

FLORENCE BARRINGTON

IN RUSSIA: 1917

Miss Florence Barrington was born in 1894, and was the daughter of Croker Barrington and the granddaughter of Sir Croker Barrington, the 4th Baronet. She received her early education in the national school at Barrington's Bridge. She was a well known breeder of Irish water spaniels, and lived for the last twenty years of her life at Clonshavoy House, Lisnagry. Florence was the last of the long line of Limerick Barringtons to live in the county. She died on 9 November, 1968, and is buried in the churchyard of St. Mary's Cathedral, Limerick.

Like many young women in these islands during the 1914-18 war, Miss Florence Barrington volunteered for service with the Voluntary Ambulance Division, behind the Russian lines. She worked with the Anglo-Russian Hospital, the headquarters of which were in Petrograd, in the residence of Prince Felix Yusupov. It was here that Rasputin was poisoned, an act which failed to work, and he was subsequently shot on 16 December, 1916. Yusupov was exiled to his estate, and no legal action was taken against the participants in Rasputin's murder – Grand Duke Dmitrii Pavlovich, Yusupov and V.M. Pariskevich, a conservative member of the Duma, who had delivered a passionate condemnation of Rasputin and his associates in mid-November. Rasputin's body was recovered from under the ice of the Neva River, into which it had been thrown, and privately buried in the presence of the Tsar, Tsarina and children in the grounds of the imperial residence. The death of Rasputin made little difference – Russia's political crisis continued.

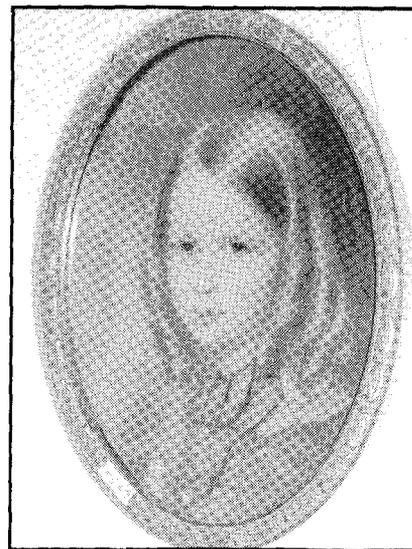
Miss Barrington left two written records of her experiences in the Russia of the last weeks of Nicholas II and the months preceding the Bolshevik Revolution of 7 November, 1917 – a diary of her journey from the capital Petrograd to Odessa and onwards to the Russian-Rumanian border, as well as the text of the address which she gave in late 1917 in Dublin on her return. Of the two documents, the diary is more graphic and closer to the realities of the war situation. The address, which was delivered at 58 Fitzwilliam Square, Dublin on 15 December, 1917, is more general and impressionistic.

Florence Barrington reached Russia in late 1916, rather frustrated by the lengthy delay in getting to the theatre of war. The end of 1916 had brought a severe deterioration in Russia's supply situation and a loss of morale and will to support the war effort then being directed by the Tsar himself at the Front.

The period from mid 1915 to mid-1916 had been marked by an



*Florence Barrington:
a childhood portrait,*



*Victoria Barrington:
a childhood portrait.*

by B.S. Faloon

improvement in Russia's mobilization of her resources for the war economy. This improvement did not stem from government action, which had been passive and highly bureaucratic in the first year of the war. It came rather as a result of what was called the self-

mobilization of industry. Industrialists, frustrated and impeded by the failure of the administrative machinery to come to grips with the supply needs for the Front, began to organize at central and city level so-called War Industry Committees to improve the flow of war supplies in their branches of industry and in the cities.



Clonkeen House, Murroe, where Florence spent much of her life.



The significance of the War Industry Committees was that they were unofficial and unsanctioned and provided a context for genuine patriotic endeavour in the war effort. These bodies included workers' representatives (unprecedented in Russian bureaucratic tradition), albeit a token number but yet a recognition of the emergence of a significant industrial working class in Russia – out of a total occupied population in 1913 of approximately 90 million, some 4 million were industrial workers. The War Industry Committees' contributions to the war effort, if also to the prosperity of private industrialists, were tolerated by the system if not officially approved.

By the end of 1916, Russia was in a very weak position – supplies of steel, coal, railway locomotives and rolling stock were severely depleted. Above all, the supply of food and goods to the urban population was quite inadequate and, by early 1917, the scene was set for the spontaneous street demonstrations which produced the February Revolution of 1917, the abdication of the Tsar and the creation of a Russian Republic under a Provisional Government, led by liberals.

Thus Florence Barrington reached Russia on the eve of a mass revolution which rejected the structures of Imperial Russia and was led by liberal constitutionalists. When she speaks of the Russian Revolution she means the February and not the October revolution.

Her diary begins in late 1916, and vividly portrays the difficulties for civilians and non-combatants in moving through Russia. She had to wait for weeks until the end of 1916 to leave Petrograd. She was aiming to reach a British hospital on the south-west front. No official was confident that she could reach Odessa and proceed onwards to Galatz and Ismail in Rumania.

Despite these difficulties, her travels took her to Petrograd in late 1916, and, after considerable delay, southwards to join the Anglo-Russian hospital in Ismail, via Odessa and Galatz. At her second attempt, having gone back to Odessa, she reached Galatz and went on to her final destination at Ismail. Here she immediately got involved in treating war-wounded patients and remained there until 1 September, 1917, when the English hospital formally terminated its activities by agreement with the Russians. She returned to Ireland by a very circuitous route via Murmansk, the North Cape, Norway and Sweden. The Finnish railway workers' strike of late 1917 barred her more direct route via Stockholm to England.

Miss Barrington's journey was by rail. The railways had been the leading sector in Russia's economic growth in the last two decades of the 19th century. Above all, they had stimulated the grain trade, the mainstay of the country's balance of payments. The buoyancy and



Medals awarded to Florence Barrington in Russia: 'For bravery M1263472, 4th degree (bottom left), and Nicholas II, 'Emperor and autocrat of all the Russians' (top right).

competitiveness of the Russian wheat and rye markets had engendered significant export earnings for the Empire and brought her trade balance into a sufficiently favourable situation to inspire confidence among foreign investors.

The test for the very extensive rail network, extending from the Baltic to the Black Sea and, since 1904, from western Poland to the Pacific port of Vladivostok, came in 1916. During that year, supplies of coal became inadequate, locomotives were immobilized and coal failed to leave the pitheads for the war zones.

Florence Barrington relates her S.W. Russian railway experiences thus:

'An Englishman dressed in Russian uniform came up and advised us to clear out, as all the civilians had already gone ... He advised us to get into the luggage train and we got into one of the trucks. It was fitted up for soldiers, with a stove in the centre and a ledge about the length of a man ran round each end. The soldiers slept underneath; we were on top of the ledge. A mixture of various people was going back (to Odessa). When you looked across you saw a row of boots opposite. We were packed like herrings in a tin. The truck was dirty and full of coal dust and one can imagine how black we all were.

Next morning with a tea kettle of warm water, we proceeded to wash, with the aid of handkerchiefs. In the middle of this the train started and we had to move off at once. The

carriages are very difficult to climb into, being very high from the ground, but some soldiers pulled us up and we got in again. The truck, however, was only shunting, but we were unable to complete our toilette'.

She commented favourably on Odessa, noting the symmetry and order of a young city, founded by a Frenchman, Le Duc de Richlieu in the last decade of the 18th century. Odessa is affectionately referred to by its natives as 'Mama'. It was a city of over 40 ethnic groups and as many languages, the heartland of Russian Jewish life and culture. It is portrayed vividly in the works of Isaac Babel – the creator of the gangster 'Benya Krik'. Odessa was a distinctive Russian city, straddling the Slavonic, Jewish and Ottoman world around the Black Sea.

Miss Barrington was clearly a young lady of energy and initiative. She became interpreter in the Ismail hospital, which she reached in late February, 1917.

'One of my jobs was that of interpreter – one of the chiefs and myself were the only persons who could do this. We treated Serbian orderlies, Russian patients and Rumanians. The Russians included Tatars, Estonians, Letts (i.e. Latvians), all with languages of their own, also Poles, with every mixture of languages. We then got some new Orderlies from Macedonia, but they could speak nothing but Rumanian(?) and we had to show them what to do, but most of the Tatar patients could



... speak Russian. Very few of the Russians, however, understood Estonian'(!).

It was quite a challenge for her to cope in the wards with the multi-lingual mix of subjects of the Tsar, who were all Russian citizens, belonging to different nationalities. Russian served as a lingua franca, and Florence studied it seriously:

'We have been working very hard at Russian and I quite see myself being dragged off to interpret – to-day I had to explain to the cook to buy legs of mutton and not shoulders and what to do with the soup.'

Ismail, Florence's ultimate destination, lay on the southern bank of the mouth of the Danube, across the river from Rumania. Rumania had remained neutral between the Entente powers and the central powers, until the summer of 1916, hoping to make some gains at Bulgaria's expense. By the time of Miss Barrington's arrival in the autumn of 1916 in Petrograd (present-day Leningrad), Rumania had been induced to enter the war on the Allied (Franco-British) side. She refers to General Brusilov in her diary: the Brusilov offensive, which involved a break through the Austrian lines in Bukovina, along the Rumanian border, resulted in no strategic gains of significance, although it had initial successes, and Russia had occupied some 100,000 square miles and taken over 400,000 prisoners. By September it had petered out. Its long-term importance, however, was in the gains against Austria, her decision to abandon her offensive in Italy and its contribution to Austria's disintegration. The Brusilov offensive finally induced Rumania to declare war on Austria, but in Russia there were severe criticisms of the failure of the country's High Command to take full advantage of the breakthrough in Galicia, and a decline in troop morale ensued. Rumania was overrun by the enemy by the end of 1916 – three-quarters of her territory in all, including Bucharest, was occupied. The Rumanian army held a mere fraction of the eastern front, now extended by some 250 miles and predominantly in Russian hands.

This was the situation Florence was moving into in early 1917 and accounts for the tremendous ethnic mix she encountered. Her comments on war medical arrangements are graphic and revealing. On the eve of World War I, Russia enjoyed a reasonable medical care system. In fact, the *zemstvo* or local government medical system attracted attention in the rest of Europe. The writer Chekhov, for example, worked in *zemstvo* medicine in the Crimea, as did Mikhail Bulgakov, author of *Master and Margherita*.

The Anglo-Russian Hospital had two or three field hospitals. The one she eventually arrived in towards the end of February, 1917, was at Ismail. The one at the headquarters in Petrograd



Metropolitan Alexis.

impressed her:

'The Hospital is very well fitted up with an X-Ray room and Operating Theatre. Unfortunately in the Russian Red Cross system they have no Convalescent Homes; the result is that they have got to keep the patients in the hospitals until they are nearly well and can go home, therefore you have a very large percentage of convalescent patients. This is a great mistake in a well fitted hospital.

We had plenty of work to do there. In the Russian Hospitals there is a different system in connection with bandaging the patients than that which obtains in this country. In the Russian Hospitals the cases are taken out of the wards to be dressed. By the time this had been done and the patients brought back to the ward the beds are found to be occupied by fresh cases. It is of course a great convenience to have the dressing done in the ward and thus minimize labour.'

In Ismail, which she reached on 16 February, they had to start from scratch. Her diary for 22 February, 1917, notes:

'We are now in the throes of getting this place ready. We have been scrubbing for three days and my arms are so stiff I can hardly move, but they will be all right to-morrow as I am used to it. We had to knock the ice off the beds before scrubbing them. This is a most lovely building, 3 big wards and 2 small ones and plenty of room for staff and stores, etc. We will have about 120 beds, Matron, 4 sisters, and 3 VAD. ... We have Serbian orderlies, one or two of whom can speak a little English. An Italian has joined us as Interpreter, he knows very little English, not much Russian, but speaks French very well ... The town is quite large, but looks very deserted. There are two very swanky Boulevards, where you can walk up and down with your best girl, and a band plays in the evening.

Free time was scarce but pleasant in Ismail: she records on 26 February, 1917:

'We had a most amusing evening on Friday. We got an invitation from one of the regiments to a family dance, so some of us went after supper to



represent the Hospital. First we had some tea and cakes, then we danced waltzes and the rest danced Polish dances, and we also had a kind of cotillon which was quite fun – then some of them produced Balalaikas and played tunes on them, so I asked them to play Russian songs, some of them are lovely. Then some of the Russian officers danced a Russian dance awfully well. After each thing we tried to go home, but were not permitted and they would have been very offended if we had. We had to eat a lot of pancakes – they were excellent as it was just before Lent. Randal has had indigestion ever since. After the pancakes we danced a mazurka and then went home'.

Miss Barrington, a few days later, had the distinction of receiving the first wounded man at the hospital (7 March, 1917).

Her address in Fitzwilliam Square continues the story:

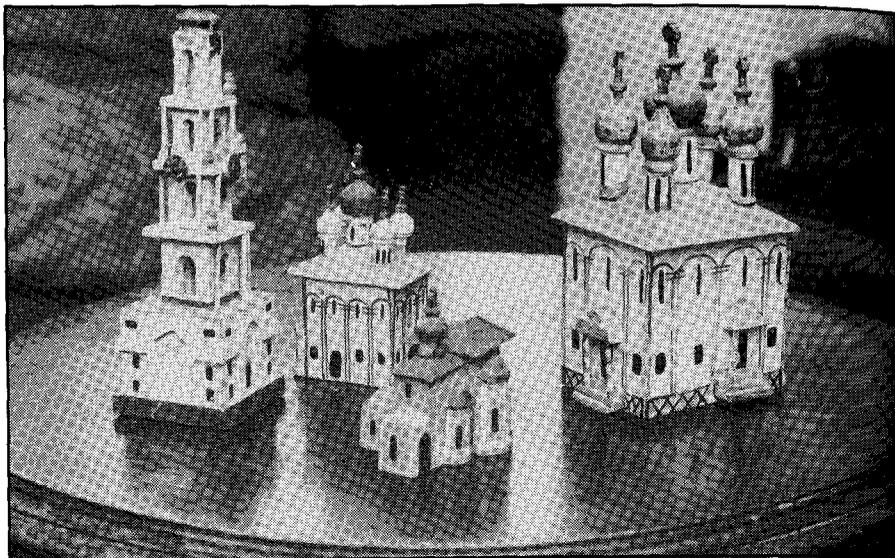
'In four days we had 60 patients at Ismail, nearly all relapsing fever and pneumonia cases, who had been attached to the Division which was then fighting along this part of the Rumanian front ... We worked in Ismail from February (1917) to September and had a good few medical and a certain amount of surgical cases ... The worst of the wounded cases here were the result of the air raids. We had German aid raids very often; on April 13th the biggest took place. I was just finishing my report when we were bombed. We had an awful lot of wounded in that night and were very busy and kept constantly bringing down patients to the new ward'.

As a result of this work, Florence Barrington and her colleagues were awarded a number of medals for their courage and devotion to duty.

In August, the two units on the Rumanian front had worked over a year, under doctors Berry and Klemov. The Russian Red Cross were informed that they wished to hand over the 'English' hospital as a going concern and would leave by September. The send-off ceremony clearly pleased Miss Barrington:

'The naval admiral came down from Odessa with a band which played "God Save the King". They, however, only knew the first line, which was played over and over again: all stood to attention'.

After a week in Odessa, Florence Barrington and her colleagues returned home through Petrograd and onwards via Archangel(!) and the North Cape. A very long journey, indeed. It took five days in Petrograd, now under a liberal 'Provisional Government', to get passports for the return to western Europe. Miss Barrington observed that 'the tram service in the Russian capital



Models of Kremlin cathedrals.



Clonshav House, Lisnagry, the home of Florence Barrington.

was rather better as a result of the Revolution'. Her reaction to returning to Petrograd is revealing:

'On the outward trip (from England) to Petrograd we were told that Russia would win the War. When we got there we saw that that would be impossible. The Russians have a habit of keeping putting things off, and when ordered to do anything, they always say 'zaftra' which means "tomorrow".'

At her lecture, Miss Barrington exhibited articles from Russia, including a heavy Bulgarian shell-case, tablecloths, ikons, medals, a model of the new Moslem mosque in Petrograd, wooden spoons, birch bark shoes and a pair of red boots.

In proposing a vote of thanks to Florence Barrington, Justice Ross, president, and the chairman of the St. John's Ambulance Corps in Ireland, paid a tribute to the way in which VAD work was carried on by young women such as Miss Barrington, and referred to the dangers attached to the work in the field. The vote of thanks was carried with acclamation, and a collection taken in aid of the Red Cross fund.

The Irish dimension in Florence Barrington's Russian and Rumanian

experiences was represented by the presence of five Irish orderlies in Reni, and a meeting with a Russian soldier who could sing the first two lines of 'It's a long way to Tipperary'. One of the orderlies, she wrote in her diary, 'had a grand Dublin brogue'.

In her travels she had a keen eye for local colour. She admired the sledges in Odessa in January, 1917: 'They are so nice, they nearly all have bells and lots of them have bright coloured nets over the horses, we think to keep the snow off them'. Coming up to Ismail the water made 'a noise like breakers on the beach at Lahinch'. She writes of the wartime diet: schchi (cabbage soup), black bread, buckwheat porridge (kasha). On her way out to her work, she had visited the sites around Petrograd – Pavlovsk and Tsarskoe Selo with their royal palaces, and, above all, Russia's oldest monastery at Zagorsk, the Trinity, St. Sergei monastery. One orderly she met was a grand-nephew of Lord Justice Holmes.

All in all, these pages of her diary and her address in Dublin reflect the experience and commitment of a dedicated and cultivated young Irishwoman at the time of the Great War.