Aileen M. Kelly


Aileen Kelly is well known to students of Russia for her impressive essay collections *Toward Another Shore* (1998), and *Views from the Other Shore* (1999) and her articles in *The New York Review of Books*. With an authoritative voice, Kelly has covered two centuries of Russia’s intellectual history, concentrating on how ideas (of Bacon, Schiller, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Proudhon, and Mill) from outside the country stimulated critics, essayists and novelists to try adapting them to Russian reality. In *The Discovery of Chance*, Kelly builds on her previous work, adding material from sources such as Herzen’s personal correspondence, and concentrating on affinities between the thought of Alexander Herzen (1812–1870) and that of Charles Darwin (1809–1882).

The book can be read as an intellectual biography, its twenty-two chapters ranging from “Who Was Herzen?” to “The Last Years,” but the trajectory veers off fairly early to focus on Herzen’s interest in science and the way that subject was interwoven with materialist thought, a sense of realism, and the role of chance in history. With her innovative approach to Herzen, Kelly differs markedly from other commentators on this seminal figure of the Russian and European nineteenth-century. The influence of Herzen’s science-obsessed cousin Alexei Yakovlev (known in Moscow simply as “the Chemist”), and the choice of an undergraduate concentration at Moscow University’s Faculty of Physical and Mathematical Sciences play crucial roles in Kelly’s narrative. She successfully brings to life the colorful Muscovite context in which Herzen was educated and in which he first began to write, with a *kruzhok* (circle) for every cultural and political interest, and where the intensity of discussion was matched by the impossibility of bringing about change under Nicholas I.

The university courses, professors, and discussions that interest Kelly are the ones concerning science, broadly conceived, as *Naturphilosophie* reached Russia; she makes the expansive claim that Herzen was schooled “in a method that would inform his approach in later years to history and the human struggle for existence” (53). While still at university, he wrote reviews of scientific articles and books and attended meetings of the Moscow Naturalists’ Society. After returning from seven years of internal exile, Herzen composed two series of essays that were published in Russia in the 1840s; “Dillettantism in Science” and “Letters on the Study of Nature” helped popularize the understanding of *nauka* as a disciplined and objective approach to studying the world, in an attempt to bring Russians down from the misty heights of Romanticism. Kelly
draws a straight line from these works to Herzen’s powerful analysis of history in *From the Other Shore* and “Robert Owen,” and sees the Darwinian revolution that began in 1859 as linked to the ideas already evident in her protagonist.

In *My Past and Thoughts*, Herzen traced his evolution somewhat differently, identifying the Decembrists’ 1825 uprising and brutal treatment at the hands of the tsar as orienting his life, and that of Nikolai Ogarev, towards political action; he certainly assigns this rebellion much greater importance than university courses or early essays. There is a clear trajectory from 1825 to the Herzen’s 1834 arrest and 1835 sentence to internal exile, where he languished in Perm, Vyatka, Vladimir, Petersburg, and Novgorod, while his friends sat in the exciting lecture rooms of Berlin and Paris. In January 1847 Herzen, fed up with political constraints, moved his family abroad. Over the next two decades he published powerful essays that enlightened Europeans about Russia’s potential, and informed Russians about what their press left unsaid about emancipation, government corruption, and threats to the state monopoly on power. The title of the almanac *Poliarnaia zvezda* (The Polar Star) was a direct reference to the Decembrists, and the newspaper *Kolokol* (The Bell), used Herzen’s martyred heroes as a touchstone for all that was worthy in the Russian character. One of the compliments that meant the most to Herzen was to learn that the surviving Decembrists read and valued his work.

If there is a residue of Herzen’s youthful interest in science in his writing from abroad, it is to be found in his figurative language. He frequently employed scientific images to describe the historical turmoil surrounding him, which believed could not be ameliorated by algebraic formulas. He described investigative journalism as vivisection, and saw himself as an observer in an anatomical theater, but not a doctor from whom a cure could be demanded. His work, he said, was not science, but an exposé. There is certainly a scientific discipline to his writing, especially in *The Bell*, where he demanded a strict adherence to the facts from himself and others. During the last decade of his life, his scientific interests centered on his son Sasha, who became a professor of physiology in Europe and a vigorous defender of new scientific ideas, including those of Darwin.

Like Isaiah Berlin, Aileen Kelly is supremely skilled at tracing the origins of ideas in Russia, and the reader of *The Discovery of Chance* will gain a valuable background in modern European thought as it traveled eastward to Russia, and as Russians traveled West to encounter new ideas *in situ*. What they will miss are the political passions in Herzen’s life, the unwavering belief in freedom and self-determination that led him to risk – and lose – his newspaper’s readership in an attempt to support rebellious Poles, calm down Russian radicals,