

ALEXANDER SMIRNOV AND  
THE BEGINNINGS OF CELTIC STUDIES IN RUSSIA

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Celtic studies in Russia which have developed during the twentieth century into a recognised and respectable branch on the tree of humanities owe much to one person who undoubtedly has won a right to be called a patriarch of Celtic studies in Russia, namely Alexander Alexandrovich Smirnov. Mostly known for his pioneering translations of early Irish tales into Russian in the early days of his career he was also prominent scholar of Welsh and Breton covering many aspects of Celtic linguistics and literary studies. His biography, achievements and approach to Celtic studies in Russia deserve better attention both on the Russian side and in the view of the history of Celtic studies worldwide. We are aiming here to connect facts of his biography with his academic career in the field of Celtic studies and because of the specific aims and limits of the present conference we are not going to touch on his role as a scholar of Romance literatures and as a Shakespearean scholar. Alexander Smirnov [27.8(8.9).1883 – 16.9.1962] can be considered the first professional Celtic scholar in Russia. He was a prominent medievalist and philologist with a range of interests from early Irish and Welsh literature to Shakespearean studies. The paper is devoted to some little known facts from Smirnov's biography especially to the early years of his academic career in Russia, France and Ireland. His earlier publications on Celtic literatures and ideas expressed therein will be brought to light and examined. Smirnov should be recognised as a 'founding father' of a school of Russian Celtic studies. His ideas and influence are still alive in the works of subsequent Russian scholars of Celtic.

Alexander Smirnov was born on the 27 August (8 September new style) 1883 in Moscow. His descent as in some early Irish tales on conceptions and births that he later worked on is connected with unusual if not mysterious circumstances. Officially his father was Alexander Dmitrievich Smirnov, a high rank government official, a full state councillor and a deputy Ober-Procurator of the Senate, nevertheless Alexander Smirnov-junior was an illegitimate son of another influential and wealthy character. His biological father was Abram Isaakovich Zak, a millionaire of Jewish origin, a director of one of the major Saint Petersburg banks and also a full state councillor (Nikolaev 2007: 670). All his life Smirnov was forced to hide his Jewish background, in his autobiography in 1913 he wrote: "I am very sad not to be able to answer correctly in a field referring to

my parents...” In 1905 he wrote one of his experimental symbolist poems entitled “Prince Judas” (“The blood of the prophets of the Bible flows in my veins”), where he implicitly refers to facts of his autobiography. During the years of Stalin’s so called “struggle with cosmopolitanism” Smirnov was constantly afraid that certain facts about his descent would become known in public. Abram Zak has died in 1893 when Alexander was ten, after which his mother divorced Alexander Smirnov-senior.

Alexander Smirnov spent his childhood and youth in St Petersburg, where he lived a ‘very lonely life, little touching reality and devoting all his spare time to reading’. He became interested in philosophy and especially in the system of thought of Kant (IRLI 377/7/3301: 2). Smirnov graduated from the gymnasium and entered Saint Petersburg University reading physics and mathematics first but then transferring to Romance and Germanic department of the Faculty of History and Philology in 1902. He studied literary theory and the history of literature with Professor of Romance Philology Alexander N. Veselovsky and his followers Professor of Spanish literature D. K. Petrov, and Professor F. A. Brown. Smirnov was one of the youngest Veselovsky’s students and was attending his course on the poetics of literary plots. It was Veselovsky who gave Smirnov a subject for his thesis in the University, namely the Lays of Marie de France, and thus Smirnov became interested and professionally involved in Romance studies which were one of his scholarly interests during his remaining academic career (Zhirmunsky 1963: 78). He seemed also to have developed his interest in Celtic and early Irish matters due to Veselovsky’s pioneering research in the subject. In his student years Smirnov started writing poetry and literary criticism: his only poetic publication reflects symbolist motives common in the Silver Age of Russian literature. He met Russian philosophers D. Merezhkovsky and Z. Hippius in 1903 and became in his own words “devoted to religious, philosophical and aesthetic problems” (IRLI 377/7/3301: 2). In 1903-04 he had written a number of articles on religious aspects of contemporary literature, where his critical view on historical Christianity “with its Syriac asceticism” was reflected. One can argue that his views on Christian religion and his mysticism later influenced his interpretation of early Irish sagas with his emphasis on the pagan survivals as opposed to a medieval Christian milieu. In 1904 he had published his only experience in literary prose an apocryphal story *Lilith* with Z. Hippius as his co-author: the story tells about hero’s love to a ‘cat-woman’ (Smirnov & Hippius 1904).

In 1905 Alexander Smirnov went to Paris where he stayed as a visiting student until 1908 continuing his study of Romance literatures and mostly medieval French literature and the Arthurian cycle, especially the tales of Chrétien de Troyes. It was quite natural for the leading Russian universities in those years to send a future specialist in Western European literature or history to study abroad in a country of his or her choice. Smirnov’s research in the field of

medieval French literature eventually led him to what he perceived as primary sources of the *matière de Bretagne*: the early literature and folklore of Celtic-speaking peoples. He started learning Old Irish with the leading French Celtic scholar of the time H. d'Arbois de Jubainville at the Collège de France, and Old Welsh with H. Gaidoz (Zhirmunsky 1963: 79). Smirnov made such a progress in Old Irish that he could assist D'Arbois de Jubainville in preparation of the first translation of *Táin Bó Cúailnge* into French. The young Russian scholar was mentioned as D'Arbois's co-editor of the first volume of the *Táin* published in 1907 and Smirnov's suggestions of links with German or Slavic folk traditions were also acknowledged (fig. 1) (d'Arbois de Jubainville & Smirnov 1907: 6). Alongside his interest in Old Irish Smirnov was making progress in the Brittonic languages: he spent the summer of 1907 in Brittany learning Breton, visiting remote villages and going on fishing boats with Breton fishermen.

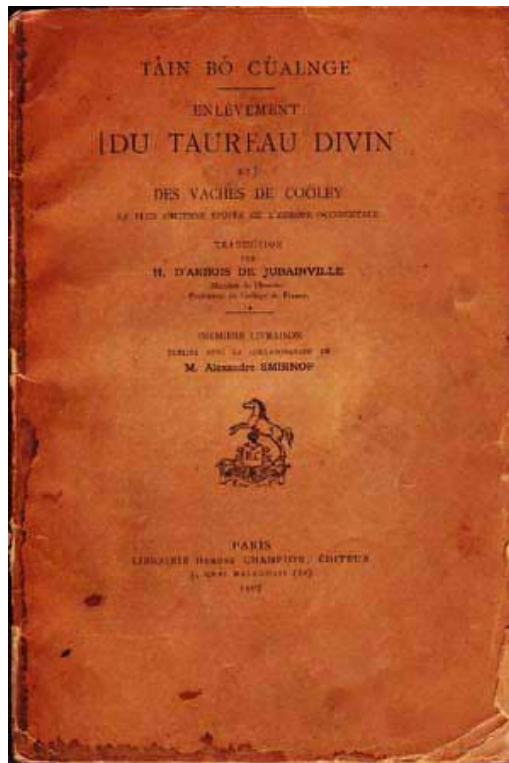


Fig. 1. The cover of **D'Arbois de Jubainville, H. & Smirnov, A., ed.**, 1907, *Táin Bó Cúailnge. Enlèvement [du taureau divin et] les vaches de Cooley. La plus ancienne épopée de l'Europe occidentale.* Tr. par H. d'Arbois de Jubainville (Première livraison publiée avec la collaboration de M. Alexandre Smirnov), Paris: Librairie Honoré Champion.

While studying in Paris, Alexander never lost his interest in Romance languages and literatures. Instead, he developed his knowledge of Spanish and became interested in Spanish medieval literature. In 1906 he was travelling in Spain.

In 1907 Smirnov briefly returned to Saint Petersburg to sit his state exams. He passed exams successfully and graduated from the University with a first class degree. On his return to Russia in 1908 he was granted a postgraduate scholarship by the Ministry of Education at the University of Saint Petersburg, department of Romance and Germanic philology, “in order to be prepared for professorial duties”. In 1911 he successfully passed his Master’s exams and was appointed Private Docent at the University (Plavskin 1969: 300). As a promising scholar he was sent back to Paris to continue his research and studies in 1911. He attended lectures and seminars in the major French academic centres: at the Sorbonne, the *École des hautes études*, the *École des Chartes*. Smirnov was working with the leading French philologists and medievalists Joseph Bédier, Antoine Thomas and Mario Roque. During his years in Paris Smirnov was trained as a philologist of contemporary European standard. In 1912-13 he acted as secretary to the editorial board of *Revue celtique*, one of the most influential periodicals in Celtic studies of the time. During these years two of his contributions were published in *Revue celtique*, and, contrary to his later fame in Russia as a scholar of early Irish literature, these publications were devoted to aspects of the Brittonic languages, to the Welsh and Breton medieval literatures. First, he published a critical review of R. Edens, *Erec-Geraint. Der Chrétien’sche Versoman und das wälsche Mabinogi* (Rostock, 1910) in *RC* 33 (1912) where he criticized the author’s approach and methodology in his comparative literary research and lack of knowledge of Middle Welsh (Smirnov 1912: 130-37). His second publication in *RC* discusses a possibility of early ‘bardic’ assemblies in tenth century Brittany (Smirnov 1913: 287-89). He debunks H. Zimmer’s attempt to see a thirteenth-century medieval French poem (*Lecheor*) as reliable evidence of the existence of such bardic assemblies in early medieval Brittany. It is remarkable how a young Russian medievalist used his skills in Middle French in order to verify the facts of early Breton cultural history. In those years he also published two book reviews in a French journal of Romance philology, *Romania* (Smirnov 1913a: 282-87; Smirnov 1914: 119-26). His name became familiar in the circle of French and Western European Celtic scholars.

In order to develop his knowledge of Old Irish during his second long stay in Western Europe Smirnov finally went to Dublin and attended seminars with Bergin and Best at the School of Irish Learning and at University College Dublin. Unfortunately for the moment I could not find further details concerning his stay in Ireland.

During his stay in Paris Smirnov never lost his interest in Russian literature and literary circles. It was in Paris that he first met A. Akhmatova, he was in

contact with other distinguished Russian poets M. Voloshin and K. Balmont who then also lived there. It is also remarkable fact that in 1912 he won the Paris chess championship. Smirnov always remained an active chess player and also translated number of books on chess into Russian.

In 1913, a year before the First World War started, A. Smirnov returned to Saint Petersburg, where he continued teaching both at the University and at Bestuzhev's Higher Courses for Women. He started his new course at the University 'Introduction to Celtic literatures', and a brief notice on that was published in the chronicle of *Revue celtique* of that year (Chronique 1913: 347). Unfortunately A. Smirnov did not publish much in the field of Celtic studies after his return to Russia, and it seems that the reason was that he was also involved in research in different other areas, such as medieval French literature, Spanish literature and Shakespearean studies. His only article on a Celtic subject published in Russian before the 1917 revolution was an essay on the Early Irish tale *Aided Muirchertaig maic Erca* published in 1915 (Smirnov 1915: 141-62). His was the first scholarly article discussing this tale after Whitley Stokes had edited the saga in 1902 (Stokes 1902: 395-437). When discussing the date of the text Smirnov refers to a personal communication by K. Meyer. It is likely that he met Meyer while working in Dublin. In his article on *Aided Muirchertaig maic Erca* Smirnov gives an abridged translation of the tale, which he later translated in full. He analyses annalistic data on the death of Muirchertach and compares it with a supernatural story preserved in the tale. In conclusion Smirnov suggests that an original historical tale with Muirchertach killed by Tuathal Maelgarb was distorted into a fairy tale by the eleventh century when the tale was written down (Smirnov 1915: 161). In a sense, Smirnov's approach was more historical than philological.

At the height of the First World War in October 1916 A. Smirnov was moved to the Urals, to the Perm branch of the University of Petrograd which grew later into the University of Perm. He went there in a group of young promising professors from the Russian capital, while some of them were thought as suspects by the government in those pre-revolutionary years. It is nevertheless significant that Smirnov himself was never associated with any revolutionary or anti-government activity, even by his later Soviet biographers. According to Smirnov's letter to his friend and colleague Victor Zhirmunsky he could not work properly in Perm (AAN 1001/3/764), this was not surprising as both lack of good libraries and new arrangements in the recently established institution all caused disruptions in his academic life. He stayed in Perm until the end of the academic year 1916/1917, which coincided with the period of the February revolution in Petrograd and the growing instability in Russia. Smirnov was back in Petrograd and lectured in the University from September 1917 onwards. In spite of political events and struggle he continued to give seminars on French medieval literature (Zhirmunskaya-Astvatsaturova 2001: 6). Writing to Zhirmunsky from Petrograd

on 24 October 1917 Smirnov says: “I am writing today and I have no idea what is going happen to me and to all of us tomorrow. Many people say this is going to be a decisive day. But I don’t say and I don’t think anything at all, and everything around seems to be happening in the other part of the world, or 300 years ago. I ceased to understand anything, and I am even ready to believe, that Bolsheviks are right now, I mean at this particular moment. But I am not going to elaborate on that” (Zhirmunskaya-Astvatsaturova 2001: 6-7). These lines reflect a chaos in minds of Russian intelligentsia of the time and prove that even the most politically unmotivated intellectual felt moved to take sides in a time of troubles.

Soon in December 1917 Smirnov left revolutionary Petrograd and went to the Crimea (Alushta) where he and his wife Elizaveta Magdenko had a holiday home nicknamed ‘Professors’ corner’ and which had been open to many literary men and artists in the 1910s (Nikolaev 2007: 671). For some reasons (political?) in September 1918 the family moved to Kharkov where Smirnov started lecturing at the local university. He did not seem to have any problems working both under German occupation of the city from April 1918 until January 1919 nor under Bolsheviks who gained access of Kharkov in January 1919. Smirnov was anxious to use any opportunity to lecture and to do research under any circumstances. Nevertheless, his later move to Simferopol in the Crimea where he became a professor for the next four years was possibly motivated by political reasons: as Kharkov had become a front city in the Civil war the Smirnovs removed themselves to the Crimea, then still occupied by the White forces. He lectured in Simferopol until 1922: the Bolsheviks’ victory and the end of the Civil War did not seem to have any impact on his academic career. He was not one of those who emigrated with retreating Wrangel’s forces from Sebastopol in 1920. While in Simferopol Smirnov worked on the methodology of literary theory, on ideas which were later reflected in publications of the early 1920s (Smirnov 1923: 91-109) and in his introduction to early Irish sagas in a book of his translations that he published in 1929 (Smirnov 1929). When A. Smirnov went back to Petrograd in 1922 he immediately returned to work in the University at the department of foreign literatures established recently by his friend Victor Zhirmunsky and until his death in 1962 he was lecturing in the University of Petrograd/Leningrad.

Smirnov’s most influential publication, a milestone in the field of Celtic studies in Russia, a collection of his translations of early Irish sagas was published in 1929 by the Academia publishing house in Leningrad, which was famous for its high quality editions of the world classics. Smirnov translated a selection of tales from the Ulster cycle (such as ‘The Exile of the Sons of Uisnech’, ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’, ‘The Tale of Mac Dathó’s Pig’ etc.) which he called heroic sagas, and also a group of tales from the *Immrama* and the mythological cycle which he called ‘fantasy tales’ (“фантастические саги”). All the tales were translated from Old Irish apart from ‘The Debility of the Ulstermen’ the original of which (as the translator admits) he could not find in the

libraries of Saint Petersburg and thus used instead a German rendering by R. Thurneysen. Smirnov admitted that he was using European translations of the tales while preparing his edition. Following certain contemporary trends which dominated Celtic studies in those years Smirnov was sometimes biased due to his perception as to what constituted an original *Ur-Text* of the tales which led him to leave untranslated what he called later Christian ‘insertions’. The first edition of Smirnov’s translations is also famous for its unique illustrations by A. Ushin which combined stylish adaptation of early medieval Irish art with elements of *art nouveau* (figs. 2-4).

To sum up my short introduction into the early years of Smirnov’s academic life it is important to understand a sharp difference between liberal and European oriented Russian pre-revolutionary scholarly environment, where Smirnov had started his career, and the later suffocating atmosphere of pseudo-Marxist ideological control over the range of the humanities in Soviet Russia. Smirnov’s role in Russian Celtic Studies would serve as a bridge from the European-centred and liberal early years of the twentieth century to the new revival in the 1980s. He was one of those human links between epochs unfortunately so rare in Russian society. His translations of early Irish tales, going into four editions since 1929, had a great impact on a specific Russian approach towards early Irish literature with its focus on literary analysis, much attention being paid to the fantastic and mythological dimensions in the context of comparative literature. Smirnov’s papers in St. Petersburg though studied by now from the point of view of his contacts and achievements in literary criticism deserve a special attention from specifically Celtic point of view. We, Russian Celticists, owe a lot to Smirnov’s scholarship. Just to give my own development as an example, I remember how in my childhood I opened a book of his ‘Irish sagas’ and was driven away to a different world, a world worth exploring and worth spending the rest of one’s life in.

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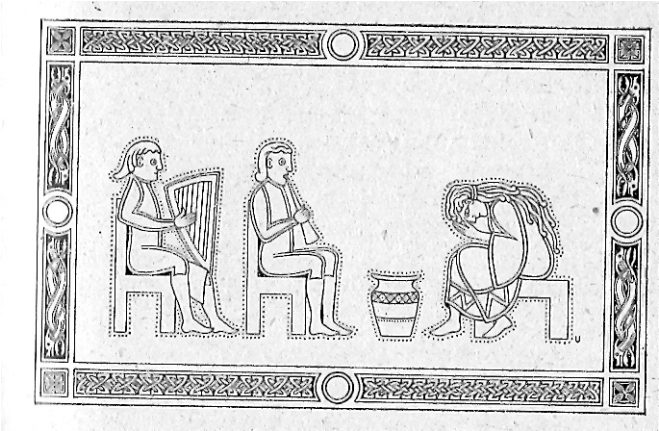


Fig. 2. 'The Exile of the sons of Uisliu', ill. by A. Ushin (Smirnov 1929: 67)

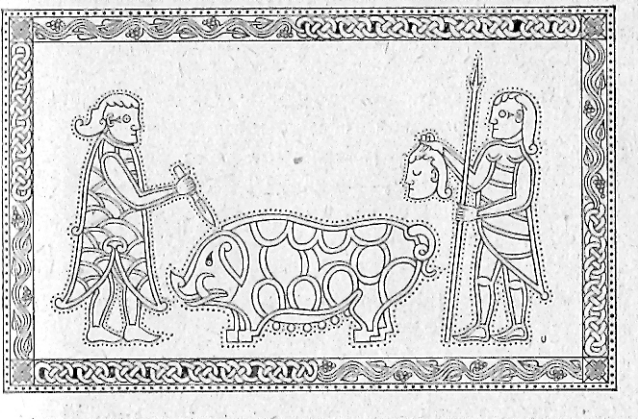


Fig. 3. 'The Tale of Mac Dathó's Pig', ill. by A. Ushin (Smirnov 1929: 93)





Fig. 4. 'The Voyage of Bran', ill. by A. Ushin (Smirnov 1929: 263).

### Abbreviations

- AAN** – *Archiv Akademii Nauk SSSR* [*The Archive of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR*]<sup>1</sup>
- IRLI** – *Institut Russkoi Literatury Rossijskoi Akademii Nauk* [*The Institute of Russian Literature of the Russian Academy of Sciences (The Pushkin House)*]
- RC** – *Revue celtique*

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<sup>1</sup> The archive material has been cited accordingly: the first number corresponds to the fund, the second number to the description, the third number corresponds to the number of the piece and finally, the page number is provided after a colon.

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