

THE REMEMBRANCER IN RUSSIA: THE FLETCHER EMBASSY TO MOSCOW IN 1588-89

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On 19 December 1586 Queen Elizabeth I wrote a letter to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen recommending the appointment of a certain Dr. Fletcher to the office of City Remembrancer which had been vacant since the death of its first holder, Thomas Norton, in 1584. She referred to Fletcher's learning, integrity and other commendable qualities which were not only sufficient to supply the place of Norton but might also serve "for some other purposes which we esteeme verie expedient both for us and for you". The "other purposes" were not specified, but they were to become clearer within the next year. The letter gave a strong hint that a civic refusal was not contemplated and suggested he be paid a "reasonable and sufficient stipend".

Who was Dr. Fletcher? Giles Fletcher was born about 1548 at Watford in Hertfordshire, the son of Richard Fletcher, Vicar of Bishop's Stortford and subsequently Rector of Cranbrook in Kent. He was educated at Eton and King's College, Cambridge, where he was admitted a scholar in 1565 and a fellow in 1568. In 1581 he married Joan Sheafe of Cranbrook, the daughter of a prosperous clothier, and in the same year was created doctor of laws and appointed on a commission for visiting Chichester, subsequently appearing as Chancellor of the diocese in 1582. In the parliament which commenced in 1585 he served as member for Winchelsea and in the following year he was sent on an embassy to Scotland with Thomas Randolph, the English ambassador. He is also recorded as an examiner of religious subversives and as a writer of sonnets, who also contemplated writing a Latin history of Queen Elizabeth's reign. His brother, Richard, had a successful career in the Church culminating in his appointment as Bishop of London in 1594. The family's literary reputation was more firmly established by the next generation as two of Giles's sons were poets and Richard's son was John Fletcher the dramatist.

The Queen's letter to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen was openly read at a Common Council meeting on 21 January 1587 at which the request was agreed and the matter of fees and salary referred to the Court of Aldermen. The letter written to the Queen about the same time still survives in the copy letter book of the Remembrancer, known as the *Remembrancia*, but is remarkable only for its

obsequious tone. At the meeting of the Court of Aldermen the following week Giles Fletcher was admitted and sworn into office at a salary of £50 per annum, to be paid quarterly. The description of his duties included attendance at the Court of Aldermen and at the mansion house of the Lord Mayor for the time being, when the Lord Mayor should send for him for the writing and ingrossing of all letters sent from the Court or from the Lord Mayor. Each letter was to be entered in a book provided by the City for that purpose, as were letters of importance written to the Court. He was also to perform such other duties as were required but was warned not to interfere with the business of the other sworn officers of the City without their consent. It is of interest that the only mention of Fletcher's office is the marginal note which describes it as "Secretary to the Lord Mayor", perhaps in recognition of the restricted nature of Fletcher's duties compared with those of Norton, whose office had been described in the Court of Aldermen in 1584 as "needless and superfluous".

Fletcher was not permitted to settle into his secretarial role for long. On 3 June 1587 he was already in Hamburg in the company of Richard Saltonstall, Governor of the Merchant Adventurers and shortly to become an Alderman, negotiating in an ambassadorial role with the Hanse concerning custom duties on English imports. The difficulties experienced by Saltonstall and Fletcher are recorded at some length in correspondence in the English state papers, but they eventually solved the problem by moving the English residency to Stade, much to the irritation of the proconsuls and senate of Hamburg who threatened reprisals. About the beginning of November a Dr. Schulte wrote to the English authorities from Hamburg praising the ambassadors as "most excellent and able men" and blaming the King of Denmark for most of the difficulties they encountered.

Fletcher was to face a greater challenge the following year when he was appointed on 6 June 1588 as ambassador to Russia. It was a long, arduous and dangerous journey and it took Fletcher and his party some three months to reach Kholmogory, south of Archangel on the regular route from the north to Moscow. He was not to return to England until July or August of the following year.

Why did the Queen send Fletcher to Russia? Direct trade between the two nations had begun in 1553, following an English expedition to discover a north-eastern passage to the Indies. Three ships, each with a pinnace and a boat, left Gravesend on 18 May, but it was only the largest, the *Edward Bonaventure*, with Richard Chancellor as her Captain, which reached Russia, anchoring in the Dvina estuary via the White Sea. Chancellor then made his way to Moscow at the invitation of Tsar Ivan IV, more commonly known as Ivan the Terrible, where he secured very favourable commercial privileges for the English. The expedition had been financed by a large group of London merchants and the Queen granted

a charter on 26 February 1555 establishing what is commonly referred to as the Russia or Muscovy Company, with Sebastian Cabot as life Governor. Thereafter there were regular trading and ambassadorial contacts between the two nations. England exported cloth, sugar, pewter, wine and some armaments, while Russia exported wax, oil, tallow, flax and furs.

The subsequent difficulties faced by the Company can be attributed to the very extensive trading privileges secured from the Tsar by Chancellor in 1553-54 and by Thomas Randolph in his embassy of 1568-69. The Tsar hoped a formal alliance might result from these very favourable concessions for English merchants but, although Elizabeth was prepared to supply armaments, she feared closer ties might antagonise the Baltic states, a traditional source of naval stores and grain.

The embassy of the irascible Sir Jerome Bowes in 1583 had not been a success and after Ivan the Terrible's death in 1584, the English encountered increasing obstacles. Ivan was succeeded by his eldest surviving son, Fedor, a man of limited intelligence who relied entirely on his advisers, the principal one of which was Boris Godunov.

Before Bowes had managed to antagonise the Tsar and his court, he had been very honourably received in Moscow. The welcome for Fletcher was much less warm. No one bid him welcome or conducted him to his lodgings and he claimed he had been "placed in an house very unhandsoom, unholsoom, of purpose (as it seemed) to doe me disgrace and to hurt my health, whear I was kept a prisoner, not as an ambassador". Elizabeth's legendary parsimony rebounded on Fletcher when her gifts were "very contemptuouslie cast down" before him. Another royal blunder was to address letters to Boris Godunov from the Privy Council rather than herself, an affront which resulted in negotiations being left to the noted Anglophobe minister, Shchelkalov. Fletcher did not help his own cause by neglecting to read out the Tsar's numerous titles in full, a slight he was eventually required to rectify and which was referred to in the Tsar's later correspondence.

The Russians were also negotiating with Queen Elizabeth's enemy, the King of Spain, concerning joint action against the Turk, but the atmosphere improved after news of the defeat of the Armada reached Moscow and Fletcher, perhaps against the odds, was able to obtain a confirmation and re-establishment of former privileges, together with some additional benefits. He had his last audience with the Tsar on 22 April 1589, but still experienced discourtesies on his return, discovering at the Russian city of Vologda that orders had been given not to "hire out horse or boat to any Englishman". The Queen was later to send

a strong letter of complaint about his treatment and the discreditation of her letters which, if they had been written to the Emperor Solomon himself "could not be in better condition, title, seal and writing".

A relieved Fletcher arrived back in London in the summer of 1589, bearing letters to the Queen both from the Tsar and Boris Godunov and reportedly telling a friend that "the poets cannot fancy Ulysses more glad to be come out of the den of Polyphemus, than he was to be rid out of the power of such a barbarous Prince ...". The Tsar Fedor in turn complained in his letter of the actions of some English merchants and declared he had granted privileges "not permitted for any other nation". The English had the right to have houses at Moscow, Iaroslavl, Vologda and on the Dvina and "they live all one with our people". Fletcher's disillusionment with his treatment may account for a paper on the decay of the Russian trade which is among the Lansdowne manuscripts in the British Library and which is now attributed to him. The author advocates moving the English staple northwards to St. Nicholas and keeping the Russians in order by blockading the port as necessary or by seizing the large stores of Russian furs at Pechora. This "gunboat diplomacy" was never implemented and there must be some doubt whether it was ever a viable proposition in these dangerous northern waters.

Fletcher's greatest lasting achievement was not, however, to be the success of his embassy, but his authoritative account "Of the Russe Common Wealth", which was published in London by Thomas Charde in 1591. This has been described by one recent authority as "unquestionably the most important English work on Russia before the reign of Peter the Great and ... a more thorough and systematic analysis of Muscovite institutions than any other foreign work of the period".

In his dedicatory epistle to the Queen, Fletcher stated that your Highness would see "a true and strange face of a tyrannical state (most unlike to your own) ...". Inevitably he saw Russia through the eyes of an Elizabethan puritan and his account of the Orthodox Church, for instance, is about as prejudiced as one would expect. He nevertheless discovered a great deal about Russian government and society and it is assumed his language skills may have enabled him to develop some understanding of Russian during his sojourn in Moscow, although he is known to have had the services of an interpreter named John Socoter. Fletcher had obviously developed the idea of writing a book at an early stage as he tells us himself that he reduced his notes "into some order by the way as I returned". He was assisted by the Muscovy Company's rather shady agent, Sir Jerome Horsey, who accompanied Fletcher on his return and who was later inclined to take credit both for Fletcher's achievements and for information in his book.

“Of the Russe Common Wealth” deals with the cosmography of the country, its natural products, its government at both national and provincial levels, its colonies and borders, the Tsar and his household and his revenues, the Russian church and its clergy, doctrine, liturgy and ceremonies, the armed forces and the system of justice. It is particularly good on the daily life and customs of the Tsar and the people, noting, for instance, that the Emperor rose about four in the morning for his devotions. Fletcher certainly did not pull his punches and boldly reported the (true) story of the death of Ivan the Terrible’s eldest son at the hands of his father, as follows - “he died of a blowe given him by his father upon the head in his furie with his walking staffe, or (as some say) of a thrust with a prong of it driven deepe into his head”. His brother, the reigning Tsar Fedor, was described as having no children “neither is like ever to have for ought that may be conjectured by the constitution of his body, and the barennesse of his wife after so many yeares marriage”. Fedor’s younger brother of 6 or 7 took pleasure “to looke into the bleeding throtes of beastes, and to beate geese and hennes with a staffe ...”. With outspoken comments such as these, Fletcher greatly alarmed the merchants of the Muscovy Company and they lost little time in petitioning Lord Burghley, pointing out that the book “will turne the Companie to some great displeasure with the Russe Emperour”. The contents were “towched in soe harde tearmes, as that the Companie doubt not the revenge thereof will light on theire people and goodes remayning in Russia and utterlie over-throwe the trade for ever”. As a result of this lobbying the book was quickly suppressed, although Fletcher’s work did not completely disappear from public view. For instance, when Milton composed his *A Brief History of Muscovia* in the 1630s, he relied heavily on Fletcher.

The book’s contents were still controversial enough in the 19th century to cause a major row in Russia in 1848, when Tsar Nicholas I’s Minister of Public Instruction, Uvarov, ordered the suppression of a Russian translation. A further attempt to produce a Russian edition failed in 1864 when Tsar Alexander II prohibited its publication, but a Russian language version was produced in 1867 and was printed in either England or Switzerland. *The Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* describes Fletcher as “one of the most important historians of Russia in the second half of the sixteenth century” although his book contains “many mistakes and distortions”. It will be interesting to see if there is a re-assessment of Fletcher’s work in the different political climate that now prevails in Russia.

Fletcher was presented by the Queen to the office of Treasurer of St. Paul’s Cathedral in 1597 and he continued in his civic office until 1605, by which time it had reverted to its original title of Remembrancer. His career was not without

further incident, however, as an expression of sympathy for his patron, the Earl of Essex in 1601, led to his being committed briefly into the custody of Thomas Lowe, one of the City aldermen. Fletcher died in the parish of St. Katherine Coleman, Fenchurch Street and was buried in that church on 11 March 1611.

The attitude of the civic authorities to Fletcher's ambassadorial activities is not recorded, although the merchants of the Muscovy Company were no doubt pleased with the success of his mission. This did not extend to covering his expenses as the Privy Council was investigating this matter as late as June 1590. His ambassadorial role did, however, leave a large gap in the civic records. Volume I of the *Remembrancia* contains no letters from February-December 1587, about the time of the embassy to Hamburg, and no letters between February 1588 and January 1591, that is the period before, during and after the Moscow embassy. In these terms, Fletcher's tenure of the post of Secretary to the Lord Mayor can hardly be considered an unqualified success. The historian of London's loss is no doubt the historian of Russia's gain and we can perhaps console ourselves with the thought that Fletcher had produced "one of the most important works of Elizabethan travel literature". On a visit to Moscow earlier this year, I had the privilege of visiting the Old English Court in Moscow, given to the Russia Company by Ivan the Terrible and recently restored. It was a sobering thought to consider that Giles Fletcher had probably sat in the court room there more than 400 years previously.

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