

**John McNair**

**Between Revolutions:  
An Australian view of Russia in 1917**

Early in April, 1917, barely a month after the so-called 'February Revolution' had forced the abdication of Nicholas II, an Australian mining engineer arrived in the Russian Far East to conduct metallurgical surveys on behalf of the Engineering Company of Russia and Siberia and at the invitation of the new Provisional Government. Edward Rigby of Melbourne, already in his mid-fifties, discovered detailed instructions from Petrograd waiting for him on his arrival in Vladivostok from Japan, and proceeded forthwith to the Company's settlement at Tietiukhe in the Sikhote-Alin mountains some 500 kilometres to the north.<sup>1</sup> So began a three-month journey through a country in ferment that ended on June 25 with his departure from Petrograd on a hardly less adventurous war-time itinerary which would take him by train and ship, via Tammerfors, Stockholm, Bergen, Lerwick and Liverpool, to London; the whole recorded in letters to his wife in Melbourne, subsequently edited into journal form, typed, bound and deposited in the Manuscript Collection of the State Library of Victoria.<sup>2</sup> What follows is an account of what by any standard must be judged a noteworthy addition to the surprisingly diverse corpus of Australian travel writing on Russia<sup>3</sup> which aims to share with a wider readership the impressions and insights of an intelligent

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<sup>1</sup> Tietiukhe (an approximation of the original Chinese name; changed to Dal'negorsk in 1975) had been founded in 1897 following the discovery of large deposits of lead and zinc in the area.

<sup>2</sup> SLV MS11714 Box 1876/5; the manuscript comprises 127 pages, although not all are numbered. For convenience, references in the text that follows are identified by means of the initials ERJ and a page number. I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the staff of the Manuscripts Collection and the Heritage Collections Reading Room of the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne.

Information on the provenance of the manuscript, and on its author himself, is disappointingly sparse. A bookplate and annotations on the front end-paper and flyleaf would suggest it was given to a Mr John Barter by T. W. Haynes[?], whose 'Grandpa' T. Timmins was a friend and shooting companion of the author. Edward Joseph Rigby (b. 1859), who in 1892 patented 'An improved method of and apparatus for counterbalancing the weight of the moving mechanism of pumps and pumping machines' (*Victorian Government Gazette*, 16 December 1912, 4880), was for twenty years managing director of Austral Otis Engineering of South Melbourne, and died in Mentone, Vic. in his ninetieth year on 24 October, 1948.

<sup>3</sup> Bibliographical details of the most important (published) items are included in Terri McCormack, comp., R. Pesman, D. Waller and R. White, eds., *Annotated Bibliography of Australian Overseas Travel Writing* (Canberra: ALIA Press, 1996).

and shrewd, if not always well-informed witness to the ferment in that country between the revolutions of 1917.

Rigby and his companions (Messrs Greenway, Findlay and Reeves are mentioned by name, but otherwise unidentified; Mr Dicken was an Englishman who spoke Russian) were faced with the almost impossible task of delivering to Petrograd by May 13 a detailed report on the viability of the existing lead and zinc mines, a projected smelting works, a proposed harbour development on the coast some 35 kilometres distant and a planned connecting railway line that would negotiate the steep descent from an altitude of 800 metres to sea level; three months' work to be completed in four weeks, and in difficult conditions. For not only did the winter snows and ice persist, hampering activities outdoors and underground, but the changed political situation had effectively dismantled the existing management structures. From the start, Rigby had to contend with what he called the 'Commitad' (presumably a phonetic rendering of *komitet*), 'a product of the Revolution, elected by the people' and invested with 'supreme power to keep order in the community' (EJR 9). Even before the arrival of the Australian, this body had arrested the mine manager, the 'unpopular' Mr Gorsky; within a few days, most of the officials had been removed from their posts and 'taken away', even if only to Vladivostok. Grateful that the new authorities remained 'very respectful' in their dealings with the foreigners, Rigby (writing on 4 April) strived for a balanced view of these changes in the order of things:

The wonderful thing is the quick way every little hamlet to the remotest corner of the empire got to know of it and adopted this system of rule, it must have been in training for generations and all thought and arranged by secret societies. To us, of course, this type of rule looks a bit ridiculous and no doubt it will lead to a lot of hardship to individuals[...] Just think what a simple, downtrodden being the average country Russian has always been and the narrow little views of social economy he has had bred in him, and then imagine him now sticking his chest out and breathing a long breath and saying: 'Now I am free, and have as much to say about things as anybody else'; there is a good deal of danger from a Commitad composed of him, especially for the people who have been their bosses, such as policemen and tax-collectors and the like. They all got out of a job at once. (ERJ 10)

Despite such misgivings, he noted that all the Russians of his acquaintance, 'educated and otherwise', agreed that change had been necessary, and took it as

an encouraging sign ('the best thing that ever happened in the country') that the Commitad had moved to deal with the curse of drunkenness by imposing a fine of 2000 roubles for possession of alcohol (EJR 10).

Revolutionary change, however, extended only so far, as the Easter celebrations later that month revealed. 'Most Russians of the lower classes', including the 'low types' and even ex-convicts from Saghalien (Sakhalin) who, it transpired, were actually in control of the Commitad, contrived to get drunk, and only the presence of the foreigners seemed able to restrain them at all (EJR 12). On the other hand, Russian Easter brought the Australian and his colleagues their first real experience of unrestrained Russian hospitality: a whole sucking pig, a brace of turkeys, a goose, a ham, raw fish, sliced sausage, cakes and sweetmeats, coloured Easter eggs — 'you just cut and slice as you like so long as you feast' (EJR 14). Alcohol ban or no, the *pièce de résistance* was the home-brewed liquor which looked misleadingly like weak coffee:

When all got a full glass, some sort of speech was made and everyone had to tap their glass against each of ours in turn and then drink. I got a mouthful of mine and can't describe it, but gee, it's strong. I felt that mouthful go down to my boots and then up to my head, the glassful would have put me on the floor, but they drank and filled again (EJR 15).

Even after a few weeks in the country, Rigby felt he had learned a good deal about Russian ways and could enjoy their food and 'easy manners' ('even the good sort of ladies eat immense mouthfuls, spread their elbows over the table and reach for anything they fancy' EJR 16), so that the sight of the womenfolk knocking back glass after glass of the potent brown-coloured liquor was only a minor shock. His own preferred beverage was Russian tea ('tchi'), to which he was rapidly becoming addicted, drinking up to fifteen or twenty glasses a day (EJR 17). Such tolerance of Russian free-and-easiness and relish for Russian food (a frequent topic in the journal) bespeak a broadmindedness that contrasts sharply with the smug censoriousness of travellers like Rigby's compatriot Violet Chomley, who traversed Russia from east to west in 1903 complaining of the 'very nasty Russian tea', the absence of proper bread and butter and the appalling table manners of Russian ladies.<sup>4</sup> And unlike so many other visitors, he even took a philosophical

<sup>4</sup> Viola Ida Chomley, a graduate of the University of Melbourne, travelled from the Port Arthur to St Petersburg on the Trans-Siberian Railway early in 1903. The manuscript of her journal was also

view of the lice and bedbugs he found in his clothes or crawling up the legs of his pyjamas: 'I haven't felt a bite, so conclude they don't like the taste of Australia' (EJR 22).

Meantime, the pressure to complete the task in hand mounted as the appointed deadline approached: to catch the Petrograd train on 4 May, the party would have to complete their inspection by 28 April. Prospects for a new large-scale processing plant looked good, but the construction of a new port was problematic in view of the roughness of the sea at the river-mouth: 'it would be a great place for surfing!' (EJR 24). The rate of progress was hampered by the periodic attacks by tigers hunting the mine horses, but more seriously by continued unrest among the Russian workforce. The Australian deplored the general lack of discipline and, although recognizing that wages were very low ('3/- or 4/- a day of our money' EJR 24) could not condone wild demands for double pay and threats to take over the mines. Moreover, the labourers struck him as 'lazy and unintelligent', especially in contrast to the Chinese who received less money but did virtually all the work. While the Commitad was eventually prevailed upon to release the former manager to assist in the investigations, Rigby had little confidence in its capacity for effective leadership:

I will be surprised if anyone invests as long as they behave like this. Why, they are just a lot of children, but vicious ones at that... (EJR 22).

Finally, their work completed on schedule, the foreign engineers set out by boat ('dirty is no word to describe it', EJR 28) for Vladivostok, where the Hotel Bristol could provide no bath but an excellent dinner whose abundance was all the more welcome in the light of rumours of food-shortages in Petrograd:

Crab and *hors d'oeuvres* of all sorts... fish soup with plums, lemons, cab-bages, olives and capers with it, very rich but good, then some veal cutlets and peas and beetroot and cauliflower and chips, washed down with Kwass, a sort of beer made of black bread and finally some really good coffee and cigarettes, with a very fine orchestra (string) (EJR 30).

On Friday 4 May the party left Vladivostok on the Trans-Siberian Railway, travelling via Harbin and Chita to Lake Baikal, where they arrived on 7 May. Here they

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deposited in the State Library of Victoria (SLV MS12478 Box 3299/7), although two passages were published in the *St James Gazette* (London) in 1904. Reference here is to pages 39, 41 and 43.

admired the ‘wonderful piece of railway work’ by which the track ran for about 50 miles round the extreme edge of the south end of the lake where ‘stupendous’ cuttings, long and short tunnels and numerous bridges had forged a path through sheer mountainsides and deep gullies. ‘A monument to the engineers who built it’ (EJR 35), this section of the line replaced the immense ice-breaker ferries that carried trains over the lake until 1905.<sup>5</sup> The next legs of the journey took them to Irkutsk and then, on Wednesday 9 May, Novonikolaevsk (now Novosibirsk).<sup>6</sup> Crossing the Ob and then (at Omsk) the Irtysh, they arrived on Friday 11 May at Ekaterinburg, where the Urals proved a disappointment and the countryside looked ‘just like Gippsland’ (EJR 46). From there their route lay north to Perm and west across the Volga to Vyatka (now Kirov) and on to Petrograd, whose approaches at first sight on Sunday 13 May looked ‘impressive, not picturesque, like going through Port Melbourne’ (EJR 49).

In general, Rigby found the towns along the railway unprepossessing and unremarkable, the general shabbiness relieved only by the many ‘mosques’ — a puzzling term whose significance in context must be architectural (referring to the domes typical of Orthodox churches) rather than religious.<sup>7</sup> Perm is typical, although ‘the capital of one of the largest and richest of Russia’s provinces’: ‘a large city with many mosques, purely Russian with its unpaved streets and general dinginess’ (EJR 46). Apart from the endless forests, he sees little of interest in the landscape before the line crosses the Irtysh at Omsk and enters ‘rich flat country with black soil’: ‘surely this is a land of plenty, not being fairly treated because of want of proper handling’ by ‘lazy and incompetent’ peasant farmers (EJR 44); although further on, along the banks of ‘the great river Volga’ and its tributaries, extensive tracts of ploughed land suggested more efficient agricultural practices (EJR 46). All along the route from east to west, however, the overwhelming impression was of a country in turmoil. The effects of the war

<sup>5</sup> The Circum-Baikal Railway (Krugobaikal’skaia zheleznaia doroga), whose construction was hastened by the Russo-Japanese War, came into full operation for freight and passenger traffic in 1905; a second track was completed in 1911. Viola Chomley (pp. 59 ff.) describes crossing the lake in winter 1903 in a convoy of sledges, because the ice was too thick for the icebreakers to deal with. On the history of the Trans-Siberian Railway, see Steven G. Marks, *Road to Power: The Trans-Siberian Railroad and the Colonization of Asian Russia 1850–1917* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>6</sup> The distorted forms in which these names appear in the typescript (Irkutsch, Novinovskoles) suggest that the author had not proof-read the text.

<sup>7</sup> In the St Petersburg section of the journal reference is made (EJR 50) to the sound of ‘mosque bells’.

were inescapable even in the Far East: only miles from Vladivostok the travellers had seen trains ‘little better than cattle trucks’ heading east with detachments of soldiers and peasants, and in Harbin and Chita there were Austrian prisoners of war and Russian wounded (EJR 32, 34). Further west, in Novonikolaevsk, the train was attacked by a mob of mutinous soldiers who retreated only when convinced that the foreigners were travelling on important government business (EJR 41), and Ekaterinburg swarmed with defectors from the front. Some stations had special rooms reserved for the wounded where ‘committees of ladies’ provided food and comforts (EJR 48), while at Vyatka ‘there was the usual crowd of soldiers lying around, sleeping in their overcoats’ (EJR 49). In the absence of men of military age, much of the heavy manual labour was being done by women and girls, especially on the railway:

They load all the wood and coal, shovel ashes, act as brakesmen on the goods and passenger trains and water all the trains. One sees them too sawing and chopping as well as [doing] navvies (*sic*) work. They load and unload freight cars and goods. Men do the bossing. One sees them in groups up to 30 or 40 at a time at most stations along the line... (EJR 47).<sup>8</sup>

The journey also provided ample evidence of the civil unrest spreading throughout Russia in the revolutionary year. At stations along the way crowds gathered to be harangued by ‘the usual description of Yarra Bank stump orator’ (EJR 32), while in Irkutsk a local committee of soldiers and workmen boarded the train searching for vodka and rifled the contents of the luggage van (EJR 35). At every halt there was news of further trouble in Petrograd and of open mutiny in the army. Food shortages became more apparent west of the Urals; at the start of the journey, the travellers had been relieved to find that a good meal could be had on the train for only three roubles (EJR 32), whereas in the station at Vyatka there was nothing to be had but rye bread and in Petrograd all food was said to be rationed (EJR 49). There were rumours of soldiers being withdrawn from the front line to work their farms and avert a famine at the next harvest (EJR 46), whatever the consequences for the war effort as a whole.

Petrograd itself (‘a magnificent city of immense size’) seemed strangely unaffected by the war: ‘the usual services such as railways, tramways, electric light and street-cleaning etc are kept going, as are all the government depart-

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<sup>8</sup> One of these women navvies was knocked down by the engine and died of injuries received (EJR 47).

ments' (EJR 54). There were, however, masses of refugees from Poland and other German-occupied territories, accommodation was at a premium, bread was rationed and prices were shocking: apples and oranges cost the equivalent of 3s.6d. each, meat from 2–3s. per pound and butter 5s. (EJR 57).<sup>9</sup> Fortunately, Rigby and his party boarded with Mr Neville of the Engineering Company of Russia and Siberia in his spacious apartment at No 13 Bol'shaia Koniushennaia Street and were looked after by his housekeeper, Mrs Moss; no other decent lodging could be found for less than 35 roubles per day. From this base, in the hours free from writing up his report, the Australian was able to stroll down the Nevskii Prospekt ('about as wide as Elizabeth Street North' EJR 54) and see the sights: the Church of Our Lady of Kazan, the 'extravagant magnificence' of St Isaac's Cathedral, the 'gorgeous church' on the site where Alexander II was killed and the 'magnificent' bronze statue of Peter the Great, the Alexander Column — 'every day brings something new to marvel at' (EJR 61). The buildings reminded him of Paris, while the crowds recalled London: 'the crush is terrific everywhere. Streets teem with people. Every tramcar is crowded like a summer Sunday car to St Kilda' (EJR 51). Soon he was venturing further afield, feeling he knew his way about the streets as though he were in Melbourne and resigning himself to the shortcomings of public transport: nothing runs on time, 'but Nicheevo, you get there in the end' (EJR 67). In the evenings he went to the opera or the 'vaudevilles', where in spite of the bread queues and the shortages Russians still seemed willing to throw their money about in pursuit of a good time. The general spirit of moral abandon was personified by the two ladies who accosted the tourist on the Moika embankment: his attention attracted by the fact that one of them appeared to be stockingless, he was shocked when she revealed that under her dress she wore no clothes at all (EJR 68). Weekends were spent in the more wholesome surroundings of a dacha in Finland belonging to a Dr Marshall. From here a trip to 'flourishing' and 'picturesque' Vyborg provided the occasion not only for a splendid meal at 'reasonable prices', but the chance to reflect on the contrasting reality of Russia: 'There is only one explanation, complete lack of organisation or management and no authority' (EJR 66).

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<sup>9</sup> At this stage, Rigby calculated the rate of exchange at 1 rouble = 1s.4d. By the time he left Petrograd on 25 June, the rouble had lost 25% of its value (EJR 84).

The lack of discipline and political stability in Russia is a common theme in Rigby's journal. He saw traces of the recent uprising (bullet holes, smashed windows and burnt-out buildings) even on the Nevsky and the Moika, and knew that day-to-day power in the city had passed to the soviet: 'the Civil Police are all deposed, their places taken by workmen and soldiers' (EJR 54). From a somewhat jaundiced perspective he writes of numerous strikes among the working people ('almost as bad as Australia')<sup>10</sup> and of the activities of revolutionary propagandists:

An agitator here, named Lenin, is very powerful and has formed a committee of men like himself, all of whom are Russianized German Jews by their real names, and seized a palace built by the Czar for one of the ballet-girls and installed themselves (*sic*) there in luxury as leaders of the workmen's party. Their tactics are ages old — just stand on a balcony and say 'Boys, what do you want?' — 'MONEY!' — 'Yes, then go to the banks and take it. It belongs to the PEOPLE. Do you want food or clothes? Yes. Then go to the shops and help yourselves', and so on. Of course, they are popular with certain classes of the crowds, just as similar spouters are on the Yarra Banks (EJR 74).<sup>11</sup>

At the same time, he is no apologist for the *ancien régime*, dismissing the deposed tsar as 'a drunken and dissolute degenerate' and his government as 'nothing but a cesspit of bribery and corruption' (EJR 50), and embellishing with further piquant details the rumours he had already heard in the Far East:

The Court [was] wholly corrupt and immoral. It is openly asserted that the young Czarovitch (*sic*) is the son of Rasputin. The Czarina was infatuated with him, and even her daughter had a youngster to him.

The empress, moreover, had worked 'heart and soul' for a German victory, and using a private wireless at Tsarskoe Selo had 'even sent the news that brought

<sup>10</sup> In the light of such comments, it is no surprise to find Rigby (EJR 68) welcoming news of the defeat of Labour in the Australian Federal elections (May 5 1917) which reached him in Petrograd early in June.

<sup>11</sup> Lenin arrived in Petrograd on 3 (16) April 1917 and addressed the assembled crowd from the balcony of the mansion the Bolsheviks had made their headquarters, formerly the residence of the ballerina Mathilda Kshesinskaia (or Kschessinska).



about Kitchener's end' (EJR 50–51).<sup>12</sup> As for the Provisional Government, he is torn between the conviction that it wants to 'do the right thing' and 'fight on till the enemy is beaten,' and the realization that 'they can do nothing without the sanction of the Council of Workers and Soldiers' (EJR 75). Naturally enough, for a father (as we learn later in the journal) whose son was then serving in the Royal Flying Corps in France,<sup>13</sup> the former was a factor of some significance, and he was encouraged by the 'energetic action' being taken by the government against the local soviets at Kronshtadt and elsewhere: 'order is gradually being restored, as people recognise that there must be a settled authority' (EJR 75). Yet, in the longer term, there is little enough cause for optimism:

The leaders who are representing Russia today and talking for her have no real standing, and even their lives and positions are very precarious, and certainly [they have] no power to give effect to anything they say or promise, and when they start to compel the people to order and obedience, the big trouble will begin (EJR 80).

However regrettable, 'it looks very likely that Russia can be counted out of the war.'

By the end of May their report was complete and the party began to plan their departure from Russia. On 12 June, the day their exit visas were issued, Rigby had a meeting with a Mr Kadigrobov [?], a member of the Duma apparently instructed by the Provisional Government to visit Australia to promote trade and commerce, and specifically to establish a Russian–Australian shipping company (EJR 73): unfortunately there is no record of their conversation, and in any case, as the traveller confessed to his journal, 'I am tired of it all now' (EJR 78). At last, on 25 June, having secured the only remaining second-class tickets, he and his companion Greenway left Petrograd by train, bound for Finland, Sweden and then Norway, finally embarking on the SS *Oslo* at Bergen on 30 June. After Russia, Finland seemed so neat and prosperous and the Finns 'cleaner and better dressed and much more intelligent and better off' than the Russians, and the Swedes were

<sup>12</sup> Kitchener, Secretary of State for War in Lloyd George's cabinet, was on a diplomatic mission to Russia when the vessel on which he was travelling struck a German mine off the Orkneys on 5 June 1916.

<sup>13</sup> See EJR 118. His son Harry (then of No. 40 Squadron, RFC; from 1918 of No. 1 Squadron of the Royal Air Force) was given leave to visit his father in England late in July. Captain Harry Alexander Rigby was awarded the MC in 1918, and flew his last mission soon afterwards.

‘as ahead of the Finns as the Finns are ahead of the Russians’ (EJR 89). Looking back on his stay, the Australian could declare in all sincerity: ‘I like the Russian people’, while at the same time acknowledging that ‘they have a lot to learn, just like a lot of children’ (EJR 71). For that reason he left the country with a sense of foreboding that was to prove all too prescient:

Petrograd is simply a live volcano for any foreigners or even the better class of Russians themselves. There will be a blow up [for] sure. It is impossible for things to go on as they are for long. I can see nothing but anarchy, riot and civil war before them, and the streets are likely to run red any time. Any little spark might start it...

The revolution had been ‘an easy thing’; dealing with the current disorder and chaos was another matter:

Russia is too vast and the people have been slaves so long and kept without education or knowledge by the autocratic government... Now they have got their freedom, they don’t know what it means (EJR 79).

Rigby eventually arrived in London on July 7, a week before Petrograd again erupted into the disorder and chaos of the ‘July Days’. Finding himself in demand as an expert on the Russian situation, he was tempted to take up the suggestion of Sir Thomas Lipton and give an interview to the press, but declined for fear of saying anything ‘the Government wouldn’t want published’ (EJR 126). Apart from that, the decisive steps taken by the Provisional Government to deal with political unrest and its declared intention to prosecute the war effected a change in British public opinion, and ‘everybody thought I was wrong’. By the end of the month, however, the Provisional Government was in further disarray, and the Australian could claim to be vindicated: ‘change and recovery’ seemed as unlikely as ever (EJR [126]). Again, for Rigby as for the British in general, the real issue in the current situation was the likely impact on the outcome of the war of Russia’s withdrawal from hostilities; from this perspective, there was ‘one grain of comfort’ to be extracted, however perversely, from that country’s protracted collapse. The Central Powers had long since dismissed the dangers of the Eastern front and concentrated their efforts and resources in the West, so that ‘the failure of Russia will not give [them] the slightest further advantage or strength’ (EJR [127]).

Rigby's journal ends on 29 July 1917 as he begins to make plans for his return from England to Australia. It seems likely that by the time the October Revolution broke out he was either *en route* (perhaps via the United States) or already back home; in any case, while there is every reason to suppose he followed further events in Russia with keen interest, there is no sign that he committed his reflections to paper in any form that now survives. We may surmise that in the establishment of Soviet rule and the outbreak of Civil War he would have seen the fulfilment of his grim prophecies, or that in reports of the fiercest fighting between Reds and Whites across Siberia, around Baikal and into the Far East he would have recognized the names of the towns and settlements he had passed through, or that as the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' emerged triumphant he would have wondered about the fate of the Russian people he had grown to like and the 'very many travelled and educated' (EJR 71) individuals he had come to know. That he went to the trouble of having his journal typed and bound might seem to suggest that at some stage he envisaged the possibility of publication; that he did not persevere in this we can only regret, as we must regret the loss of the photographs he took throughout his Russian travels. For without making extravagant claims for the percipience of his observations or the sophistication of his commentary, we must recognize the interest and the merits of the narrative that bears witness to the momentous events in which he found himself caught up.