian Authors* (Dent, 1934), to which Rochelle contributed an introduction. This was reprinted at least four times, most recently in 1982. In addition to these literary translations Rochelle also translated a tract by Leon Trotsky (*Whither Russia? Towards socialism or capitalism*), published in New York in 1926 and reprinted in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1973. Her co-author, Zinaida Vengerova, as we shall see, already had an indirect link with Rochelle and the choice of work on which the two women worked provides some small clue to the identity of a translator who, despite a considerable portfolio of high-quality work, remains, in a profession where anonymity is often the norm, more anonymous than most.

Almost nothing is known about the first twenty years of her life. Such evidence as we do have comes mainly from her death certificate, which gives her date of birth as May 5 1880 and her place of birth as Kiev, Russia. Whether this date is given by the Julian calendar, still operative in Russia in the nineteenth century, or the Western Gregorian calendar, is not stated. How she got to England, how she acquired her English is, as yet, unknown. Her documented life begins on 10 February 1900, when she married Charles Francis Townsend in St Pancras Parish Church. Her age is not given; she is merely described as a "minor", which, if her birth date is correct, she technically was, being under the age of twenty-one. The relevant entry in the parish register is an interesting document in several ways. For instance, she gives her name simply as "Rochelle Slavyanskaia", despite the fact that, when her name appeared in print, she was referred to as "Mrs R.S. Townsend" and the 1911 census records her forenames as Rochelle Sasha. This is rather odd; "Sasha" of course is a Russian diminutive (usually for Alexandra) and Russians do not have more than one forename. Was Rochelle perhaps known as Sasha when living in Russia? Or was she brought up in an Anglophone household where two forenames would have been quite normal? The census return of 1901 raises another question: what was her nationality? Under "where born" the 1901 census has the word "Russia" and then, in brackets, the word "naturalised" crossed out and replaced by the words "by marriage". So much is clear, but who were her parents? I have been unable to trace any mention of her mother. Her father, on the other hand, is recorded in the St Pancras register as "Tonia (presumably Anton) Slavyansky". This in itself is a pointer to her origins, since no Russian would refer to their parent in a formal document by the diminutive form of their name. The register contains a second reference to her father, presumably dictated by Rochelle herself: "By and with the consent of Tonia Slavyansky, the natural and lawful father of the aforesaid minor". The wording suggests that Rochelle was born out of wedlock to a Russian father and an unknown mother. Tonia Slavyansky is described as a translator, although I have not found any published translations attributed to him. It is possible that he was an interpreter rather than a translator, the Russian word (переводчик) being the same for both.

Rochelle's husband was Charles Francis Townsend, born in Hampstead on 26 July 1865, the eldest child, and elder of the two sons, of Charles Townsend, an education official and Harriet Townsend (née Overton). Charles Francis had two younger sisters, the elder of whom, Violet Mary Gwendoline, signed the register as a witness to her brother's marriage to Rochelle. Charles Francis was a chemist and was admitted as a fellow of the Chemical Society in March 1888. Later the same year he is recorded as a resident of San Francisco, though how long he remained there is not known. By the end of the century he had set up a business in the Strand as an analytical chemist together with Edward Frederick Teschemacher, grandson of the founder of the Chemical

Society. The business was wound up in June 1900 some four months after Charles' marriage to Rochelle. Charles' address was given as "Bastead Cottage, Ightham, in the county of Kent". The couple's first child, Charles Thoreau Townsend, was born on 15 November 1900. The boy's second name is a pointer to the left-wing views manifested by Rochelle later in life. The American essayist, abolitionist and advocate of "civil disobedience" was the subject of a biography by Henry Stephens Salt, published in 1890, which became popular in left-wing circles.

By 1901 the family had moved some eight miles north from Ightham to West View Road in the village of Farningham, now largely swallowed up by Swanley. The road still exists. Their household now included a servant Harriett Burr and Charles was describing himself as a "journalist and author" which probably reflected the success of his book *Chemistry for Photographers*. First published in 1897, it went through five editions by 1910 and is still available via the internet. A daughter, Beatrice, was born on 25 May 1902 and was possibly named for the joint-founder of the Fabian Society, Beatrice Webb..

The following year an event took place which was to have a major impact on the future of the Townsend family. In September 1903 a company was formed to build the first "garden city" in the UK at Letchworth and the land to do so was purchased. "Garden City", as the town was known at first, attracted many innovative thinkers, many of them left-wing in their sympathies, who saw in it a vision of the future. Charles Townsend is recorded as being one of two joint Honorary Secretaries of the Residents' Council as early as 1905. The family seems to have moved to Letchworth in 1907. Their seven-room, five-bedroom house, known as "The Orchard" was, and still is (as № 66), in Norton Road, in the former village of Norton, one of three villages incorporated into the Garden City. Charles had gardens designed by Barry Parker one of the two master planners of the Garden City.

This garden was the scene in the following year of open air performances of three plays Browning's *In a Balcony*, Lady Gregory's *Spreading the News* and *The Loan of a Lover*, were performed. Charles was clearly a keen amateur actor and is listed in one of the two casts for performances, in 1909, of the Letchworth Dramatic Society. The plays they performed were Tolstoy's *Ivan the Fool* and Thomas Hardy's *The Three Strangers*. The Tolstoy piece started life in 1886 as a literary fairy-tale in prose. An English translation was published in America as early as 1891. The Letchworth Dramatic Society may have simply adapted this translation, but it is tempting to think that Rochelle, who is completely anonymous during this decade, being presumably preoccupied with child care, had a hand in the translation and adaptation of the work.

Away from his recreational activities, Charles was the family breadwinner. The dominant ethos of the Garden City might be described as "practical idealism", and Charles now put his skills as an analytical chemist to practical use by designing a laundry (known as a power laundry) for the Garden City. He designed

the machinery and specified the chemicals to be used. Power laundries were a relatively new phenomenon and had the effect of taking the drudgery of washday out of the domestic environment and mechanizing it. Townsend was already editor of a trade journal entitled *The Power Laundry* and the author and editor of several spin-offs, notably *Chemistry for Laundrymen*, published in both UK and US in 1910.

It is not till 1911 that Rochelle reappears in the historical record. In a hint of her future political leanings she is recorded as being of the local branch of the socialist Fabian Society. She was still a member of that Society when the annual report came out in 1931. She, Charles and their two children (but no domestic servant) are also recorded as living at "The Orchard" in the 1911 census. Charles now describes himself simply as "Journalist" but no profession is entered for Rochelle. Charles records her nationality as "Russian", to which an official has added in brackets "resident" as well as the numerical code 860, indicating "Russian-born". Presumably the word "resident" means that she is a permanent UK resident married to a UK citizen and, as such, by an Act of 1844, has British nationality.

However, if the 1911 census entry suggests a stable family, it disguises reality. There now enters upon the scene Eleni Zompolides (1880-1958). English-born and educated, of Greek parentage, her speciality was designing letters and alphabets. She arrived in Letchworth in 1908 with the celebrated book binder Douglas Cockerell and in 1910 had her portrait painted by another Letchworth resident Harold Gilman. Known as "The Blue Blouse", the painting now hangs in Leeds City Art Gallery. Charles and Eleni began an affair and by 1912 she was living with him in the nearby village of Stotfold, in a substantial detached house known officially as Stotfold Bury, but unofficially as the "Townsend House" and was the subject of a painting by the Letchworth artist William Whitehead Ratcliffe. Their first child Ralph, was born in July 1912, to be followed by two daughters (Margaret in 1919 and Monica in 1924) and a second son, Christopher, born in 1921.

Now a single mother, Rochelle had to find a source of income. Fortunately the publisher J.M. Dent had built the Temple Press in Letchworth with the aim of producing the Everyman series of classic texts. Despite having no profession listed in the 1911 census, Rochelle was, as we have already seen, already translating two formidable texts for Dent's Everyman series, *Virgin Soil* and *Anna Karenina*. Ironically, Eleni Zompolides did much of her work for J.M. Dent.

Rochelle's next translating venture was to take her to London, where, in subsequent years she was to live and work. The Stage Society, a private society specializing in new and experimental drama, were putting on the first UK performance of Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* at the Aldwych theatre on 10/11 May 1914. The translation – the first of the play into English – was done by Rochelle. The production was widely, and generally favourably, reviewed, but only two reviews made any mention of the translation. The anonymous critic of

*The Times* observed that "Here and there the audience obviously laughed in the wrong place, an accident almost inevitable over any translation, which is bound now and then to slip unawares into a betrayal; but you did on the whole feel that you had got a fair notion of what the play was meant to be." Egan Mew in *Academy* liked the translation if not the production:

...Although the play cannot entertain or greatly convince us, we feel indebted to the Society for allowing us to see Mrs R.S. Townsend's able translation of Chekhov's work..."

Able it may well have been, but it has never been published. A typescript of it is held in the archives of the V&A Museum.

By 1918 Rochelle was living in Kensington, and she was to remain in London until 1950. In the 1920s she worked for the publisher Herbert Jenkins Ltd., famous for publishing the works of P.G. Wodehouse. In 1924, while working there, she came across a manuscript left in the outer office by an examiner called Harold Heslop (1898-1983). The manuscript in question was a novel *Goaf* (the word refers to the waste left in old mine workings), but Jenkins refused to publish it. However, Rochelle thought the novel would go down well in Russia and approached her friend Ivan Maisky, future Soviet ambassador to the UK but between 1925 and 1927 Counsellor in the Soviet Embassy. The novel was duly translated into Russian under the title *Под властью угля*, was published in 1926 and is said to have sold no fewer than 500,000 copies.. The translator was the aforementioned Zinaida Vengerova (1867-1941), a distinguished critic and translator. When Heslop's original text was finally published in 1934, he dedicated the book to both Vengerova and Rochelle Townsend.

The 1920s saw big changes in Rochelle's personal life. In 1921 her son, Charles Thoreau, went off to the University of British Columbia in Vancouver to do a BSc in Agriculture. He graduated in 1925 and thereafter moved into the food preservation industry in North America. He died in California on 7 April 1994 at the age of 92. Rochelle divorced Charles Francis in 1927, though she kept the name Townsend. In her petition she gave her patronymic as Petrovna, which makes her father Petr rather than Anton. I suspect she put down the first name that came into her head, forgetting what she had written 27 years earlier on her marriage certificate. Charles Townsend and Eleni Zompolides were married in early 1929 but Charles died on 12 August the same year. In his will he left a total of £3299 6s. 0d to his widow Eleni and to Charles Thoreau (described as a bacteriologist). He left nothing at all either to Rochelle or to his daughter Beatrice.

This was not the only blow suffered by Rochelle in 1929. On May 30 at the general election she stood as a candidate for the Labour Party in the

Wycombe constituency. This was the so-called "flapper election", the first in which all women over the age of twenty-one were entitled to vote. Rochelle's choice of Wycombe may not have been accidental. The incumbent Unionist MP was Major-General Sir Alfred William Fortescue Knox. He had been appointed military attaché to Russia in 1911, had witnessed the storming of the Winter Palace in 1917 and been attached to the anti-Bolshevik forces of Admiral Kolchak in 1919. He was a fluent Russian speaker and a fervent anti-communist. In the event he retained the seat comfortably; a Liberal came second and Rochelle third, with 8899 votes, 18.1 percent of those cast. It was her first and last foray into national politics. An earlier foray, into local politics in 1922, as a Labour candidate for Hammersmith borough council, was equally unsuccessful.

The following year, in May 1930, Rochelle's daughter Beatrice, excluded from her father's will, married Herbert Richard Charles Booth, a Dublin-born civil servant, in Shanghai. The couple appear to have lived abroad, settling finally in British Columbia. The choice of Canada was not wholly unexpected. In 1913 Herbert Booth had entered Canada from Vermont and in August 1915, giving his occupation as "student", had signed up for the Canadian Expeditionary Force, the forerunner of the Canadian Army. Rochelle, meanwhile, presumably continued to earn her living during the 1930s; her death certificate describes her as a newspaper journalist, but it is difficult to be more precise. We have a glimpse of her in 1937 and 1938 working at "Grand Buildings W.C.2". There were, and still are, numerous offices situated in this complex on the corner of Trafalgar Square and The Strand, but it is probably significant that the left-wing *Daily Herald* had had offices there since 1929.

In 1950 Rochelle's son-in-law died in Vancouver at the age of 57 and Rochelle, who had retired in 1946 and was now seventy years old, decided to join her widowed daughter. She sailed from Liverpool, bound for Quebec, on the *RMS Franconia* on 21 September 1950. Thereafter we lose sight of her, apart from three appearances on the electoral register for British Columbia. At some point she became a Canadian citizen, having spent the first twenty years of her life as a Russian citizen, and more than fifty years as a British citizen. She died in Vancouver General Hospital on 30 April 1970, a few days short of her ninetieth birthday. Her body was cremated. Beatrice herself, like her brother, lived to be over ninety, dying on 9 April 1995. She was survived by her son Michael Richard, born in Shanghai in 1931. He became a distinguished expert on the history of drama, mainly English drama, and held professorial chairs at Warwick University, the University of Guelph, and the University of Victoria, British Columbia, retiring from there in 1996. In 2008, addressing a conference in Richmond, Yorkshire, he referred to himself as living in "the wilds of Greece." Both Rochelle and Charles Francis were, in their different ways, prolific and successful authors, and Michael Richard (known professionally as Michael R Booth) has followed suit, being the author of

numerous books, articles and reviews. Both he, and the descendants of Charles Francis' second marriage, who live mainly in the Hertfordshire area, may be in possession of documents which hold the key to the many remaining gaps in Rochelle's biography. Only one putative photograph of her survives; it was published, unlabelled, on the ancestry.com website and, to judge by the ages of the children, was taken circa 1904.

So ended an extraordinary life, about the first twenty years of which we know next to nothing and about the last twenty years we know very little. There is, however, one tantalizing possibility of shedding some light on her early years. The most prominent person to bear the surname Slavyansky and to have links with both Kiev and Britain was the Russian singer and choirmaster Dmitry Alexandrovich Agrenev (1834 or 1836-1908). Because of the choir's traditional Slavonic repertoire and the historical Slavonic costumes they wore for performances, Agrenev was awarded the honorific title Slavyansky. The choir came to Britain for an extended tour in 1885-86 and performed for the Prince of Wales at Marlborough House and for Queen Victoria at Windsor Castle ( Agrenev was billed as Dmitri Slavyansky d'Agreneff). The choir visited Kiev three times (1869, 1887 and 1888) and Agrenev-Slavyansky conceived the idea of building in that city a vast concert hall to rival La Scala. The plans had to be scaled down for financial reasons but a concert hall was built on the Kreshchatik between 1891 and 1897. Years later, when it had been put to other uses, it was still known as the "Slavyansky House" (Дом Славянского).

Could this have some connection with Rochelle? If it does, it would add another strand to the story of a remarkable and mysterious woman.