

George Borrow (1803–1881) in St Petersburg and the Scriptures in Manchu

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Abstract

George Henry Borrow became well known in Victorian England as a novelist and travel writer. He wrote a brilliant description of the five years he spent working in Spain for the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS), *The Bible in Spain* (1843). It became a best-seller. This article examines Borrow's multi-faceted work in St Petersburg — before his time in Spain — in which he was engaged in the translation of the New Testament into the Manchu language. This article also brings out Borrow's Christian faith, an aspect which has been ignored or misrepresented in much of the literature about him. In 1911, it was reported that a bundle of letters by Borrow had been discovered — 'a great literary treasure'. Here, his letters from St Petersburg, held in the Cambridge University Library, are used as the main primary source material to enable a picture of Borrow and his endeavours to be painted.

Keywords

George Borrow; Bible Society; Manchu; St Petersburg; translation

Introduction

George Henry Borrow became well known in Victorian England as a novelist and travel writer. He wrote a brilliant description of the five years he spent working in Spain for the British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) entitled *The Bible in Spain* (1843), a book he described as narrating his 'journeys, adventures and imprisonments'. It became a best-seller: six editions were printed in one year alone.¹ He followed this with two books that partly told aspects of his own story but also sprang from his long-term interest in Romany-Gipsy people: *Lavengro* (1851), meaning 'Word-Master' in Romany, and *The Romany Rye* (1857), or 'The Gypsy Gentleman'. His last major work was a classic travel book, *Wild*

¹ Edward Thomas, *George Borrow: The Man and his Books* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1912), p. 6; George Borrow, *The Bible in Spain* (London: John Murray, 1843).

Wales (1862).² Borrow's early life was mainly spent in eastern England in East Anglia. His father, Thomas, was an army recruiting officer and his mother, Ann, a farmer's daughter. As a teenager he spent time with his father in Ireland, attending a Protestant Academy and learning Irish, Latin, and Greek. He completed his school education in Norwich, at the Grammar School, where his ability in languages was evident. It was reckoned at the age of eighteen that he knew eight spoken languages — Welsh, Irish, German, Danish, French, Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese.³ During the years that followed, up to 1832, he worked in a lawyer's office, travelled, and was involved in literary translation.⁴ His later encounter with the Slavic world, living in St Petersburg, was anticipated in his translating some of the works of the Polish Romantic poet Adam Mickiewicz from his 1829 collection.⁵

In Norwich, Borrow's main association with Baptist life, when he was in his early twenties, was with Simon Wilkin, a scholar, a businessman, and in particular a publisher. He published Borrow's *Romantic Ballads: Translated from the Danish* (1826).⁶ Wilkin's spiritual and educational mentor was Joseph Kinghorn, the influential minister of St Mary's Baptist Church, Norwich. Kinghorn carried on an extensive correspondence, and Wilkin ensured this was later published. Wilkin also published work by William Taylor, a leading thinker in Norwich, the first advocate in England of German Romantic literature, and someone who had a powerful impact on Borrow. Taylor said that the sight of Joseph Kinghorn in prayer 'reminded him of the benediction of the people by the Pope', which he had witnessed in Rome.⁷ When at a later stage, Taylor became a guide to Borrow, a letter Taylor wrote to his friend, the poet Robert Southey, had this comment: 'A Norwich

² George Borrow, *Lavengro: The Scholar, the Gipsy, the Priest* (London: John Murray, 1851); *Romany Rye* (London: John Murray, 1857); *Wild Wales* (London: John Murray, 1862).

³ J. W. Robberds, *Life and Writings of the Late William Taylor* (1843), cited in Herbert Jenkins, *The Life of George Borrow* (London: John Murray, 1912), p. 34.

⁴ Clement King Shorter, *George Borrow and his Circle* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1913), p. 135.

⁵ George Hyde, "Language Is First of All a Foreign One": George Borrow as a Translator from Polish', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 77, no. 1 (1999), 74–92.

⁶ George Borrow, *Romantic Ballads, Translated from the Danish; and Miscellaneous Pieces* (Norwich: S. Wilkin, 1826).

⁷ C. B. Jewson, 'St. Mary's, Norwich', *Baptist Quarterly*, 10, no. 6 (1941), 340–346.

young man is construing with me Schiller’s “Wilhelm Tell”, with the view of translating it for the press. His name is George Henry Borrow, and he has learnt German with extraordinary rapidity; indeed, he has the gift of tongues.⁸ Much has been said about Borrow’s literary work.⁹ The focus of this article is the first period of Borrow’s association with the BFBS, from 1832 to 1835, largely in St Petersburg.

Borrow as a Bible Society Recruit

In October 1832, Borrow wrote to Mary Clarke, a widow who was part of a vibrant evangelical circle in East Anglia, sending her ‘the tale of Blue Beard’, which he had translated into Turkish. The reason for the gift of a book in Turkish has not been explored by writers. The connection was probably the BFBS. Mary Clarke, and others she knew, were keen supporters of the BFBS, which was the leading agency for the translation and circulation of the Bible. Evangelicals in the Church of England were kept in touch with this work not only through the Society’s publications but also through the *Christian Observer*, which in 1832 reported on translations of the Bible that had been produced in Turkish.¹⁰ A friend and spiritual mentor of Mary Clarke’s was Francis Cunningham, the Church of England Rector of St Margaret’s, Pakefield, and Secretary of the Lowestoft Branch of the Bible Society. Borrow was introduced to Cunningham through Mary Clarke and her brother, Breame Skepper.¹¹ Francis Cunningham’s brother John was a leading figure in the evangelical movement in the Church of England. In one episode, when the BFBS was attacked for not being purely Anglican — it was inter-denominational — Francis Cunningham sprang to its defence.¹² Borrow was entering a new world, which meant that previous

⁸ William A. Dutt, *George Borrow in East Anglia* (London: David Nutt, 1896), pp. 25–26.

⁹ There is a George Borrow Society, see <<http://georgeborrow.org/home.html>>. For a fine article on Borrow’s religious convictions published by the Society, see Kathleen Cann, ‘George Borrow and Religion’, in *George Borrow in Wales: Proceedings of the 1989 George Borrow Conference*, ed. by Gillian Fenwick (Toronto: George Borrow Society, 1990), pp. 55–63. I am grateful to Ken Barrett for his help with this.

¹⁰ *The Christian Observer* (London: J. Hatchard & Son, 1832), p. 255.

¹¹ William Knapp, *Life, Writings and Correspondence of George Borrow*, 2 vols (London: John Murray, 1899), 1, 149–152.

¹² Francis Cunningham, *Observations on an Anonymous Pamphlet* (Yarmouth: J. Keymer, 1817).

influences, such as that of the religiously sceptical Taylor, began to fade, and evangelicals such as Cunningham in the Church of England, Kinghorn, and a Nonconformist circle in Norwich would draw him into Christian undertakings.

On 27 December 1832, Cunningham wrote an enthusiastic letter to Andrew Brandram, a graduate of Oriel College, Oxford, who was a BFBS secretary, about Borrow's potential as a translator. Cunningham said he had 'long heard' of Borrow, presumably through Mary and Breame in his congregation, but also in all probability through Joseph John Gurney, a Quaker philanthropist, author, and evangelical supporter in Norwich. Cunningham was so impressed by Borrow after a conversation with him that he wondered if he could be a successor to T. Pell Platt, a fellow of Trinity College, Cambridge and the librarian of BFBS, and William Greenfield, a widely-published philologist who had been the Society's editorial superintendent. Cunningham explained to Brandram that Borrow, without a university education, could 'read the Bible in thirteen languages'. Borrow's reading of the Bible was to become a major part of his life. The letter explained that Borrow did not have a particular denominational allegiance but held Christian convictions. Cunningham urged Brandram to meet Borrow in London. Cunningham himself was due in London (to attend the evangelical Islington Clerical Conference) and hoped to meet Borrow there and could facilitate a BFBS meeting.¹³

The timing of Cunningham's letter was propitious, because of renewed interest in the possibility of producing the Scriptures in Manchu, the imperial language of China during the Qing dynasty (1644–1912). The Qing Dynasty is sometimes known as the Manchu Dynasty taking account not only of the language but of the early founding of the dynasty by the Manchu clan Aisin Gioro. Starting in what is today north-east China, the Manchu presence expanded into surrounding territories in China. What was established became known as the Empire of the Great Qing. The name Qing was taken first of all in 1636 and it was in 1644 that the Manchu conquest of Beijing took place, which is

¹³ For Islington, see David Bebbington, 'The Islington Conference', in *Evangelicalism and the Church of England in the Twentieth Century: Reform, Resistance and Renewal*, ed. by Andrew Atherstone and John Maiden (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2014), pp. 48–67.

considered the start of the dynasty's rule. Through this the Manchu language was given considerable significance.¹⁴ In 1821, the Bible Society had commissioned Stepán Vasilievitch Lipoftsoff in St Petersburg, who had spent fourteen years with the Russian Mission in Beijing, to translate the New Testament into Manchu.¹⁵ As a result of his work, an edition of 550 copies of Matthew's Gospel was printed from type that was cast for the undertaking. The BFBS in London took a hundred copies, with the rest, along with the typeface, stored in St Petersburg. Later, Lipoftsoff completed the translation of the New Testament. Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat, a leading Sinology scholar, praised Lipoftsoff's work.¹⁶ In 1832, the BFBS was looking for someone who could work with this text and produce and print the whole New Testament in Manchu for future use in China.

A further factor that heightened BFBS interest in Manchu in 1832 was a discovery made by William Swan, a Scot who served in Siberia with the London Missionary Society and was a translator of the Bible into Mongolian. He found in the remarkable library of Baron Schilling von Canstadt in St Petersburg a manuscript — amounting to 10 000 pages — of an unpublished translation into the Manchu language of most of the Old Testament and two books of the New. This translation was the work of Louis Antoine de Puerot, or Poirot (1735–1815), a French Jesuit scholar and missionary in Beijing, who at a later stage served the Russian Mission in China as a doctor. The discovery of the manuscript was felt by Swan to be crucial, and he informed the BFBS. It was so important to him that he decided to defer the journey he was due to make to Siberia and instead make a transcription of the text, which he was to complete over the course of the next two years. He wanted enquiries to be made to ascertain if someone could be found to facilitate eventual publication.¹⁷ Encouragement also came from Isaac

¹⁴ Robert S. Elegant, *Manchu* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1980).

¹⁵ See Hartmut Walravens, 'Christian Literature in Manchu: Some Bibliographic Notes', *Monumenta Serica*, 48 (2000), 445–469; and 'Christian Literature in Manchu', *Central Asiatic Journal*, 58, no. 1-2 (2015), 197–224.

¹⁶ Knapp, *Borrow*, p. 155. See Markus Messling, 'Representation and Power: Jean-Pierre Abel-Rémusat's Critical Chinese Philology', *Journal of Oriental Studies*, 44, no. 1-2 (2011), 1–23.

¹⁷ William Swan to the Bible Society, 10 November 1832, BSA/E3 1/1/1. BSA references are to the Bible Society archive in Cambridge University Library. I am grateful to Dr Onesimus Ngundu, the Society librarian, for his help.

Jacob Schmidt in St Petersburg, who had been engaged in translation and commerce in Russia and who had some influence with the Russian government. He considered the Russian authorities might well be favourable to the production of a Manchu translation of the Bible.¹⁸ An invitation was sent to Borrow to come to the Bible Society offices in London in January 1833 to discuss this possibility.

Borrow responded swiftly, and walked from Norwich to London, covering the distance of 112 miles in twenty-seven hours. His expenses, when he was offered reimbursement, were a pint of ale, a half-pint of milk, a roll of bread, and two apples. On 14 January 1833, at the offices of the Bible Society in Earl Street, Borrow was interviewed by Andrew Brandram and Joseph Jowett, the BFBS editorial secretary, and perhaps others. The conversation was about learning Manchu, and Borrow expressed his willingness to do so and conveyed his characteristic confidence in the area of languages. It seems that Borrow was convincing. His personality, his articulate way of communicating, and his breadth of knowledge generally evoked positive reactions. Coupled with this, his height and his prematurely white hair were impressive. It was agreed that he would have six months for the task, and his return journey to Norwich, by mail coach, was paid for by the Society. On 10 February 1833, Borrow wrote what would be the first of many letters to the Society, especially to Jowett.¹⁹ He reported being ‘almost incessantly occupied’ in learning Manchu. He had brought from London a copy of Lipoftsoff’s translation of Matthew. He had also been lent the French-Manchu dictionary produced by the eighteenth-century French Jesuit Jean Joseph Marie Amiot. With the help of this dictionary, which had been praised by Prince Hongwu, a member of the Qing imperial family, Borrow did not hesitate to offer an initial critique of what Lipoftsoff had done. He saw the Lipoftsoff translation as ‘a good one’ but believed that in various places it ‘must be utterly unintelligible

¹⁸ Isaac Jacob Schmidt to the Bible Society, 31 December 1832 and 12 January 1833, BSA/E3 1/1/1. Robert Pinkerton, a principal Agent of the BFBS, backed up this view.

¹⁹ These letters are held in BSA/F2/5. For the purposes of this article, I have page referenced the published versions from T. H. Darlow, *Letters of George Borrow to the British and Foreign Bible Society* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1911).

to the Manchus from having unnecessarily made use of words which are not Manchu, and with which the Tartars cannot be acquainted'.²⁰

Although Borrow had only recently come to know the Bible Society leadership, he was already referring to Brandram as his 'kind and respected friend' and Brandram had expressed interest in the possibility of Borrow being involved in outreach to gypsies. Borrow's evangelical convictions have tended to be characterised by biographers as hypocritically sanctimonious — 'cant', acceptable to the Bible Society, was how Clement Shorter dismissed it.²¹ However, this fails to take into account the new evangelical influences on Borrow, especially through people connected with the BFBS. Among those in Norwich was Gurney, who was the founder of the Norwich Auxiliary of the BFBS.²² For Borrow, Gurney was an advocate of 'the glory of Christ', as was Borrow's mentor, Cunningham, who had married Gurney's sister. Borrow wrote to Cunningham asking for prayer for 'speedy success' in learning Manchu.²³ As well as valuing his new experience of evangelical spirituality, Borrow appreciated the breadth of scholarship in the BFBS. In March and June 1833, he wrote to Jowett that he was using Julius von Klaproth's *Chrestomathie Mandchou* (a collection of Manchu texts), sent to him by the BFBS, and in turn he had undertaken translation into and from Manchu.²⁴ By June, Borrow felt he had 'mastered Manchu'. He sat an examination in London in which, as Jenkins notes, he had to translate a Manchu hymn to the Great Futsa, the Buddha of the Tartars. Borrow's work met with full approval and on 29 July 1833 he was duly appointed to the BFBS.²⁵

²⁰ The whole letter of 10 February 1833 is in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 6–11. I am using 'Manchu' rather than other versions such as Mandchou. For Amiot, see Alexander Statman, 'A Forgotten Friendship', *East Asian Science, Technology, and Medicine*, 46 (2017), 89–118 (p. 101).

²¹ Clement K. Shorter, *The Life of George Borrow* (London: J. M. Dent, 1919), p. 104.

²² Roger H. Martin, 'Quakers, the Bible, and the British and Foreign Bible Society', *Quaker History*, 85, no. 1 (1996), 13–28.

²³ George Borrow to Francis Cunningham, 20 January 1833, BSA/F2/5.

²⁴ Letters of 18 March and 9 June 1833, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 11–13.

²⁵ Herbert Jenkins, *The Life of George Borrow* (London: John Murray, 1912), p. 104; Minutes of the Editorial Sub-Committee of the BFBS, 29 July 1833.

Settling in St Petersburg

It was only in the later stages of the conversations Brandram and Jowett had with Borrow that relocation to St Petersburg was mentioned as part of the appointment; and when it was, Borrow responded with enthusiasm. He left London on 31 July 1833. On the first leg of the journey, a voyage to Hamburg which took three days, Borrow became ill. He recorded in a letter to Jowett that he became friendly with two Jewish passengers from Copenhagen. A purpose-built synagogue in the city was opened that year.²⁶ The standard histories record how these two, Weil and Valentin, helped Borrow in his illness. However, writers such as Jenkins omit important details, such as the fact that Borrow conversed with them about the Talmud and described how ‘the Lord took care of me’ through them as ‘His instruments’. In Hamburg, Borrow visited one of the main churches and found its interior ‘very venerable and solemn, but the service seemed to be nothing more than a low-muttered chanting, from which it was impossible to derive much spiritual edification. There was no sermon.’ He concluded this letter to Jowett by expressing the hope that he would soon be able to write from St Petersburg, ‘provided it pleases the Almighty to vouch-safe me a happy arrival’, and he presented to the BFBS staff ‘a fervent request that you will not forget me in your prayers’. Indicators such as these of Borrow’s spiritual outlook are not regarded as significant by those who have written about Borrow; his motive is seen as using language that would appeal to the BFBS.²⁷

Borrow’s excitement increased markedly when he arrived in the Russian capital. He immediately enthused to Gurney in Norwich about the Russian capital city.²⁸ In another letter, to Jowett, in August 1833, he described it effusively as ‘the finest city in the world; neither London nor Paris nor any other European capital which I have visited has sufficient pretensions to enter into comparison with it in respect to beauty and grandeur’. However, his priority was to make connections. He found William Swan ‘one of the most amiable and interesting

²⁶ Conrad Kisch, ‘The Jewish Community in Denmark: History and Present Status’, *Judaism*, 47, no. 2 (1998), 214–231.

²⁷ Jenkins, *Life of George Borrow*, pp. 107–108.

²⁸ Knapp, *Borrow*, p. 171.

characters I have ever met with'. In St Petersburg, Swan was part of the Congregational Chapel, known as the British and American Chapel, and it is likely that this is where Borrow normally worshipped, although he also attended the Armenian Church and came to know 'several very clever and very learned Armenians'.²⁹ Along with Swan, Borrow visited Isaac Schmidt, who was sure permission would be granted for printing the Manchu New Testament. A few days later, Borrow met Lipoftsoff, who to Borrow's great surprise was 'totally unaware' of any plan to print his translation. Nonetheless, Lipoftsoff promised to give Borrow any help he could. Borrow was pleased that their conversation would be in Russian — Lipoftsoff did not speak any other European language — since he saw that frequent conversation about the task that lay ahead would improve his spoken Russian.³⁰

As well as talking to those who had a specific interest in translation, Borrow made other contacts. In Norwich he had come to know John Venning, a prominent member of the Independent (Congregational) Prince's Street Chapel, Norwich.³¹ Angus Fraser notes the benefits Borrow gained through associating with forward-thinking Dissenters — Baptists, Congregationalists, and Quakers — while holding to the Church of England.³² Venning was a long-established merchant in St Petersburg. He returned to Norwich in 1830. His work in Russia included not only his business interests but also a commitment to prison reform. In this he had the support of the Emperor, Nicholas I. Venning gave Borrow letters of introduction addressed to, among others, Prince Alexander Golitsyn, who had been the Russian Minister of Education and president of the Russian Bible Society. A crucial contact of Venning's for Borrow's work was to be Baron Schilling von Canstadt, a Lutheran from Tallinn, Estonia, who was at the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and was a member of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Science. In 1832, the Baron returned from a two-year mission at the Russo-Chinese border. Venning's letters opened doors, and Borrow saw them as helpful both

²⁹ Letter of 20 February 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 73–79.

³⁰ Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 21–26. Letter not dated, but given as August.

³¹ John Alexander, *Thirty Years' History of the Church and Congregation in Prince's Street Chapel, Norwich* (London: Jackson & Walford, 1847).

³² Angus M. Fraser, 'George Borrow' (unpublished paper, 1981), p. 4, BSA/F2/5.

in his tasks and in case he was seen as a spy. A letter from Venning to Borrow was addressed ‘My dear friend Mr George Borrow’ and ended ‘May the Lord bless you and make you a great blessing there’.³³ The biography of Borrow by Michael Collie (1982), referring to Borrow’s arrival in St Petersburg, is entirely misleading in suggesting ‘it is doubtful whether in any real sense he was a Christian’.³⁴

The possibilities inherent in influential relationships were quickly taken up by Borrow. Two days after his arrival in St Petersburg, he was being introduced to Prince Golitsyn by John Venning’s son James, and Golitsyn wrote to John in Norwich to report on this.³⁵ As well as making these contacts, Borrow began to investigate the manuscripts of the scriptures in Manchu. He assisted Swan in transcribing the version produced by Puerot and applauded ‘the diligence and learning of him who, probably unasked and unrewarded, engaged in and accomplished it’. Borrow found the style, as far as he could judge, ‘to an eminent degree elegant and polished’. In making comparison with Lipoftsoff, he was not fully aware that after Lipoftsoff produced his translation of the Gospel of Matthew in 1822 he made some changes to it.³⁶ Other points of comparison for Borrow were 300 copies of the modern Russian New Testament produced through the (by then disbanded) Russian Bible Society, and no less than 20 000 copies of what Borrow called the ‘Slavonian Bible’, more often referred to as being the Old Church Slavonic Bible.³⁷ On 2 January 1834, Jowett wrote to Borrow to say, ‘Your observations on Puerot’s work, so far as you had become acquainted with it, are so striking and interesting that they have whetted our appetite for further information.’ At this point Jowett and others in the BFBS were not sure how Borrow was progressing and wanted to know how far his ‘introduction to the literary

³³ John Venning to George Borrow, 25 July 1833, in Knapp, *Borrow*, pp. 162–163. The reference to the possibility of being taken for a spy was in a letter to his mother of 30 July 1833 (Jenkins, *Life*, p. 106).

³⁴ Michael Collie, *George Borrow: Eccentric* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), p. 65.

³⁵ Knapp, *Borrow*, p. 167.

³⁶ Chengcheng Liu, ‘Report on the “questioned” 1822 edition of St. Matthew’s Gospel in Manchu’. I am grateful to Chengcheng Liu (Helen) for the opportunity to read her unpublished paper written in 2023.

³⁷ For more, see *The Bible in Slavic Tradition*, ed. by Alexander Kulik and Catherine Mary MacRobert (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

circle of St Petersburg' had paved the way 'towards printing in the city any future portions of the New Testament in the Manchu'.³⁸

Borrow had in fact, in accordance with his usual determination, been very active and was able to give an upbeat report. It was only to his mother that he complained of winter cold in St Petersburg that 'cuts your face like a razor'.³⁹ To Jowett, on 20 January 1834, he explained that he had taken 'a bold step', after consulting with Swan, his 'sincere, and most truly Christian friend', to approach the Russian authorities for permission to print the Manchu Scriptures. He presented a petition to Count Dmitry Bludoff, the Minister of the Interior. The hope was that Bludoff would be sympathetic, as he was known for his progressive views. Tolstoy described Bludoff's house on Nevsky Avenue, St Petersburg, as a place 'where writers, and in general, the best people of the time would gather'.⁴⁰ However, Bludoff told Borrow that the decision did not rest with him. Borrow became apprehensive, but with his deepening faith he 'prayed fervently to God, and confiding principally in Him, resolved to leave no human means untried which were within my reach'. Borrow's next step was to talk to John Bligh, the British plenipotentiary in St Petersburg, who had, Borrow said, been very kind and was 'a person of superb talents, kind disposition, and of much piety'. Bligh was happy to talk to Bludoff, and did so over dinner. The result of this diplomacy was that Lipoftsoff, who worked for the Asiatic Department of the Russian government, was appointed 'Censor' for the BFBS work, and on that basis, permission was granted to print the Manchu Scriptures. 'Thanks be to the Lord', Borrow added.⁴¹

In the meantime, Borrow was continuing to work on the Manchu language. He was now able to translate fairly readily from and into Manchu, and even, with his Church of England commitment in view, prepared a Manchu rendering of the Second Homily, *On the Misery*

³⁸ Letter of 2 January 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, p. 28.

³⁹ George Borrow to his mother Ann Borrow, February 1834, cited in Jenkins, *Life*, p. 116.

⁴⁰ *Tolstoy and the Genesis of 'War and Peace'*, ed. by Robin Feuer Miller and Donna Tussing Orwin (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁴¹ Letter of 20 January 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 28–34.

of *Man*, as well as Homilies he translated into Russian.⁴² However, he had become aware that the Manchu language was more demanding than he had realised. He was amazed at the ‘copiousness’ of Manchu, and often puzzled by the idioms. He compared the difficulty of the language with that of Sanskrit or Persian, but was wrong in suggesting that neither of those languages had ever been fully acquired by any European. Henry Martyn, who went out from Cambridge to India, completed a translation of the New Testament into Persian before his early death in 1813 and it was published in St Petersburg in 1815.⁴³ Borrow’s reports to Jowett in January and especially February 1834, as well as referring to continued progress — now only ‘tolerable’ — with Manchu, gave more information about the typeface that might be used in publishing. At the Sarepta House, the BFBS house in the city, there was ‘a chest containing Manchu characters’. The only other source for some type in Manchu was Borrow’s ‘learned friend Baron Schilling’, who had ‘a collection of Eastern manuscripts and other priceless treasures that was world-famous’. After his death, this was acquired by the Imperial Academy of Science at St Petersburg.⁴⁴ Borrow was, as Ann Ridler puts it, ‘bowled over’ by the ‘the sheer excitement of the vistas of unbounded knowledge opened up to him in Baron Schilling’s library’. Within this, Manchu was ‘a lake of learning’.⁴⁵

Problems and Progress with Print

For a good part of 1834, from March to October, two issues demanded all the energy Borrow could muster and at times proved exhausting. These were the issues of print and translation. He had not expected that

⁴² R. A. J. Walling, *George Borrow: The Man and his Work* (London: Cassell, 1909), p. 90; For background, see J. Barrett Miller, ‘The First Book of Homilies and the Doctrine of Holy Scripture’, *Anglican and Episcopal History*, 66, no 4 (1997), 435–470.

⁴³ For Martyn’s life and letters, see *The Letters of Henry Martyn, East India Company Chaplain*, ed. by Scott Ayler (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2019).

⁴⁴ Jenkins, *Life*, p. 111; letter of 4 February 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 36–39.

⁴⁵ Ann Ridler, ‘Obedience and Disobedience: George Borrow’s Idiosyncratic Relationship with the Bible Society’, in *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1804–2004*, ed. by Stephen Batalden, Kathleen Cann, and John Dean (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), pp. 286–304 (p. 290), citing George Borrow to Francis Cunningham, November 1834.

achieving progress with facilities for printing in Manchu would be so difficult. On 15 April 1834, he wrote to Jowett to say that he was ‘terrified at the enormous sums which some of the printers to whom I made application required for the work’. The aim was high quality production, including the paper, as was appropriate for Manchu as a court language. Borrow consulted Schmidt, who recommended the University Press. In typical style, Borrow immediately spoke to ‘the directors of the establishment’ and they sent an estimate, which Schmidt felt was a reasonable one. However, Borrow’s range of contacts led him to two German printers, Schultz and Beneze, young men who had just entered the printing business. The link was probably made through John P. Hasfeldt, from Denmark, who was about Borrow’s age and became a valued friend. Hasfeldt was attached to the Danish Legation and also gave lessons in languages. It became clear that whereas the University Press could ‘take or leave’ a printing contract, Schultz and Beneze were very keen to sign up a British organisation. Schmidt, who was a member of the Russian Board of Censors, saw no problem with that.⁴⁶ Borrow later used the firm to print some of Alexander Pushkin’s writings which he had translated into English.⁴⁷

Two weeks after his report on printers, Borrow wrote about his endeavours in looking for the quality of paper he wanted. He had ‘hired a calash’, which was a horse-drawn vehicle, with a driver, and spent almost a week being driven to all the places in and around St Petersburg where paper was made. ‘Tall George’, as he was known, became a recognised figure in European circles in the city. He was aware that it was ‘the general opinion of the people of this country [the Russians] that Englishmen are made of gold, and that it is only necessary to ask the most extravagant price for any article in order to obtain it’, so he did not tell companies he was English. He was often taken to be German, and he did gain assistance from Germans such as Freidrich von Adelung, who knew about publishing manuscripts.⁴⁸ He also employed two agents working on his behalf. In some places he failed to find anyone who

⁴⁶ Letter of 15 April 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 41–46.

⁴⁷ George Borrow, *The Talisman: From the Russian of Alexander Pushkin, With other Pieces* (St Petersburg: Schulz and Beneze, 1835). In 1892, Jarrold & Sons of Norwich reprinted this in facsimile.

⁴⁸ Jenkins, *Life*, p. 112.

could give him a quotation. When he did receive firm quotations he began to bargain, and eventually he struck a deal for high quality paper at a quarter of the typical initial figures quoted. ‘In this country’, he added in a postscript, ‘the wisdom of the serpent is quite as necessary as the innocence of the dove.’⁴⁹ The BFBS was probably taken aback and certainly intrigued by Borrow’s reports. His letters were sometimes read out at BFBS meetings. In East Anglia he was, as Mary Clarke put it in a letter to him, ‘mentioned at many of the Bible meetings’, and in particular his work was highlighted in public gatherings by Gurney and Cunningham, who was in effect Borrow’s pastor.⁵⁰

After Borrow’s reports in April 1834, he was too busy to keep up with correspondence. His friend Hasfeldt later recalled that Borrow ‘grew thin’ through the amount of work he was doing, but this was not known in London, and in October 1834 Jowett wrote what one biographer, David Williams, justifiably described as a ‘starchy, spiky, ungenerous and uncomprehending’ enquiry as to what Borrow was doing. Borrow’s letter of 8 October, which has been regarded as a reply, was, said Williams, ‘one of the greatest letters’ from the pen of someone who had become a master of letter writing.⁵¹ In the summer of 1834 the BFBS had reported that Karl Gützlaff, the first Lutheran missionary to China, had been able to make use of some of the Manchu Gospels translated by Lipoftsoff. The report expressed the hope that in the light of what Borrow had achieved, 1000 copies of the New Testament in Manchu would be produced.⁵² The hope was an expectation. While Jowett was fretting, Borrow was focused on making his mark. On 8 October 1834, he wrote at the beginning of his letter that ‘by the blessing of God I have surmounted all my troubles and difficulties’. He explained that in recent weeks ‘I have been working in the printing-office, as a common compositor, between ten and thirteen hours every day during that period; the result of this is that St. Matthew’s Gospel, printed from

⁴⁹ Letter of 28 April 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 46–48.

⁵⁰ Knapp, *Borrow*, p. 184.

⁵¹ David Williams, *A World of his Own: Double Life of George Borrow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 78–79, 81.

⁵² *Annual Report of the Bible Society*, Summer 1834 (London: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1834) pp. lxxxii–iv; Charles Gutzlaff (Karl Friedrich), *A Sketch of Chinese History (Ancient and Modern)*, 2 vols (London: Smith, Elder & Company, 1834).

such a copy as I believe nothing was ever printed from before, has been brought out in the Manchu language.⁵³

As well as Borrow's own enormous work-load, Harsfeldt recalled that 'you almost killed Beneze and his lads', and it seems that on occasion Borrow had to bribe them with gifts of vodka.⁵⁴ In his letter to Jowett, Borrow explained that the 'fount of type', the Manchu type, which was necessary for the printing was taken to the print-shop of Schultz and Beneze. Borrow wanted to stress the difficulties that had to be overcome. He described 'the state in which these types came into my possession. I found them in a kind of warehouse, or rather cellar. They had been originally confined in two cases; but these having burst, the type lay on the floor trampled amidst mud and filth.' Part of this destruction had been caused by the river Neva having flooded in 1824. It had been Borrow's task to clean and arrange them and then to teach the compositors the Manchu alphabet. He had, he added, been 'obliged to be continually in the printing-office, and to do three parts of the work myself'. He considered that since Matthew's Gospel had been ready for some weeks, waiting to be bound in a fine volume, this needed to be done urgently, or 'the paper will be dirtied and the work injured'. Borrow had, once more, made efforts to ascertain the best option in book-binding, as he had in all parts of his enterprise. He had found book-binding in Russia 'incredibly dear', but had approached Schilling for help, who had in turn 'prevailed on his own book-binder, over whom he has much influence', to do the work at a fraction of what might otherwise have been charged.⁵⁵ He had achieved the high quality he wanted, at very reasonable cost.

The Trials of Translation

Although the process of printing was a challenge, the task for which Borrow had been principally appointed was to work with Lipoftsoff to ensure that there was a readable New Testament in Manchu. The test that Borrow had been given in London had not been about his skills as

⁵³ Letter of 8 October 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 55–63.

⁵⁴ Williams, *World of his Own*, p. 78; Walling, *The Man and his Work*, p. 89.

⁵⁵ Letter of 8 October 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 55–63.

a printer but as a translator. However, as he put it, he was resolved to 'do or die', and, instead of complaining to the BFBS about what was at times an almost impossible situation, he was determined to succeed. Borrow was happy to report to Jowett in October 1834 that Lipoftsoff had made 'an immense number of alterations in his translation', and Borrow did not hesitate to describe these changes, which he himself had suggested, as 'excellent improvements'. While Clement Shorter, in his biography, found little of interest in what Borrow was doing at this point and referred to the outcome as 'useless',⁵⁶ that was emphatically not the view from the BFBS. Instead, there was 'much enthusiasm in Bible House' and the reports from Borrow were sent to Cunningham, his continued spiritual mentor. Across the circles associated with the BFBS there was 'high satisfaction' with the progress made. An apology was conveyed from Jowett, and instead of complaint there was an affirmation of Borrow as an agent who had been notable for his planning, diligence, and achievement.⁵⁷

It gave Borrow considerable pleasure to be able to write to Jowett on 13 October 1834 and enclose a testimonial in Latin from Lipoftsoff. This read, *Dominum Burro ab initio usque ad hoc tempus summa cum diligentia et studio in re Mantshurica laborasse*, confirming that Borrow, 'from the beginning until this time', had 'worked with the utmost diligence' and had given himself to the study of Manchu. Borrow pointed out that Lipoftsoff was 'as little inclined to be prodigal of praise, as was of old the learned Scaliger himself, to whom in many points indeed, he bears no faint resemblance'.⁵⁸ Borrow went on to report that he was anticipating that Mark's Gospel would soon, like Matthew, have 'passed through the press' and that Luke and John would be printed by Christmas. He predicted that by May 1835 the entire New Testament in Manchu would be published. With something of a flourish, Borrow asked that 'this intelligence' should be 'communicated to the public, who are at liberty, provided the Lord does not visit me with some heavy affliction, to hold me culpable, if my assertion is belied by the event'.

⁵⁶ Shorter, *George Borrow*, p. 104.

⁵⁷ Darlow, *Letters*, p. 68.

⁵⁸ Joseph Scaliger, a Calvinist, was an important European classical scholar in the years around 1600. See Philipp E. Nothaft, 'Josephus and New Testament Chronology in the Work of Joseph Scaliger', *International Journal of the Classical Tradition*, 23, no. 3 (2016), 246–251.

He was not able to write more than a short letter since, as he put it in continued dramatic form, ‘my proof sheets are rushing in so fast that time is exceedingly precious to me, and I grudge every moment that is not devoted to my Maker or to my great undertaking’.⁵⁹

The time-table that Borrow had set out for himself was the topic of the ongoing reports in his letters. On 20 February 1835, he wrote to Jowett to say that a month before he had given Schilling bound copies of the Gospels and he had promised to ship them to London through one of the couriers belonging to the Russian Foreign Department. Borrow was now working on the Acts of the Apostles. He was not satisfied with what Lipoftsoff had done in translating Acts and this had, as he put it, ‘rendered much modification highly necessary’. Despite this, Borrow felt he had been able to maintain a friendship with Lipoftsoff. Borrow was fully aware that ‘Mr. L.’, as he often referred to him, was ‘the Censor of his own work, and against the Censor’s fiat in Russia there is no appeal’. In addition, Lipoftsoff was ‘a gentleman whom the slightest contradiction never fails to incense to a most incredible degree’. A further issue was that Lipoftsoff was a ‘strict member’ of the Russian Orthodox Church (Borrow continued to refer to it as ‘the Greek Slavonian Church’) and believed that it was the Old Church Slavonic Bible — which Borrow attributed to the eighth century but the whole of which was translated for the first time in 1499 by Archbishop Gennady Gonozov of Novgorod — that was textually authoritative.⁶⁰

Although there were challenges, Borrow was, overall, encouraged. When a possible revision of what Lipoftsoff had ‘originally concluded to be perfect’ in his translation was suggested, in the light of Borrow’s study of the Greek text of the New Testament, Lipoftsoff almost invariably agreed. There was one notable exception. Lipoftsoff had undertaken some ‘improvements’, as he termed them, of his original translation, and one of these was that when God the Father Almighty was addressed, he erased ‘the personal and possessive pronouns *thou* or *thine*’ (to use the language of the King James Version), and so ‘O Father, thou art merciful’ became ‘O Father! the Father is merciful’. Borrow

⁵⁹ Letter of 13 October 1834, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 63–68.

⁶⁰ E. J. Pentiuć, *The Oxford Handbook of the Bible in Orthodox Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), p. 39; letter of 20 February 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 73–79.

objected to this strange usage, but Lipoftsoff argued that Chinese and Tartar custom was to address only the lowest levels of society in the second person; and that it would be indecent to speak to the Almighty as if he were a servant or a slave. Borrow's response was that God was not to be addressed as if he were 'a great gentleman or illustrious personage', but rather as children speak to their father, with a mixture of reverence and love. But Lipoftsoff was adamant that in China children never addressed their parents in that way. Borrow admitted that Lipoftsoff had on his side the Chinese scholars of St. Petersburg. Apart from this aspect, Borrow wanted to assure the BFBS in his letter of 20 February 1835 that 'the Word of God has been rendered into Manchu as nearly and closely as the idiom of a very singular language would permit'.⁶¹

This was something of a leap on Borrow's part, since there was still work to be done. On 12 August 1835, however, the last two parts of the Manchu New Testaments — altogether they were in eight parts — were ready for shipping. Permission was still awaited. The first six volumes had been safely despatched, but the authorities were now accusing Borrow of having printed them illegally and it seemed that his presence in St Petersburg was now being viewed as (he used their own words) 'suspicious and mysterious, and that there are even grounds for supposing that I am not connected with the Bible Society or employed by them'. It is possible that Borrow had aroused suspicion in this period through visiting Moscow and speaking to gypsies, the Russian Roma. He addressed them, he said, on 'the advent and suffering of Christ Jesus'.⁶² When he returned to St Petersburg, however, his hope for satisfactory completion of his task was fulfilled. Although there were trials, 'there is One above who supports me in these troubles, and I have no doubt that everything will turn out for the best'.⁶³ He said goodbye to his considerable number of friends in St Petersburg and left for

⁶¹ Letter of 20 February 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 73–79.

⁶² A. G. Cross, 'George Borrow and Russia', *The Modern Language Review*, 64, no. 2 (April 1969), 363–371; report, 23 September 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 87–96.

⁶³ Letter of 12 August 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 85–86.

London on 28 August 1835. All eight volumes of the Manchu New Testament came to London.⁶⁴

A Range of Outcomes

Clement Shorter, in his biography, poured ridicule on the outcome of Borrow's work. Shorter spoke of what was done 'at so great a cost of money, and of energy and enthusiasm on the part of George Borrow' having no ultimate value: when the New Testaments were later sent out to China and copies distributed by missionaries, it was found – 'why not before is not explained', he intoned — that the Manchus in China were able to read Chinese, preferring it to their own language.⁶⁵ The actual situation was much more complex. There were certainly disappointments. Borrow was willing to take Manchu New Testaments to China: he had written to the BFBS, 'I will now conclude, and repeat the assurance that I am ready to attempt anything which the Society may wish me to execute; and, at a moment's warning, will direct my course towards Canton, Peking, or the court of the Grand Lama.'⁶⁶ He was undertaking research and had identified the town of Kiachta (Kyakhta), on the northern border of China, as a suitable headquarters for supplying Manchu Scriptures. This was a location known for the Treaty of 1727 which regulated relations between Imperial Russia and Qing Empire; it also set a framework for Orthodox mission work.⁶⁷ For a time, Borrow hoped that a passport for travel East could be obtained from the Russian Government, but he was informed that he would not be able to obtain a passport for Siberia except on condition that he did not carry any Manchu Bibles.⁶⁸

⁶⁴ The 8 volumes of Borrow's 1835 New Testament edition, the Old Testament copied by Swan (with Borrow) and Edward Stallybrass, and Lipoftsoff's manuscripts, are all in the Bible Society Archive in Cambridge University. Exhibitions have been held in Cambridge in connection with Borrow's work.

⁶⁵ Shorter, *George Borrow*, pp. 105–106.

⁶⁶ Letter of 20 February 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 73–79.

⁶⁷ For insight into Orthodox missions, see Lars Laamann, 'The Christian Manchu Missions during the Qing period (1644–1911): Perceptions and Political Implications', in *Early Encounters between East Asia and Europe: Telling Failures*, ed. by Ralf Hertel, Michael Keevak, and Thijs Weststeijn (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 101–122.

⁶⁸ Letter of 3 May 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 80–82.

On his return to London, Borrow gave a report to the members of the committee of the BFBS. Much of it rehearsed what had been covered in his letters. However, at a time when there was relatively little understanding in England of the Russian Orthodox Church,⁶⁹ he described the Orthodox Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in Moscow, ‘the splendid church of the Kremlin’. Borrow had an extended conversation with the priest who had the task of introducing aspects of Orthodox worship to visitors. The priest, Borrow told his BFBS audience, was ‘a most intelligent and seemingly truly pious person, and well acquainted with English spiritual literature, especially with the writings of Bishops [Jeremy] Taylor and [John] Tillotson, whom he professed to hold in great admiration’. Having said that, the priest asserted ‘that both these divines, great men as they undoubtedly were, were far inferior writers to his own celebrated countryman Archbishop Teekon [Tikhon of Zadonsk] and their productions less replete with spiritual manna’. Borrow, although indebted to English spiritual traditions, ‘felt little inclined to urge any objection’, as he had ‘perused the works of the great Russian divine with much comfort and satisfaction’, and he expressed regret that ‘the devout part of the British public are up to the present moment utterly unacquainted’ with this spiritual resource. Borrow also reiterated his belief in the BFBS’s crucial endeavours in biblical translation. Without accurate translation, such as he had sought to undertake, ‘the Prince of Darkness and the Enemy of Light’ was able to spread untruth, ‘as many a follower of Jesus from his own individual experience can testify’.⁷⁰ It is remarkable that Borrow’s serious Christian scholarship and faith has been so largely unrecognised.

Discussions took place over the next few months and even years within the BFBS about the best use of the Manchu New Testaments. Robert Morrison, a missionary to China who translated the whole Bible into Chinese, was cited. He hoped that the Manchu Bible would ‘be of great use in diffusing the knowledge of God throughout the northern domains of this [Chinese] empire’.⁷¹ There were plans along these lines,

⁶⁹ For background, see J. Courtney, ‘Listening to Voices from the East: Nineteenth Century Anglicans and the Russian Orthodox Church’, *Text Book Publishing*, 1, no. 5 (2014), 89–104.

⁷⁰ Report, 23 September 1835, in Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 87–96

⁷¹ *Annual Report of BFBS*, Summer 1835 (London: BFBS, 1835), p. lxxi.

although they could not be fully implemented.⁷² In anticipation of future use, the Manchu type for typesetting was sent to the BFBS China Agency in Shanghai. Editions of Mathew and Mark were printed in Chinese and Manchu side by side. It was not until 1869 that promising news was heard about the Manchu New Testament. In that year, Joseph Edkins, a graduate of London University who was well-versed in Chinese affairs and was a missionary with the London Missionary Society, told the BFBS that he had recently sold a number of the Manchu New Testaments to the Mission of the Russian Orthodox Church for use in Amur and Kamchatka (in the Russian Far East) and they were readily understood. Edkins wrote extensively on China. He was awarded a D.D. for oriental research, from Edinburgh University. In 1905, George Hunter of the China Inland Mission, while serving in Chinese Turkestan, came into contact with Manchu speakers and he received Manchu Gospels from Shanghai.⁷³

An outcome not related to the New Testament highlights Borrow's interests in literature. Towards the end of his time in Russia, he selected a few of his own translations from a range of languages and varied literature, and asked the Censor for permission to publish these. Permission was granted. Borrow probably did the typesetting himself. Among the pieces included was 'Mystical Poem', which is a poetic version of the hymn Borrow was asked to translate for the Bible Society to test his Manchu. A short review of Borrow's publication, written by John Hasfeldt, appeared in 1836 in the *Athenaeum*, a London-based journal of literature, science, and the arts. Hasfeldt wrote, 'Just before completing this great work [the Manchu N.T.], Mr. Borrow published a small volume in the English language, entitled *Targum, or Metrical Translations from Thirty Languages and Dialects*. The exquisite delicacy with which he has caught and rendered the beauties of his well-chosen originals, is a proof of his learning and genius.' For Hasfeldt, the work was 'a pearl in literature, and, like pearls, it derives value from its scarcity, for the whole edition was limited to about a hundred copies'. Another production by Borrow was *The Talisman*, which was only the second

⁷² Christopher A. Daily, *Robert Morrison and the Protestant Plan for China* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2013).

⁷³ Darlow, *Letters*, pp. 96–97.

appearance in English of any of Alexander Pushkin's poems. Borrow never met Pushkin, but left copies of *Targum* and *The Talisman* with Hasfeldt as a gift for Pushkin. On receiving them, Pushkin penned a note to Borrow expressing 'profound gratitude' for the gift and sincere regrets 'that he had not the honour to be personally acquainted with him'.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The period which George Borrow spent in St Petersburg, and his outstanding work on the Manchu New Testament, has not received the attention it deserves. In the history of the BFBS, his years in Spain have understandably received much coverage. However, it was St Petersburg which offered him an international spiritual and cultural setting that he relished. The biographies of Borrow have generally played down his Christian faith, but the successor to Joseph Jowett at the Bible Society, Thomas H. Darlow, who knew the correspondence between Borrow and the BFBS in detail, described Borrow as someone with 'a fierce sincerity of faith'.⁷⁵ This faith was nurtured in the context of evangelical circles in East Anglia and those bonds remained strong. In 1840 he married Mary Clarke, and he looked to Cunningham for pastoral guidance. Although from the 1840s onwards Borrow never again worked for the BFBS or any specifically Christian agency, he spoke of himself in 1857, in *The Romany Rye*, as a 'sincere member' of the Church of England.⁷⁶ He also had an independent 'dissenting' spirit. In 1899 *The Bible Society Reporter*, noting the two volumes on Borrow that had just been produced by Knapp, saw Borrow as the only one among the Society's early agents who had 'achieved high distinction in literature'. At that stage his *Bible in Spain* had passed through nearly forty editions.⁷⁷ In 1911, thirty years after Borrow's death, Darlow wrote in the BFBS publication *The Bible in the World*, about the bundle of letters by Borrow that had been discovered — 'a great literary treasure'. Of all the servants

⁷⁴ For these developments, Knapp, *Borrow*, pp. 223–225.

⁷⁵ Darlow, *Letters*, p. xi, Preface.

⁷⁶ George Borrow, *Romany Rye* (London: John Murray, 1900), p. 346.

⁷⁷ 'George Borrow', *The Bible Society Reporter*, April 1899, p. 74.

of the Bible Society, Darlow stated, George Borrow was ‘perhaps the most remarkable’. He was someone with outstanding energy and capacity, and Darlow’s conviction, which is confirmed by the St Petersburg years, was that Borrow was ‘a Bible Christian’.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ T. H. Darlow, ‘An Unconventional Missionary’, *The Bible in the World*, December 1911, pp. 357–359.