

## **Locked windows, locked minds: the fictional portrayal of the last Romanovs**

**an article by Janet Ashton**

*A novel is balanced between a few true impressions and the multitude of false ones that make up most of what we call life. It tells us that for every human being there is a diversity of existences, that the single existence is itself an illusion in part.* - Saul Bellow

*The past exudes legend: one can't make pure clay of time's mud. There's no life that can be recaptured wholly, as it was. Which is to say that all biography is ultimately fiction.*  
- Bernard Malamud

Pretty inevitably, the family of Nicholas II makes an appearance in various works of imaginative literature. The drama of these individuals' lives and the horror of their deaths mean that they are attractive subjects for novels and plays; and the colourful era they lived in on its own ensures that they feature as background figures in innumerable historical novels. Their appearances in books and plays range from brief cameo to central character, and what follows is an attempt to describe and analyse how they are depicted in a selection of these works. Full reviews of the books themselves are sometimes beyond the scope of this article, since several of them have very little to do with the Imperial family at all, but the creative presentation of the family on its own says much about them as individuals and historical characters. Their fictional representation ranges from insightful portraits that can genuinely add to our understanding of them as people, through loosely bundled collections of stereotypes that speak to us mainly about what we want them to represent for us, to completely ludicrous ciphers that do no more than fill a hole in a character list.

There appears to be a veritable cottage industry, for example, in sub-Sherlock Holmesian potboilers which feature historical personages, usually as participants in historical events which never occurred. A full list of books and index of their subjects is available online at [www.schoolandholmes.com](http://www.schoolandholmes.com), but a few indicative examples of the Romanov-related stories probably need mentioning here.

M.J. Trow, one of the most prolific of the authors involved, has put Nicholas into several of his works. These books make no claim to be great literature, and the characters are at best crude stereotypes of the person they represent, inserted into a story complete with hilariously heavy-handed historical references. Thus George V, entertaining his cousin the Tsar in 1912, breaks his cameo appearance to lean from a window and call out to the Prince of Wales,

“David! Who's that woman you're with?..... Wallace?! Wallace who?!”

George and his cousin Nicky are peppery British aristocrats, throwing their heads back to sigh about women drivers and sending their body-guards to despair with their insouciance over security. It is probably fair to say though that veracity is the last thing that needs to be on the mind of the author of this type of disposable fiction.....

John Lescroart's novel *Rasputin's revenge* comes slightly closer to reality – though only slightly! His hilarious romp concerns a series of murders carried out in wartime Petersburg with the apparent aim of demoralising the Tsar so he will reach a separate peace with Germany. Holmes's illegitimate son Auguste Lupa and a French diplomat briefly engaged as tutor to Alexei at an improbably grand court are called in to sort things out, and slowly the truth emerges: Rasputin is behind the murders, hoping to lure Holmes's son into a trap and have him killed, in revenge for the killing of his own real father at Reichenbach Falls....Rasputin is of course the secret son of Holmes's great enemy, Professor Moriarty!

John Lescroart seems to have a reasonable grasp of the geography of St Petersburg, but little of the architecture, dropping in mentions of the “gables” and “courtyard” of the Winter Palace, in which half the government apparently resides along with the imperial children. Nit-picking over the factual errors in unserious novels is always a fatuous exercise, but some of the anachronisms in this one leap out at the reader, and are actually pretty funny. There is “Commissar” Boris Minsky, for a start, the great friend of the Tsar and early murder victim, not to mention a whole range of characters with family ties to the imperial family but bizarrely proletarian names: Minsky, for one; Ivan Kapov, and so forth. Some of the names have a vaguely east-European feel but are certainly not Russian (neither do they obviously hale from any other country I can think of): “Duke Pavlaya Beretska”; “Prosecutor Anaxagoras Beria”. (I am not sure whether this last is a joke, or whether the author was so little worried about authenticity that he grabbed one of the few Russian surnames that he knew, regardless of connotation). Titles crop up in the oddest places: while Kapov, Minsky, and other close associates of the family have none, there is a mysterious “Grand Duke Sergei Zostov” floating around.

Nicholas in this novel is much as his sympathizers always have him: gentle and naïve, “goodness personified”, and his wife – less commonly - is disarmingly fragile, inspiring protectiveness among the men in her life. Towards the end of the novel however the stubborn steel in her character emerges and she is more the traditional Alexandra. Though war is on, they entertain lavishly, giving multiple-course dinners featuring the finest foods, and flitting back and forth between Tsarskoe and the Winter Palace, where the children apparently live most of the time in isolation from their parents. The unlikely hero of the piece is their son Alexei, a self-possessed and surprisingly well-educated boy, who banters with his tutor about philosophy and issues independent orders to ministers. This is far-removed from the historical Alexei, whose illness interfered with education and whose tendency to idleness even when well drove his tutors to despair, but perhaps the character is just an extreme version of the preternaturally mature and thoughtful boy in several of the romantic novels on the family.

### ***And thus to these romantic novels.....***

The imperial family do, naturally, feature in a great many historical romances set in late Tsarist Russia. Almost without fail, they come across in these books as the most perfect family which ever lived: beautiful mother, gentle father, four laughing girls and a sick boy who is sensitive and “wise beyond his years”. Two typical examples are the Danielle Steel novels *Zoya* and *Granny Dan*. The former, whose eponymous heroine is supposed to be a childhood friend of the Grand Duchess Marie, contains mildly more character

development, and the imperial family are permitted to speak and give an impression of themselves. Steel seems to have done her reading: she is reasonably familiar with the details of the imperial childrens' lives, even mentioning the Saturday visits to Olga Alexandrova. Where her picture becomes implausible is in its depiction of the family as an almost laid-back, happy-go-lucky band of people, with the girls permitted to have social lives and their mother acting with easy grace towards people outside the family. This is a competent romantic novel if you like that sort of thing, and the idea that Tsarist Russia was a perfect, sunny world swept away by evil seems to appeal to plenty.

The other book, *Granny Dan*, is far sketchier in every respect. The Romanov family are in this too, handing out bounty in the form of a summer cottage given to the young ballerina who is the heroine, and worrying over her illness to the extent of sending their own doctor to treat her. None of them utters a line, however, and since the book doesn't even describe any of them physically they remain decidedly ghost-like characters. There is a moment of unintentional humour: the young doctor falls in love with the ballerina, and when he gets her pregnant though he is already married, Tsar Nicholas sympathetically offers to expedite the situation for them! – The unlikelihood of anyone who found themselves in that situation at the court of Nicholas II meeting with anything other than horror and dismissal does not trouble the author here.

Natasha Borovsky's *Daughter of the nobility* is of the same romantic genre, and although she allows the family a few more dimensions and even moments of discord (claiming for example – as many novelists do – that several of the children secretly disliked Rasputin) her characters are fairly stereotypical nevertheless. The heroine of the book, Tatyana Petrovna (the heroines of such novels are often called Tatyana) is the classic wild skinny naughty girl who wants a career (medicine) and who is modestly astonished when she grows up to be a beauty as well. The Grand Duchesses feature during her childhood mainly as foils to show how wonderful she is: these rather timid, well-behaved little imperial children fall at her feet, and their brother has a crush on her (the heroines of Danielle Steel's Russian novels are marvelous with Alexei too, of course). She is Tatiana Nikolaievna's best friend and her father – equally implausibly - is Nicholas's, and warns him frequently that he is on a doomed political course. In that sense the novel is one shade more sophisticated than Danielle Steel's, because although a lost aristocratic lifestyle is seen through rose-tinted glasses the author does not deny its darker side, and doesn't deny either Nicholas and Alexandra's own role in maintaining this dark side by clinging stubbornly to autocracy. Alexandra, who facilitates Tatyana's desired medical training, is gentle and understanding one moment but imperious the next, rebuking the heroine for making too great a show of herself at times. Nicholas is more straight-forward: talkative and kind, taking wrong decisions because he is too weak to resist conflicting advice. The secretive, stubborn side of the side of the Tsar, the side which was convinced that he and he alone was right and that he was accountable only to God, is something that novelists usually prefer to ignore. If anyone is to be imbued with this sensibility, it will be the fictionalized Alexandra.

The curious thing about all of these romantic novels is that although they aim to transport the reader back to a lost world, none of them is very hot on description. I didn't read one

which made me feel as if I was there in the room with the characters, seeing what they saw and touching the things they touched.

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***There are also books the critics like.....***

The imperial family also put in incidental appearances in more elevated genres of literature.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn is professedly halfway through completing a quartet of novels set in the First World War. With the aid of contemporary advertisements, newspaper reports and songs, and through the story of his characters' lives, he paints a powerful picture of Russia on the brink of the abyss; of a society that must have seemed stranger and more lost when he started the books in the 1970s than it does now, post-Communism. The main protagonists are ordinary people, usually fictional characters, but the subject matter calls for the odd intrusion by historical personages. He has Nicholas appear as a background presence in *August 1914*, received exclusively through other peoples' perceptions of him. This picture is conventionally contemptuous and not always factually accurate. Solzhenitsyn for example holds Nicholas responsible for the appointment of General Yanushkevich, representing this act as one of spectacular incompetence ("how could he disappoint the charming, blue-eyed Emperor, who was as shy as Yanushkevich himself, and admit that he knew nothing at all about the job?") The reality was of course that Yanushkevich came as a package with Nikolasha as C.-in C., and was Nikolasha's man.

The second volume of Solzhenitsyn's Red Wheel quartet is *November 1916*. This was written some years after the previous book, and he seems in the meantime to have gained access to a greater range of primary sources. Both Nicholas and Alexandra feature here, complete with their own thoughts based very closely on their war-time letters. The Tsar therefore is a more nuanced though possibly no less incompetent character than in the first book, dreaming of escape at the Front from the horrors of his position as Emperor and the torments of his son's haemophilia ("All night long the father could hear the little boy's groans, mingling with the howling of the wind outside. Those groans made the father want to sob out loud or to take flight."). It is a deeply pitying portrayal of a man enslaved by routine and unsure which way to turn, but this time without contempt.

Alexandra is pathetic in her way too, struggling on with her duties though racked by ill-health. Several considerably slighter novels portray her this way too, but there is something unique about Solzhenitsyn. He doesn't romanticise Alexandra as these other novels do for her nursing while pitying her as tragically deluded in her political activities; he admires her. To this born-again monarchist, Alexandra was apparently fighting a valiant battle against her husband's slow slide into apathy and breakdown. He depicts her rather as she occasionally did herself: that she and she alone knew what was needed while Russia was at war, and those men within the Duma who shouted for responsible government and claimed that the war was being mismanaged were deeply unpatriotic to so do when Germany was at the gates. To Solzhenitsyn's Nicholas, the Duma is a puzzle, ever demanding, never appeased. ("He sadly reviewed in his mind the long line of ministers he had sacrificed in his efforts to please the insatiable Duma... And still he had

not done enough to please them. Instead their importunities had become fiercer and more frenzied than before. So why had he made any concessions at all?") and the author's voice itself comes in at places to support the government, most notably in his description of the attacks in the Duma that effectively opened the floodgates against the regime. Solzhenitsyn views this as frankly libelous: not just to the Empress who was effectively accused of treason, but to the whole regime indicted for incompetence. His description of the Duma speeches is simply littered with sarcastic asides against the deputies. ("Miliukov: 'On June 26....' Solzhenitsyn: It was actually a week later, but the professor of history always got dates mixed up." ... "Behold, the power of parliamentary oratory! However gratuitous, however disingenuous it is, once pronounced it hardens into granite: the Tsaritsa was working for a separate peace!... Obviously, once such hints were dropped, the leader of the Duma opposition had the right to accuse the Russian government of treason!")

Solzhenitsyn's portrayal of Nicholas and Alexandra is easily the most subtle and insightful of any novelist, entering even into a lengthy exposition of the relationship between the two, complete with the thesis that Nicholas's ambivalence about his wife's advice on ministerial appointments was born not of feeling that she was often mistaken but of mild resentment at her ability as he saw it always to be right. Solzhenitsyn as always evokes time and place most powerfully by taking his reader straight to the heart of his characters' mental world.

Another enormous Russian novel which features the imperial family is the earlier *Rasputin*, by Ivan Nazhivin. As with Solzhenitsyn, the imperial family are incidental characters brought in to set the historical stage. Once again, the dominant character among them is Alexandra (one barely notices Nicholas is even there), but Nazhivin is certainly not an admirer. He does portray her as understanding the threats to the regime far better than her cipher of a husband, but unlike Solzhenitsyn does not credit her with either wisdom or intelligence. She is 'of weak intellect and little education', and only 'instinctively, hysterically' grasps the threats facing them. This Alexandra gets her way by throwing herself down in fits of hysterics. Nazhivin reflects what was probably the favourite popular image of her immediately after the revolution, heavily influenced by rumour and by forgeries such as *Anna Vyrubova's secret diary*. The more dubious political affiliations of this family are emphasised; even Alexandra's love for the swastika is interpreted as an anti-Semitic gesture, although it certainly did not have that meaning before 1920. This is a novel written by an émigré who apparently has as little time for the imperial government as he does for the Bolsheviks, and his melodramatic depiction of the Emperor and Empress spoils what is in other respects rather a good book with fully-realised characters. The eponymous Rasputin actually comes across as a more complex person, though the temptation to stereotype him must have been enormous.

Jeffrey Gibian's *All the Russias* attempts a Solzhenitsyn-esque sweep too. This is a recent British novel which like Solzhenitsyn and Nazhivin looks at the closing years of the Tsarist regime from the perspective of numerous characters, both historical and invented. This volume (one of four planned) covers specifically the years 1881-ca. 1896. It is obviously a first novel, with sometimes rather clunky stream-of-consciousness text ("she had been drifting away but at the shore's edge of this longed-for release, so tenderly

whispered the quiet touch of his life. Ever there. Insistent. Touch telling of that which endures and is true. Touch telling of that which waits, so sure, so pure”), but it manages a sympathetic portrait of the imperial couple without in any sense apologising for the terrible sins of the regime (several of the main protagonists are Jewish). Less insightful than Solzhenitsyn, Gibian tends to depict the Emperor and Empress as little lost sheep, clinging to one another for reassurance in their terrible, bewildering position. Up to a point, this is accurate, but his Nicholas and Alix are a little *too* innocent and ignorant, a little *too* much at the mercy of other peoples’ lies about the true state of Russia, a little *too* prone to sudden nasty shocks about the world they inhabit. The result is a certain lack of plausibility in their characters.

Nicholas also earns a mention in several other serious novels about the last years of the old regime. He is not a character as such, in the sense that he does not play an active or speaking role in the story, but since the very idea of Nicholas has the power to influence the thinking and behaviour of important characters, some of these books deserve inclusion here.

By and large, the Tsar excites bewilderment or even contempt in intelligent protagonists. Thus the Grand Dukes and ministers in John Elliot’s *Blood on the snow* (a novel about Father Gapon and the events of 1905) muse on Nicholas’s frustrating inscrutability to everyone who knows him: this is of course an accurate reflection of how most around him saw him. More harshly, the eponymous hero of acclaimed Estonian novelist Jaan Kross’s *Professor Martens’ departure* regards Nicholas as a “chicken brain” and “milksop” taking capricious decisions based on poor advice from men like the Kaiser. Contemptuously, Martens refers to his Emperor as “Nicky”, as he spends a long train journey musing on his own life and work at the periphery of the government.

Both Kross’s book and Elliot’s convey the terrible helpless position in which men like Professor Maartens found themselves, perceiving clearly that the Empire was heading for a precipice, but frustrated by the Emperor’s very character from making a consistent contribution towards helping sort things out. For Professor Martens, his own position is also a reflection of his own hypocrisy, since by serving Nicholas he colludes in the government he despises and in the imperial oppression of his own homeland Estonia: his sense of self-disgust underlies his sneers at the Tsar. Jaan Kross is frequently tipped as a likely winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature, and his purpose in writing his rhetorical historical fiction has little to do with wishing to present an objective view of the last Russian Emperor. Much of his work is allegorical, using the Tsarist regime to make points about the Soviet government which at the time of writing could not be openly expressed.

Rebecca West’s *The birds fall down*, like *Professor Marten’s departure*, involves a train journey, and long thought-provoking conversations between political opponents. One of the conversants is a Russian monarchist, who despite his own unjust exile at the Tsar’s hands remains completely devoted to his Emperor and argues his case in religious terms. The exile, Nikolai Nikolaievich, sees Nicholas II as the epitome of the mythical long-suffering Russia, for whom wrong and even unjust decisions are a necessary part of his role as sacrificial lamb for the nation. He even goes so far as to argue that the Emperor had surely suffered more through exiling an innocent man than that man himself!

It goes without saying that West's subtle understanding of this peculiar mindset raises her novel levels above others written by slighter talents of a basically liberal persuasion, many of which tend to be reductionist about the intelligence or motivation of monarchists.

In at least one book though the idea of the Tsar plays a truly sinister role. Bernard Malamud's *The fixer* is based on the horrible story of the Beilis affair, which saw Nicholas turn a blind eye to and even collude with anti-semitic local authorities when they had an innocent Jewish man imprisoned without trial for the ritual murder of a Christian child. In the course of powerful and moving book, which is as much about any individual's attempts to come to terms with meaningless suffering as it about racist injustice in tsarist Russia, Malamud's protagonist, Yakov Bok, meets Nicholas in his dreams and attempts to plead with him. This Nicholas mentions his own role as sufferer for the nation; but unlike West's Tsar he suffers not through his own actions but through the actions of those who offer opposition to the Christian state – even when that opposition is imaginary! The dream Nicholas primly tells Bok that he is a loving Tsar, a devoted husband and father who feels horror that his beloved Russia must be tortured by Jews. Rejected, hopeless and disgusted, Bok responds that Nicholas's "love" is nothing more than sentimentality if he can stand by and watch innocents suffer without feeling. Thus in a few short paragraphs Malamud knocks seven shades of hell out of the latter-day myth that a monarch who sees himself as a Christian sufferer above all must necessarily be a good and benevolent person. Nicholas's sorrow for Russia is perhaps a little like Lord Eldon's in P. B. Shelley's poem *The mask of anarchy*: a self-righteous crocodile grief which hurts the world more than it hurts him:

His big tears, for he wept well  
Turned to mill-stones as they fell  
And the little children, who  
Round his feet played to and fro,  
Thinking every tear a gem,  
Had their brains knocked out by them.

Last but not least, there is one recent novel in which the idea of the murdered imperial family plays as important a role as the idea of Nicholas in the novels about revolutionary Russia. In *The pretender*, Mary Morrissy's fictionalization of the life of Anna Anderson, memories merge as the protagonists - Franziska Schankowska and the Grand Duchess Anastasia - begin to think themselves unconsciously into one another's shoes. A young woman in a Berlin mental hospital has no idea of her true identity, but remembers a family with several sisters and an all-important little brother. From here, with the aid of newspaper pictures and the respectful treatment of fellow inmates at her asylum, it is a small step to concluding that she is really the Grand Duchess, sole survivor of the Ekaterinburg massacre. She starts to recall the murder, and then the days in prison before that, looking out into the street and wondering how it might feel to have been born an ordinary peasant girl. This scene, Anastasia dreaming of a different life, is the author's device for introducing Franziska's story: the tale of her hard days in war-time Berlin, the death of her fiancé, her own miscarriage following a factory explosion, and her brief spell

as a prostitute, forced up against a wall by an itinerant Russian soldier named Alexander Tchaikovsky, who tells her that he has a diamond and pearl necklace belonging to the Grand Duchess Anastasia. Finally the book steps back still further to Franziska's childhood in Prussian-occupied Poland and the central tragedy which could be the original and compelling reason for her wish to lose her own identity and become the personification of violated innocence, only survivor of the most perfect family that ever lived. The reader, influenced by the results of the DNA testing on the real life Anderson, is tempted to conclude that this is what has happened. "The pretender" is a novel, though, and careful reading allows for the alternative interpretation: that the violated Grand Duchess has invented a history for herself in which she was simply a Polish peasant girl imagining herself a Grand Duchess. This is a superb novel about identity and the search for meaning, and the working-class Berlin in the 1920s most hauntingly evoked as the backdrop to Franziska's sad youth. Several of the novels examined in this article succeed supremely well in setting the scene, either through describing their characters' mental world, or through laying out the political or social context, or both. Mary Morrissy's book, though, is the strongest of all on sheer tactile detail: the grit and grime of the physical environment are the most striking feature of her writing.

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Moving on now to books in which the imperial family as people play a slightly more central role, there are of course innumerable works about their imprisonment and murder. This leaves aside for the moment the equally huge catalogue of rescue stories.

***The last days.....***

Roberto Pazzi's *Searching for the emperor* is a haunting account of a fictional regiment's hunt for the imprisoned imperial family, a race against time to prevent their murder. The story of their progress is interspersed with views of the family itself, broiling in a psychological hothouse behind the walls of the Ipatiev house. Considerable liberties are of course taken with fact in a book which ends when Tatiana poisons her family and the regiment turns into birds, but the author seems to be trying to stick to a plausible picture of the personalities involved. Nicholas is the most sharply drawn character in the family and the majority of the chapters about their days in Ekaterinburg are written from his perspective. He is a dreamer, enmeshed in his memories and in the possibilities of what might have been, and it is a far from unsympathetic picture. Alexandra on the other hand is half mad, full of spells and incantations and whispering constantly the need for him to act, to do something, until Dr Botkin silences her with an injection. The couple are entirely emotionally detached from one another, and she is cold and distant with the children too, rebuking their son for playing with the dogs in case he catches something. This is not an accurate picture of the animal-loving Alexandra at all, but it chimes well with her up-tight popular image. The children who make the strongest impressions are Alexei, a dreamer like his father, locked in his imaginary world with imaginary friends, and Tatiana, the difficult complex one, bewitched by Rasputin's ghost. Neither is particularly true to life, and I can't help feeling that this lonely self-sufficient Alexei is a

lot more attractive than the real one, but they make a wonderful book, airless and dream-like.

Howard Barker's thought-provoking play *Hated nightfall* is also based on the murder of the family. There is less obvious correlation between his protagonists and the real family of Nicholas II – Barker has only three children in his imperial family, for a start, and all names have been changed – but various character traits bear a relationship to a certain idea of the originals. The character Griselda, an affectionate and mildly rebellious younger daughter, is an obvious amalgam of Marie and Anastasia, while the dignified educated Helen clearly represents Olga and Tatiana. The father of these children is a pathetic character bewildered by his failure in life; his wife intelligent and unfulfilled. The former is a common enough view of Nicholas, but the Alexandra figure is interesting for being far more functional and more of a catalyst for events than her usual representation in books about the imprisonment or murder. As in *Searching for the Emperor* this family is falling apart under the strain of imprisonment, but rather than retreat into a dream world of the past the characters turn on one another and seize every opportunity to take advantage of new situations. Hence Griselda and her mother both offer themselves to the tutor Dancer, a symbol of vitality and the “common people”. Dancer is the real catalyst of the play, ostensibly carrying out the wishes of the government in murdering the prisoners, but in reality pursuing his own agenda in his personal relationship with the tormented family.

Roberto Pazzi's regiment of birds is delusional, but the book remains guardedly monarchist, with all the honour and idealism vested in these, Nicholas's supporters, and the sensitive Emperor apparently a victim of his position in life. Barker's on the other hand oozes with contempt for the Imperial government and depicts the family as a sort of monstrosity, cocooning itself in insipidity atop the blood and bones of its countrymen. Alexandra's real-life delusions about Nicholas's role as Tsar feature here when “Caroline” the Empress sighs to her husband that she feels their only sin has been one of loving too much, of being too gentle. Dancer attempts roughly to disillusion her on this score. To Barker, even the famous love of this family for one another is as saccharine a delusion as “Caroline's” thoughts on the monarchy. It all falls apart under the cold glare of Dancer's eyes.

*The kitchen boy*, by Robert Alexander, is the most recent example of the imprisonment genre of literature. Unlike either of the above, it is straight-forward and naturalistic in style, and will certainly not upset any admirers of the family as individuals. Concentrating upon events within the house in the last few weeks of the Romanovs' lives, it tells their story through the purported memories of the kitchen boy Leonid Sednev, who observes a gentle, informal and loving family suffering at the hands of its torturers, the guards. There are no attempts to get inside the heads of any of the family, but the picture as seen from the outside is a touching one, with moments of unadulterated playful joy for the children, and of tenderness or passion between their parents to relieve the monotony and fear of imprisonment and underline the simple humanity of the imperial family. This book will please ardent Romanovophiles because it contains not

one single factual error in the name of poetic license; it is extremely well-researched and highly readable. Oh, and – there is a survivor to boot.

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*Speaking of survivors.....*

There are of course innumerable thrillers about the rescue or attempted rescue of the Imperial Family, ranging in quality from Gretchen Haskin's splendidly-written *An imperial affair* through competent adventure stories like Ted Willis's *Buckingham Palace connection* to the usual selection of airport paperbacks.

The godfather of all these works is *Rescuing the Czar: two authentic diaries*, by "James P. Smythe". Smythe was a joint pseudonym adopted by the American businessman William Rutledge McGarry and the Russian consul to San Francisco, George Romanovsky. The book, written as a get-rich-quick scheme in the wake of the disappearance of the imperial family and concomitant interest in their fate, purports to comprise the diaries of two individuals involved in a successful rescue attempt. The first half, McGarry's contribution, is the diary of an American named Fox, who succeeds in spiriting the family out of the Ipatiev house via lorries and an underground tunnel, and then escorts them across Siberia to India and safety aboard a ship taking them away to their new life. It is real cloak-and-dagger stuff, quite ludicrous, and riddled with factual errors (McGarry, for instance, seems to be under the impression that Kerensky was still in charge of the government in July 1918). Every few pages, Fox spots someone looking vaguely familiar, who turns out to be either an ally or a spy for the enemy: the world is apparently bound by a network of conspirators consisting of the same three to four people all the time. There is a freemasonry of royalty coordinating the mission and then uniting to hide the truth about the rescue (governments all plan to issue reports saying that investigations had concluded that Nicholas was dead), passwords available only to royalty and their trusted accomplices, and the inevitable frisson of romance with a Grand Duchess. Fox himself wins the family's confidence with his slick tongue and can lay out regiments with a fist. His text is larded with literary references and his knowledge of foreign lands phenomenal.

The portrait of Nicholas is an interesting one, though, for pre-dating the volumes of memoirs written by his supporters. Fox observes that beneath the façade of soft-spoken courtesy, the Emperor is a man of a great many prejudices who refuses to assume any responsibility for his own role in what had happened to Russia. Nicholas complains about Jewish conspiracies, distances himself from Rasputin by observing that he and the Empress had found the man useful as a psychological study in what would happen when the common man had power, and complains about his ministers betraying him. This is rather different to the Nicholas of later rescue books, who generally sighs over what might have been if he'd been more lenient, and suffers meekly for Russia under the Bolsheviks. Although clearly based on a stereotype of how royalty behaves, the undoctored image in *Rescuing the Czar* is not totally inaccurate in my view.

Nicholas's adored wife barely speaks; her role is strongly to reinforce his prejudices, but she is not blamed – as she is in many later books – for being the originator of them. Among the children, Marie emerges most clearly as a character, intelligent and beautiful

and inevitably the love interest. Olga is dignified and quiet, Anastasia “chummy”, Alexei (like Marie) has spent his captivity trying with spirit to escape. Tatiana – who at the time of the book’s publication (1920) was the popular favourite candidate for escape – leaves no impression at all.

Tatiana however is the one sister who *does* leave an impression in the second half of the story. This half is Romanovsky’s contribution to the enterprise, a diary narrated by a Russian aristocrat who is sent to Tobolsk disguised as a revolutionary soldier to help lay the groundwork for the escape. This nameless protagonist (he is called only by his pseudonym of Alexei Syvorotka) appears to have known Tatiana in her earlier life, and makes contact with her in the Governors’ House at Tobolsk; there is an implication that he is in love with her. Romanovsky’s work is so vastly superior to McGarry’s that it renders the novel incongruous and there is little point even comparing the two halves. He has fully fleshed-out characters, a plausible conspiracy, and plenty of ironic comment about human interaction in revolutionary and other situations. The imperial family of this half of the book are at the mercy of their brutal guards, most of whom have German or “Lettish” names, and who enjoy tormenting the children with death threats and obscene songs. Nicholas is described as looking old and bowed, while his wife and children are terrified at their situation.

The story of the book *Rescuing the Czar* is in its way even funnier than the clumsy prose of McGarry’s portion. Because of the secretive manner in which its authors produced and published it (told in full in David Haskin’s article “The printer’s devil” in Atlantis volume 1, issue 2) it has become the inspiration for some incredible theories about the fate of the family. In 1971 journalist Guy Richards searched for a copy, read it and then produced perhaps the silliest book in the entire annals of Romanov survival literature: *Hunt for the Czar*. This is a work of speculation so fantastical that it deserves inclusion here, for all its claims to be investigative journalism. It is hard to believe that its author took it seriously, although plenty of others have.

At the time, the question marks hanging over the fate of the imperial family (whose bodies after all had never been found), allied to the curious obscurity of *Rescuing the Czar*, appeared to warrant some questions being asked: that Guy Richards should want to find out more was entirely reasonable. That he went on to produce the work he did was anything but reasonable. He tried to track the author of the book: he couldn’t find a James P. Smythe. He might have inferred that the pseudonym was designed to promote mystery in marketing a novel and also to hide the identity of an author – Romanovsky – whose association with it might land him in trouble in his job. Instead, Richards decided that this had been done to hide someone else. His book starts with the premise that *Rescuing the Czar* was a true story, and the imperial family got out alive. In support of this notion (since he has no solid evidence), he performs some truly bizarre twists of logic: “Would the ex-Chinese Emperor have funded the Russian monarchist movement if he didn’t think Nicholas II was alive? Of course not!” He pretends not to be aware that there were other Romanov claimants besides Nicholas, and that the monarchist movement might even have more to gain from the death of the discredited Emperor than from his remaining alive. And then: “Who was this Nicholas Romanoff who turned up in 1919 in San Francisco, claiming to be the natural son of Nikolai Nikolaievich? NN *had* no natural son! – Could it have been the Emperor?!” – this despite the fact that the name Nicholas

Romanov is as common in Russia as John Smith used to be in England, and so were people claiming to be illegitimate children of one Romanov or other. Then again: “Who was the mysterious third party who sat in the shadows at the printers, telling the authors how much detail they could release? Might it actually have been Nicholas?” Er – no – why should it have been?!

Richards found that a couple of people whose names appeared in “Fox’s” part of the text were actually real people: he used this in support of his notion that Fox must be too. No suggestion that the real author might simply be using the names of his own friends.

Eventually he even found a man named Fox who had been in approximately the right place at the right time, and he went about convincing this man’s hapless – and sceptical - family that their father had indeed rescued the Tsar in 1918.

I suspect I am being unfair to Guy Richards. I imagine that he – like McGarry and Romanovsky themselves - was just a man who recognised that any book promoting a wild theory about the Romanovs will sell pretty well. But his little tome seems to represent the most glaring example of how a few conspiracy theories and a wild imagination can blind someone to the obvious explanation.

You can pick up a tattered paperback copy of *Hunt for the Czar* in practically any second-hand bookshop in the U.K. Nevertheless there is currently a website run by some magazine with the alluring title “Conspiracy nation” which is making the claim that it, “like *Rescuing the Czar*”, has been suppressed by someone apparently *still* having a motive to hide the truth!

Gretchen’s Haskin’s *An imperial affair* is directly inspired by the story in *Rescuing the Czar*. The hero is George Romanovsky, assuming the role assigned to Fox in Romanovsky’s own novel by spiriting the family out of the Ipatiev House via a tunnel. Similarities in plot apart, the book is the antithesis of the Romanovsky/McGarry hokum. There are no dramatic mountainside punch-ups, no passwords hissed into lace handkerchiefs, and the protagonist, the jaded Romanovsky, is a rounded and oddly sympathetic character, with few illusions about the people he is rescuing or the government they represented. The author, too, is least impressed of all rescue writers by the Imperial Family as characters, depicting Nicholas as a kind rather stupid man and his wife as cold and withdrawn. They evince little obvious gratitude for their rescue, apparently taking others’ efforts on their behalf as their due. Alexei dies from his injuries during the rescue and the sick Romanovsky is called upon single-handedly to carry his body miles and miles and bury it in a local church, Alexandra walking at his side without offering help or even seeming to mourn her dead child. The imperial daughters, focus of so much sympathy in other stories, barely feature at all. The book thus keeps the family as essentially bit players, a characteristic of many of the rescue novels, which tend to have the would-be rescuers as heroes. Its sharp literary style (the first page is a real attention-grabber) and coolly unroyalist approach set it apart however from the majority of the escape stories. The aim here seems to be the telling of the adventure story rather than the exciting of sympathy for members of the Romanov family. Even the rescuer Romanovsky makes no bones about his dislike of the imperial government, and for that reason, *An imperial affair* seems to me to be the most level-headed of the rescue tales, the dramatic success of its escape notwithstanding.

*The Buckingham Palace connection*, based as the title suggests upon a rescue attempt orchestrated by the British government, depicts the usual gentle Nicholas and tragic haunted Alexandra, neither of whom actually put in a line of conversation in the text. He hovers in the background as the object of the protagonists' mission, 'the little Tsar', sympathetic but unimperial by implication; she appears briefly after his shooting by the guards in the midst of the botched rescue, attempting half-crazed with grief to escape with her daughters and dying of a heart attack in the attempt. This book comes from the school of thought that sees the family as pawns wholly overwhelmed by events beyond their control. Willis has the majority of them die or disappear and only two of the daughters escape to safety in England; like many of the escape stories it is told from the perspective of a late twentieth century character who slowly learns the secret history of an older acquaintance.

The family as people play a larger role in William Green's *The Romanov connection*, which like the similar Willis book and several others is based on an imaginary attempt by the British government to spirit them out of captivity. In this case, they are to be rescued not from Ekaterinburg but from Tobolsk, snatched in the night by the British agent who is a distant relative and piled onto a train to be carried away. Much of the action takes place as always in the outside world, where rescuers ranging from former ladies in waiting to the Empress's young nephew Dickie Mountbatten plan the escape. From captivity however, Anastasia recounts the family's story in her diary entries and thus brings them all to life. This is a surprisingly articulate Anastasia, dreaming up poetic metaphors for their situation, and competently setting out her feelings of loss and anxiety as she observes the family and its relationships and changing mood. At times she seems a little cold and detached, and her literate style is unconvincing to anyone familiar with the letters and diary entries of the real Anastasia, but the mildly pretentious demeanor of this fictional Grand Duchess may be oddly familiar to anyone who can remember being a teenage girl who kept a diary! This book has no happy ending either; the rescue train is intercepted, and the family split, the majority of the children returning to Tobolsk while Nicholas, Alexandra and Marie go on to Ekaterinburg, as per history. No conclusions are drawn, but the reader can probably assume that their eventual fate follows the accepted story.

Trains also feature in *The King's Commissar*, by Duncan Kyle. This book theorizes that Yakovlev who accompanied Nicholas, Alexandra and Marie from Tobolsk to Ekaterinburg was in reality a British agent sent to carry them away from the Bolsheviks (themselves to be paid a rich ransom, however, through the agencies of a concerned King George). Once again, the family have bit parts, with the majority of the action centering upon the rescuers, though there is a brief romantic aside involving Marie and the fake commissar. In this book too the attempt fails and the family is eventually murdered. It is actually not a story about the imperial family at all, but a well-paced thriller about gold, espionage and the Russian revolution, and the character development (especially of the one-dimensional imperial family) is fairly minimal. The historical context though is well-understood and superbly well-set, with Arthur Ransome, Basil Zaharoff and others flitting in and out. This author knows his revolution.

In addition to *Rescuing the Czar* and *An imperial family affair*, at least two more novels of the rescue type permit all of the Romanovs to escape. *God save the Tsar* by Susanna Hoe is the moderately more plausible of the pair. Like Robert Alexander, this is an author who is more than familiar with Romanov hagiography and manages a sympathetic portrayal based very closely on the memoirs of the family's retainers and on biographies like *Nicholas and Alexandra*. Thus the Tsar is a gentle and kind man; his wife haunted if occasionally domineering; the daughters simple and good in their different ways, and at times – to this reader, anyway – rather irritatingly young for their ages, as though the experiences they had been through in captivity had left their psyches untouched. Only Alexei shows distinct signs of hauteur or caprice in his relationships with those around him. The story of the family's previous life is fully told through the memories and conversations of its members, reliving crucial moments; but inevitably only Alexei or perhaps at moments Alexandra feels nostalgia for their lost power. Although they escape abroad, there are hints in the introduction – when, once again, some of the characters introduce the story by looking back on their own past – that their later story has its sad moments. References are made to the Empress's bitterness and sorrow in later days; the Tsarevich's death and the unmarried devotion of one daughter – Olga or Tatiana, probably – to her aging father. None of these are mentioned in the book which ends so optimistically with messages to King George informing of the escape, but they add an edge of reality to the story overall.

Justin Scott's *A pride of kings*, on the other hand, is pure happy fantasy. This is yet another story in which George V discovers his sense of honour and extends a hand to his Russian relatives by sending a rescue mission out to them. In this he is actively assisted by the Kaiser. Oddly, though, this rescue occurs not after the revolution but before it; the British government realizes the danger to the imperial system and sends an American commander to Petersburg to help the Tsar's nearest and dearest. The latter, curiously, acquiesce in abandoning the country, sail off into the sunset and live happily ever after, health and sanity miraculously restored and all concerns about Russia's fate apparently banished from their minds. This fictional family is not completely removed from historical reality, but the image presented is a decidedly rosy one – the healthy tomboy daughters, whom their parents did not raise “as helpless young ladies”, the wry brave Nicholas, and excitable but ultimately reasonable empress. The main character in the story is the commander who rescues them; his life-history and romantic past are central to the book, with the inevitable imperial ballerina involved along with a host of imaginary Grand Dukes. Like the romance novels, this book is all parties and jewelry, escapes and disguises, old-world honour and revolution without blood.

Robert Littell's *The revolutionist* is curiously similar in some ways. Superficially, it is quite the opposite of Scott's book: its protagonist, Alexander Til, is a Bolshevik, and the scenes of violence border on the gratuitous, particularly where rape is involved, but it is so wildly fantastic in its portrayal of pre-revolutionary society that it clearly belongs to the same genre of romantic literature. As in *A pride of kings*, there are hordes of imaginary characters, including a twin sister for Felix Yussoupov, with whom he enjoys a brief incestuous affair. This sister, “Lili” is nevertheless supposed to be a contemporary



Grand Duchess, even if she wanted just something simpler. This is not an especially brilliant or insightful book: the characters are one-dimensional and the reader suspects that the unconventional picture of Marie is painted to move the romantic story along, rather than because the author has studied the real girl closely. Her romances are too mature for a girl of 14 or 16 enjoying a crush: it all smacks slightly of the bodice-ripper and tales of forbidden romance. Some of the factual errors too start to get irritating after a while: why for instance, describe the Empress's brother as "Ernest of Prussia" (or Battenberg as a Prussian name for that matter)? – If the author's considers her intended audience too ill-educated to have noticed the existence of Hesse, why assume that they know about Prussia instead?

The family's imprisonment is a martyrdom in this book too, and some of the humiliations suffered go beyond those in the standard monarchist tales to include the Tsar being punched in the face by Bolsheviks and his daughters searched by roving hands at every turn. The language of the soldiers, as recalled later, is graphic in the extreme.

In spite of these terrible humiliations at the hands of her guards, the fictional Marie has an odd reaction to the sudden news that the family is to be freed by the government. Instead of rejoicing, she complains that she has to cut off her hair, which has just re-grown following her measles attack! – Things go wrong after that anyway: the Tsar is taken from the Ipatiev House and hauled before the local soviet, which then gives him an hour to collect his worldly goods together. In the melee which accompanies his removal (based closely it seems on the early newspaper account of the Emperor's murder as told by "Parfin Domnin", the valet who never existed) Alexei also disappears, and the women of the family are left wondering whether he has escaped or been taken with his father. They never find out the truth about the fate of either.

Transported to Perm, the women are eventually separated into two groups for punishment at the Empress's recalcitrance and Anastasia's flirtation with a guard, Sergei (Tchaikovsky?). Marie and Anastasia are held in a cellar and repeatedly raped, until Anastasia escapes. Marie is reunited briefly with her mother and sisters, who have also been subjected to terrible abuse, and discovers that she is pregnant. She loses the baby on a train in the middle of a journey to Moscow, again alone, though still a prisoner.

Once in Moscow, things take on a truly fantastic turn. Marie is introduced to the wives of various top Bolsheviks, Krupskaya included, and told that they have been taking a personal interest in her fate and want her to live. She is given a false identity and transported to the Ukraine, where she duly marries a local prince, Nikolai Dolgoruky, and they leave the country to set up home in Africa and have two daughters. What is surprising is the ease with which Marie shakes off her past; she has some trouble conceiving as a result of some sort of psychological block due to her rape, and for a short while she doesn't want her husband to touch her, but in the long term her appalling ordeal seems to have left her with hang-ups at all, either sexual or emotional. She has no problems trusting people; even in the Ukraine immediately after her release she wanders cheerfully about on her own and does not seem to fear being followed or hunted.

During the 1930s, Marie is contacted by her sister Olga, who is living in Italy and running an orphanage. She has changed her name to Magda Boots – the name of course one of the real-life claimants, who the author thus skillfully unites with her own. Tatiana and their mother are living in a convent in Poland, and Tatiana plans to take holy orders once her mother – who no longer speaks and appears not to recognize anyone – is dead.

Anastasia no-one hears from, but the novel accepts her identity with that of Anna Anderson, the author speculating that she didn't contact her sisters since she had been completely unbalanced by her experiences as a prisoner, consumed with guilt that she caused a lot of it through her flirtation with the soldier. In any case, she adds with truth, Anastasia had been a girl whose tutors commented on the apparent arrest in her mental development, and she speculates that the Grand Duchess had always been "at the very extremes of normality". Nevertheless, the unbalanced behaviour of Anna Anderson needs no such explanation. In the context of their apparent experiences, it is Marie's reaction which seems odd.

Marie dies in 1970, a year after the death of her husband at the hands of the KGB (who poison him a la Czech dissident Georgi Markov by piercing his skin) leaving her grandson as heir to the throne (as if there were no Salic Law), and her papers to be pored over by the novelist Monsigny.

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### ***The decline and fall of imperial Russia.....***

Several childrens' novels have also been written about the family's part in the last years of the old regime and in the revolution. *The last days of the Romanovs* by Michael Mullen is a blend of fact and fiction, which apparently starts out as an attempt to explain history to his young readers, and ends with the sudden rescue of Alexei from prison by a young guard. The book then jumps eighty years ahead, and the two turn up leading parties of tourists around Tsarskoe Selo in Yelstin's Russia. They have apparently lived quietly all these years in Communist St Petersburg, and haemophilia seems not to have been an issue after 1918, although it features highly in the first part of the book. It isn't clear what age-group Mullen writes for, but this sequence of events would surely strain the credulity of any child old enough to be able to grasp the central concepts adequately. Unsurprisingly, the characters rather lack depth, and the imperial family themselves are full of goodness and wisdom and simply swept along by events.

Stephanie Plowman also focuses on the children rather than their parents. The narrator of her books *Three lives for the Czar* and *My kingdom for a grave* is Andrei Hamilton, a Russian aristocrat of Jacobite descent, childhood friend of the Grand Duchesses'. His parents – friends of Nicholas and Alexandra - talk rather freely in front of him about the political events of the day. The books seem to be aimed at teenagers, and the personalities involved are less one-dimensional than Mullen's. Nicholas and Alexandra get a bad press, and, as often, most of the criticisms of her are based (perhaps understandably in children's books) on a stereotype of how she behaved rather than carefully observed reality. What else could have prompted the author to depict the fresh-air loving Alexandra as someone who wanted the windows kept shut at all times to keep things stuffy and 'Victorian'? Although stubborn and narrow-minded, Alexandra is the thinker in the relationship, suffering deeply as the regime comes to an end. Nicholas is a simple cipher, the Tsar who played dominos while Petersburg burned and handed over command of the Russian Empire as if he were handing over a regiment.

In order to bring events to life, the author interposes Andrei's parents into genuine historical scenes; thus, for instance, Andrei's grandfather delivers the lecture about

regaining the peoples' confidence which was in reality given by George Buchanan. Similarly, Andrei's mother is present at an interview with Nicholas and Alexandra which bears great similarity to the row they had with Alexander Mikhailovich in the early days of 1917.

The children as portrayed are effectively smothered intellectually and in initiative by their cloistered upbringing; this is fair up to a point. Tatiana is domineering and superficially unchildlike, Alexei alone reveals a spark of rebellion, and by 1916 Olga is the "only one who had grown up". Her sisters still giggle in corners and fight over their pets. Olga is a pathetic figure in both books, modest and unassuming, though aware that her intellect is being smothered by her environment. In the first book she is cloyingly simple and optimistic, bringing tears to the eyes of Andrei's mother with the pleasure she takes in the limited means of entertainment afforded her by her family life. The whole imperial family features quite extensively in this first book, where Andrei's father is killed riding alongside the Grand Duke Serge at his assassination, and Andrei's sister dies of internal injuries in the aftermath of the bomb attack on Stolypin's house. The Hamiltons are ardent monarchists, but increasingly saddened and frustrated by Nicholas and Alexandra's refusal to comprehend what they are up against.

The second book concerns Andrei's military service during World War One. In this the imperial family feature less, although he runs into the increasingly independent Alexei at Stavka, noting the boy's resentment of Rasputin (a common device in Romanov fiction) and of being intermittently cooped up at home with his mother. There is a romantic frisson between Andrei and a rather depressed Olga, but it comes to nothing, the revolution occurs, the family is exiled. Andrei sees them briefly in Tobolsk, where Olga seems bowed down by captivity and looks older than her age, but arrives in Ekaterinburg with the White Guard too late to save them. This is a poignant reference back to the first book, in which the small Olga, lost on the farm at Peterhof, sits contentedly stroking a kitten and tells Andrei that she had not worried "since I knew you'd come". Such a scene makes the books sound terribly sentimental, but they are actually well-written and interesting.

Olga is also the heroine of Catherine Gavin's *Snow mountain*, a reasonable adults' romantic novel about the war and revolution. If Stephanie Plowman's heroine is clear-eyed but bowed down, Gavin's Olga is the one that various other members of the imperial family dreamed of: their ally against her parents, able to see clearly what was wrong with the government. It is an Olga more independent (and further from reality) than Plowman's heroine, in love with a young officer and moving freely around Petrograd on the sly : an intriguing 'might-have-been' had the real Olga – short-tempered and recalcitrant for sure, but also religious and emotionally fragile – engaged with the world rather than retreat into depression and physical illness during the difficult war years. The real Olga was like her mother but without the drive that brought out the greatest resolution at the times of greatest adversity. Nevertheless, as the most intelligent and apparently most rebellious of the children, she remains a popular subject for novelists, and their books appear to have influenced her "image" among her fans, if their websites are anything to go by. The eldest daughter of the Tsar is popularly perceived as a sort of feisty young feminist, chafing against her lot - the girl who would have saved the regime if she'd only had the chance.

Nicholas in this book is completely purblind, pushed along by his wife, seeing sadly that she is wrong but too infatuated and full of pity to oppose. He is a hen-pecked, lonely figure designed to incite the reader's sympathy as much as anything. The outgoing Olga of the story meets with his former mistress Kschessinskaya, comparing the gracious dancer's youthful appearance with her "faded" mother and sighing that she is glad her father had had some joy once. This sort of romantic nonsense, painting Kschessinskaya as the sweet lost love of innocent youth simply because Nicholas was legally unable to marry her (when there is no evidence that he had even considered such a thing!), ignores the ballerina's manipulative, greedy nature, which was probably far more difficult than the Empress's – to say nothing of the rather sordid complexion of her affair with the future Tsar, which was arranged for him by his father, and in which all parties understood the deal.

In *The snow mountain* Alexandra makes the mistake of accusing the ballerina of taking bribes. At this point even the spineless Nicholas rises from his chair and rushes to his former mistress's defense, informing his wife coldly that Kschessinskaya is "the glory and adornment of the ballet", and bowing coldly before bidding her goodnight. That Alexandra may even have been right about this does not trouble the author in her quest to see the Empress as hysterical, irrational and manipulative until the last days, the nemesis of the dynasty, and absolutely mistaken in every thing she does. This characterisation means, of course, that author and readers alike can imagine that without Alexandra and possibly Nicholas too, the basically decent and reasonable Tsarist regime might have survived the war. When such characters as Rodzianko put in an appearance they too are clear-sighted and sensible, frustrated by the government but committing no human errors of their own in their opposition to it. Even Alexandra, though, finally emerges in prison as strong and great-hearted.

The children however are more completely drawn in this book than in any other I know of. Tatiana and Marie, resolute, dependable, devoted to their parents, come closer to reality than their elder sister does; Anastasia is somewhat less capricious than the real one; ditto her brother, who is sharp and intelligent, sees through Rasputin and displays moments of great insight about their situation. Considering the parents, these children seem to be a veritable triumph of nature over nurture.

Although the imperial family are the main characters, there are sub-plots to give a broader perspective on the unfolding revolution. Olga's rival for the affections of her young officer is an idealistic girl revolutionary – undoubtedly based on Fanny Kaplan - who swiftly becomes disillusioned with the Bolsheviks and attempts to murder Lenin. (There is even an implication that some of her early left-wing political zeal might have born partly of jealousy for Olga's hold over their young officer). Sitting in a cinema and watching the crudely pornographic propaganda films about the imperial family, she thinks back to her meetings with the "young, fresh" real Olga and somehow comes to change her political affiliation as a result. I am not quite sure what this is supposed to tell us: that the character feels Lenin to have betrayed the ideals of the revolution by resorting to such vulgarly untrue propaganda? – Or that she suddenly realises that the old regime, as epitomised by Olga, was never anywhere near so bad as the new? Given her earlier jealousy of Olga, not to mention the book's portrayal of most of the family's opponents as brutes, I suspect it is supposed to be the latter. Fanny having her cynical revolutionary heart purged by memories of the Imperial Martyr is an interesting if unintended insight

into the way that the images of the unfortunate imperial children have been used to manipulate the image of the imperial regime.

Another, now little-read, novel about the last years of empire is *Double eagle* by Michael Pravdin. More serious than Gavin's book, but narrower in focus than Solzhenitsyn or Nazhivin's works, it covers the same period as all three, with a cast of characters that consists exclusively of government ministers, Rasputin, and Nicholas and Alexandra. It is simply, in the author's professed aim, an attempt to get inside the heads of those most intimately involved in the collapse of the regime, but it sticks fairly closely to the image presented in memoirs and published letters in building up a picture of their characters. For that reason, motivation is taken at face value, and there are none of the thoughtful insights which Solzhenitsyn gives in *October 1916*. Thus, for example, when Alexandra receives the infamous Nikolai Mikhailovich letter accusing her of being a liability to the regime, Pravdin portrays her fury at the Grand Duke, which comes across clearly in her letters, but none of her own private sense of betrayal and pondering on her husband's motives in forwarding it. So too has Pravdin's Nicholas (as in his letters) genuinely forwarded it to show her their cousin's treachery, and not, as some have speculated, to make her think twice about her political role. Any picture of Nicholas based upon his sparse letters and diaries must inevitably make him seem shallow and vacillating, and this book is no exception; he leaps from decision to decision, holding but unable to stick to the firm guiding principles that are seen in Alexandra, who has left us more evidence of her strong antipathy to the Duma, for one thing.

Only in the case of Rasputin, who left no written record, is much imagination employed in describing what was thinking, and the author occasionally gives him credit for good intentions. His influence upon both halves of the imperial couple is sometimes weaker, sometimes stronger (Pravdin apparently having no time for Nicholas's apologists' theory that he disliked the Holy Man and it was all Alexandra's doing), but unusually in the case of Romanov fiction his approval is not seen as the be-all and end-all for a ministerial appointment. Behind it all is the guiding principle of faith in autocracy, Rasputin's blessing merely setting the seal on it.

In this book there are no real villains, only transparent human beings making mistakes, and the author is fairly sympathetic to Nicholas and Alexandra, depicting well the Emperor's exasperation with the escalating demands of the Progressive bloc and the Empress's sense that nothing she can ever do will be right for adopted country. This book is a far better fictional introduction than most to Russia's wartime government, but to anyone already familiar with the literature and events of those years, it is barely a novel, so little license does it use. This reader found it rather lacking in flair.

The play *House of Romanoff*, by Margaret Brown, is from a similar era (the 1930s) and is similarly lacking in zest. It too tells the story of the war years in a straight-forward style, without even the benefit of the internal view of its characters which Pravdin's novel can offer. Limited by length, it can't give much political background either, leaving the impression that the central dilemma of late imperial Russia was the question of whether or not Rasputin should be permitted to rule the country. The Emperor and Empress do not present themselves particularly well (she deluded, he too weak to resist, as ever), but at the end, focus of sympathy switches to them as their murder looms. In the final scene of

their lives there is a moment of real insight into their characters as Alexandra tells her husband “You were always fatalistic, whereas I struggled against fate”. She continues in the vein of the real Alexandra: “I was more devout but you were the better Christian”. And then the guards, burly, sweaty and swearing enter the room. The final scene has the ethereal family walking through woods, canonized by death.

Another '30s offering, rather different to the two above, is *Rasputin and the Empress*, a novel based on the celebrated triple Barrymore film of the same name. This is the Nicholas and Alexandra story rewritten as Ruritanian melodrama: - an easy read, with parts of the text hilariously dated (“Unlike most fair women, there was character, courage and dignity in her even features and intelligence in her eyes”).

Rasputin appears on the scene as a man bent on gaining control of Russia by fair means or foul, with no apparent motive beyond personal ambition. On page one, he declares his cynical intention to exploit the human interest in both spirituality and sex. Proceeding to the capital, he heals the Tsesarevich through straight hypnotism involving a watch, and proceeds to dismiss the boy's doctors and tutors, assuming their functions himself in order to exercise greater control. In this the parents acquiesce for the sake of their boy. Their own aim in life (besides leading a quiet time as a family) seems to be the slow reform of Russia into a constitutional monarchy. At the beginning of the book, which opens when the tercentenary celebrations are in full swing, the Duma is out of session. Reforming Prince Paul Chegodieff persuades them that bringing it back will stop the riots now plaguing Russia, but Rasputin hates the idea of devolving power to his fellow peasants, and at a party given by the Prince he declares his hand:

“He threw the cigar on the floor. It broke with the force of the throw, and the leaves opened and scattered.

‘Some day I'm going to *run* this country,’ he said fiercely. ‘I'm not going to have my toes stepped on by a lot of peasant swine with their ideas of government!’”

Paul is already disturbed by the Tsesarevich's sudden antipathy to him, and by the automaton's look in the child's eyes as the Mad Monk hypnotises him again and again. He observes Rasputin sow suspicion and discord by suggesting to the Emperor that the Duma and most of the ministers are pro-German. He then persuades Russia into war when the gentle Emperor is reluctant.

Paul's fiancée Natasha, a lady-in-waiting to the Empress, is taken in by Rasputin, who eventually rapes her. He attempts to force her not to tell the Empress by demonstrating that he can make the bewitched Tsesarevich harm himself in some way if she does. This is the final straw, and Paul resolves to kill him.

Chegodieff, in accomplishing the murder, occupies the historical role of Felix Yousoupov, but his character - honorable, democratic, merciful and steadfast - is as far removed from the erratic Felix as the Machiavellian Rasputin of the novel is from the loud, drunken, but basically limited and well-meaning historical character he is based on. The book contains the usual raft of entertaining errors, ranging from organ music in an Orthodox cathedral, through the author's apparent belief that Moscow was the capital of pre-revolutionary Russia, to the fact there are only three daughters in the imperial family (this error, not repeated in the film, may perhaps be deliberate, although why is not clear). There are anomalies even in this: at one stage the daughters are named as “Maria, Tatiana and Anastasia”; later on, Olga appears with Tatiana and Maria; still later, all four are

named together. Tatiana is sometimes Tatania for a variation, and when Rasputin sets his sights on her she becomes interchangeable with Maria. He attempts to enter Tatiana's bedroom; Natasha surprises him and informs the Empress what has happened, reminding him:

““You know you went to Maria's room – I stopped you.””

This finally undoes him in the eyes of the Empress, who believes Natasha rather than chucking her out of the house as the real Alix would have done. If the hero of the book is the fictional Paul Chegodieff, the heroine is really the Empress, strong and loving. Her husband is a frail figure, 'slightly bowed', lost without her encouragement, and ever ready to fall asleep in her arms like a child. After Rasputin's murder and Paul's exile for it (though his role has been approved by the Empress) the revolution sees the family banished to Tobolsk. There on a winter's day they are told that they must move to Moscow. The Empress suspects the truth but calmly protects her family by not telling them. In their final moments of life, they stand reading the Bible amidst the disrespect of their slovenly guards, some of whom are affected despite everything by their demeanor. The Tsar hand the commandant his personal record of reforms proposed in his reign, commenting altruistically that it might help the current government, since there must be "many sincere people" among them who could use them to make a bridge between revolution and "the kind of government they are after". And then the imperial family is shepherded from the house to be shot in an open courtyard.

This moving picture painted, the scene flashes to Paul, in London with Natasha. Settling down to their calm future, they console themselves with the banal thought that the Tsar had asked them to seek their own happiness.

*Rasputin and the Empress*, an obviously fictionalized work littered with error and artistic license, is important for marking the moment at which the family began to be canonized in popular regard as blamelessly slaughtered saints, the victims of the machinations of those around them. It is hard to think of a medium which reached a broader constituency in the 1930s than film, and this book was a film spin-off whose grosser errors (such as the inconsistency over the names and numbers of Grand Duchesses) are conceivably due to the author watching the film and transcribing without due regard for detail.

On the opposite side of the coin is the *Journal secret de Anna Viroubova* – also available in the original Russian as *Intimnyi dnevniki Anny Vyrubovoi*. This is probably the earliest work of Nicholas and Alexandra biographical fiction of all, both versions being published during the 1920s. The books were touted at the time as the genuine diaries of Alexandra's unfortunate friend, and even today – as in the case of *Rescuing the Czar* – there are historians who profess to believe in them. Most recently, French academician Marc Ferro in his biography of Nicholas II referred to "the diary attributed" to Anna, and then proceeded to quote it uncritically, observing that it "throws light on the relationship between her, Rasputin and the Tsaritsa on the one hand and Nicholas on the other." That it doesn't, and it's pretty hard to see how a contemporary historian could possibly be fooled by a work that depicts Anna sleeping with Nicholas, Nicholas sleeping with a sorceress and Alexandra sighing with unrequited love for General Orlov! – Written by novelist Alexei Tolstoy with help from the literary critic Pavel Shchegolev it thus apparently has its basis in the rumours and legends circulating about the family in the

years before the revolution. That many of these stories had previously been published in journalistic works about the regime may explain the book's early credibility: it never descends into the realms of alleging that Rasputin kept the Grand Duchesses as a harem or any of the wilder tales that found their way into revolutionary propaganda films and leaflets. There are however many telling clues that could have alerted even a contemporary to the fact that it was a fake. Why, for instance, would Alexandra's British nanny, Mary Anne Orchard, have been known to her former charge by a Russian nickname, as the book alleges? – And why for that matter would Henry of Prussia have been called in the family by the clearly Russian diminutive "Guenia"? Henry is named as Alexandra's early secret love, and she is supposed to have married Nicholas without feeling, becoming slowly fond of him later (though Orlov is the love of her life, and her secret tryst with him in Anna's house causes the breakdown of Anna's marriage when her husband erupts in jealous fury). Nicholas in turn loves her but visits other women freely too. He tells Anna insultingly when he comes to her room that he does so because he simply needs someone to sound off to, and it's as impersonal with her as "talking to a wall". At this juncture, the historical editor of the 1928 French edition has inserted an unintentionally hilarious footnote, explaining that since Anna was found in 1917 to be a virgin, this scene between her and Nicholas "illuminates her psychology". In other words, he thought the fictional diary entry was simply a besotted fantasy!

The book covers the years 1909 to 1917 and is in approximate chronological order, with occasional flashbacks to earlier events. Alexandra in the entries is frequently hysterical and suffers from dire premonitions – as does her nanny Mrs Orchard. Anna though announces that one can believe what the Empress says; with Nicholas it is not so easy. The Tsar is buffeted by the conflicting advice of his wife and mother (the latter known as "L'Irascible"); he generally ignores both and does what he pleases. Anna has great sympathy for both halves of the imperial couple as she feels that they are entirely alone in the world and certainly unable to rely on the extended Romanov family for support. Alexandra as per the revolutionary legend takes her orders from the Kaiser in frequent correspondence, and her purported letters from her brother Ernie and brother-in-law Henry are reproduced in an epilogue to the book, both men clamouring anxiously for information during the revolutionary days and promising her their help and support.

Lozania Prole's *The last Tsarina* is also apparently an adults' book, written for a highly unsophisticated audience. No character in it is clearly drawn, and none are sympathetic, although the author seems to intend the Empress to play on our heart strings. It is a fictionalised biography of the Empress, and Alexandra here is an excessively pathetic figure, curiously reduced in every way. Even her physical dimensions are down-played: she has "little hands", a "little mouth". She comes across as shallow and self-centered, spending hour after hour whining that no-one in Russia likes her, infatuated with jewelry, and clinging to her husband for explanation of events unfolding around them. One suspects that the unattractive picture is unintentional, and that the author simply imagines that this is how princesses behave. Early in the book, Prole states that Nicholas is simple and child-like, in contrast to his well-educated wife; but for the most part he is portrayed as clearly the more sensible character, forever warning her off fraudulent holy men like Philippe Vachod and being ignored. Philippe of course is a confidence trickster, and all characters who oppose Alexandra or harm her in any way are fundamentally evil. No

room here for simple misunderstanding; it is a morally one-dimensional book that sounds as if it were written by a child, with historical events introduced in facile conversation (“Is it Karl Marx who tells people to behave like that, Nicky?” “Yes, darling, it’s Karl Marx; they have no money so they look to an outsider for help.”) and the voice of the author passing curious comments on peoples’ behaviour. (“As Emperor and Empress they should have had more dignity than to use baby talk” – er...*why?* Surely this was rather less of a problem than their political attitudes?!) Outside the gates of the palaces lurk the people of Russia, a gothic mass with curses and shaking fists, set against the hapless Empress from the start because of her inability to produce the Heir they all think about constantly. *The last Tsarina*, incidentally, is the only book about the imperial family that reduces any of them to physical stereotype – and to a stereotype that doesn’t exist outside the author’s imagination either: she frequently describes the blond, blue-eyed Nicholas as “dark”, “like all Russians”. Right. OK.

A far superior novel about Alexandra’s life is True Bowen’s *And the stars shall fall*, a book that shows some genuine insight into her psyche and political stance. Although slightly too full of sudden chills down the spine and moments when the darkening room fills with a consciousness of evil, it is a highly readable book without the melodrama that disfigures Prole’s work, and the author goes to some effort to explain Russia’s historical development and the national myths that shaped Alexandra’s political thought. This is not to say, of course, that she doesn’t take considerable liberties with truth in attempting to tell a good story, but they are enjoyable liberties, and the scheming, jealous Dowager Empress, plotting against the throne for motives no more sound than simple dislike of her daughter-in-law, is a particularly entertaining figure. Oddly plausible, too; since even in the real world it is hard to conceive of Minnie acting from well-thought-out political conviction. This of course means that Nicholas and Alexandra are portrayed in the novel as the only morally upright Romanovs, making mistakes but trying to do their best and being thwarted at every turn by the selfishness of their relatives. The picture goes too far, inevitably, in arguing that they were really reformers, but it must have struck chords with such surviving friends of the family as Anna Vyubova, who tended to see them precisely as victims of malice and misfortune, who might have saved Russia if they’d only had more time.

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*And finally, the fellow-travelers.....*

In addition to his imprisonment book, Roberto Pazzi has also produced a work of Romanov biographical fiction; this one rather more grounded in imagination than any of the above, as the author freely admits. The subject of *The princess and the dragon* is George Alexandrovich, eking out the last days his existence in the Caucasus. This George has become ill almost for psychological reasons, over-burdened as heir presumptive by the prospect of a throne he believes to be doomed. It is, Pazzi suggests, the weight of history which initially made the sensitive George ill; his body simply fell into line later. He lies in his bed and dreams of journeys into the past and future, all of which tell him that the monarchy will fall, and thus he permits himself to expire. This book is no less depressing for the fact that the real George – the bright and naughty second son of

Alexander III – was nothing like the haunted protagonist. Somewhere, sometime, there must have been a prince who really felt like this fictional George does.

Part of the book is about Nicholas's and George's grand tour of 1890-1, and this is the one time that the future Tsar features as a distinct character, raging against his brother's incipient illness and refusing to believe that his childhood soul-mate and companion is slowly dying.

*Elizabeth and Alexandra*, by Antony Lambton, is also primarily about an imperial sibling. Title notwithstanding, it focuses on Ella above all, with Alexandra as basically a tiresome catalyst for certain events in her sister's life. Lambton has written a couple of books about this family, including the myth-busting *The Mountbattens*, a straight family biography in which he goes out of his way to unpick some of the more extravagant legends about the Battenberg and Hesse clans. His personal hatred for Mountbatten is rather obvious, and as a consequence – while his work undeniably lacks balance – errors stand out at 1000 feet and leave the solid material to speak for itself. *Elizabeth and Alexandra* includes a historical postscript in which he makes a number of interesting observations about the realities of Ella's murder and the genesis of the legend that she went to her death singing hymns.

He portrays her in the novel as something of a black sheep, chafing against the dull domestic life to which her sister Victoria apparently aspires, and marrying Serge as much for the challenge and for the romance of Russia as anything else. She is bored by royal life too, and quickly revolted by a husband whose chief sexual peccadillo appears to be administering sadistic beatings. The unusual thing about this Ella is her lack of sentimentality; this is not the frustrated mother and gentle saint of popular memoirs, but a complex character who needs more in her life than she is being offered.

Lambton's Alexandra is far less sympathetic, but the portrayal is, again, not without psychological insight. He holds that her chief problem was a sense of childhood rejection by her own family, which led her to cling possessively to Nicholas and her children.

There are of course a fair number of novels about that other great character in the drama of the last Romanovs: Rasputin. He is almost incidental in Nazhivin's eponymous book, which is mainly about the age he lived in, but there are others based more closely upon his life. *A winter serpent* by Aileen Armitage is a straight-forward dramatisation of the accepted story, presenting the "Holy man" as a schemer who deliberately insinuated his way into the imperial family in order to rule Russia. The family are predictably pure and innocent victims of his wiles, but he is not without conscience, for the author is quick to point out that one of his prime concerns was to look after Russian peasants, and she doesn't down-play the reality of his ability to help the sick. This is an unpretentiously disposable novel for people with a passing interest; it does not aim to add anything to our understanding of the characters in this historical drama.

The supernatural currents swirling around the would-be Holy Man make him attractive to cult novelists too, of course. He even appears in a spin-off from the *Dr. Who* series. Not being an aficionado, I have no idea whether he was ever in the television programme, but the novel is readable and surprisingly well-researched. The time-traveling heroes of the television show arrive in the Russian capital in late 1916 and come to know the "Mad

monk” well, being faced with the dilemma of whether they mess with the course of history by attempting to rescue him from his impending murder. Rasputin himself is a flawed but human character in this book, drinking and womanising but also genuinely interested in spiritual matters. Paradoxically, in fact, this fantastical science fiction novel is less inclined than many supposedly more serious works to make a melodrama out of the man and his life! The author, David McIntee, seems to be very familiar with geography of St Petersburg, and his is the only piece of Romanov light fiction I’ve encountered that actually has a realistic grasp of the power relationship between Rasputin and the Empress – stating that he simply told her what she wanted to hear. There is even an amusing page or so which features Alexandra writing her infamous “go to sleep forever in your arms” letter to him, and telling herself that this was simply the type of stuff Holy Men liked to hear! She is the only member of the imperial family who plays a major role, steely but well-meaning in her persona.

This article has been an attempt to resume a broad cross-section of fiction featuring the last Tsar’s immediate family. Hopefully I have covered the outstanding examples: - the most plausible, the most thought-provoking, the most exciting or entertaining; not to mention one or two that fail in their mission to be any of the above. There are undoubtedly titles that I have missed; others that I have purposefully excluded since they don’t feature the family as people and are beyond the remit of this article. I had to draw the line somewhere!

Those excluded thus include unfortunately the whole shelves-full of books about people claiming to be Nicholas or one of his children, about secret descendants or purported secret descendants of the daughters, and about hunting for Romanov treasure. It would be a shame, though, not to mention one novel in the claimant genre, which stands out for sheer hilarious implausibility. This is the tale of a Russian girl who is persuaded that she is descended from the Empress and Rasputin via a secret daughter born in war-time and brought up secretly away from her parents. This daughter apparently truly existed, and by some bizarre twist of genealogy is alleged in the novel to have had a claim to the Russian throne.....

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With thanks for their suggestions, comments on and practical help with my list of titles to Greg King, Penny Wilson and especially Gretchen Haskin  
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[Any comments or questions?](#)