

## The little-known compassion of Dr Chekov



### Doctor Chekov

A Study in Literature and Medicine

John Coope. *Chale, Isle of Wight: Cross Publishing. Pp 159. £15.*

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*"Medicine is my legal wife,  
literature my mistress."*

Tolstoy, a lifelong friend of Anton Pavlovich Chekov, said of his young colleague "Medicine stands in his way. He would be a much finer writer if he hadn't been a doctor". Chekov would have disagreed, he never divorced medicine, his "legal wife", in fact, he remained faithful to her to the end—and she was a most demanding spouse. He also kept his mistress satisfied and she, likewise, was unrelenting in her demands. This remarkable symbiosis of muse and Aesculapian are portrayed with delicacy and skill by John Coope in his fine study of Chekov.

Medicine gave Chekov the substance to fulfill the demands of his mistress. "My medical studies have had a serious effect on my writing. They have taught me the art of how to classify my observations and they have enriched my observations". Chekov like many other writers—Maughan, Carlos Williams, Gogarty, and Goldsmith to name a few—was also a doctor, but there the similarity should end. Chekov was unique among doctor-writers in being, first and foremost, an idealistic and hard-working doctor driven by his dedication to serve his patients, and whereas many doctor-writers continued to practice medicine, none I can think of, did so in the sort of hell in which Chekov chose to immerse himself—the impoverished *zemstvo* system of rural Russia in which corruption, incompetence, and appalling deprivation were partners.

Throughout his life, Chekov never faltered in his belief in medical science. The disillusioned and depressed Andrei Yefimich trapped in the hell of Ward No. 6 extols the advances that Chekov so admired: "...medicine has undergone a fantastic transformation in the last twenty-five years. In truth, what unexpected brilliance, what a revolution! Thanks to antiseptics, they perform operations the great Pirogov used to consider impossible, even in the future... For a hundred abdominal operations, there is only one mortality, while gallstones are considered such a trifle that nothing is ever written about them". In 1895 Chekov threw his energies into saving *The Surgical Chronicle*, one of Russia's few medical

journals, and in so doing befriended medical editors all the time with the statement: "A good surgery journal is as useful as performing twenty thousand operations".

Chekov fought a personal battle with tuberculosis for 20 years, eventually succumbing to Koch's bacillus on July 15, 1904, at the early age of 44. Coope, himself a sensitive and caring doctor, who is familiar with the creative call, depicts perhaps as no other could, the pain and inevitable disillusionment that followed the first haemoptysis in 1884. We can at least be grateful that the infecting bacillus was not a virulent one, a fact that gave Chekov cause to doubt the diagnosis: "If the haemorrhage I had in the district court had been the beginning of consumption I should have been in the other world a long time ago".

Perhaps the most astounding aspect of Chekov's struggle with illness was his selfless disregard for his own welfare in pursuit of humanitarian causes. Not only did he dedicate much of his failing energies to founding (and financing) schools and hospitals for the peasants in Melikhova but he set out on an extraordinary odyssey to the convict island of Sakhalin. Coope brings new understanding to Chekov's determination to speak on behalf of the prisoners of Sakhalin, and of the punitive personal sacrifice this entailed. The hardships of this journey were truly frightful and he escaped death narrowly when his tarantass collided with three troikas, but it is the relentless misery and the sense of unremitting discomfort, not only on the journey, but also during his 3-month sojourn on the prison island that haunts the mind of the reader. "We're driving on. The felt boots are as wet as a latrine. They squelch, and my socks are like a sopping wet handkerchief that you've just blown your nose in after a heavy cold. The coachman is silent and clicks his tongue despondently. He would gladly turn back but it's too late. Darkness is falling."

Why, we ask, would a sick young doctor set out in primitive conditions to travel 5000 miles across some of the most inhospitable country in the world to uphold the cause of the detritus of society? The explanation may be found in a letter from Chekov to his friend A S Suvorin: "I want to write

### Asteroid hyalosis

... when suddenly,  
you realize that time  
has filled your eyes  
with threads of fine silk,  
wandering like seaweeds  
in a dead water pond,  
and with refringent grains  
of black sand,  
floating at all times  
between you and your landscapes.

You will never see again  
the sky's neat smoothness  
or the pure whiteness  
of the awaiting paper  
or that of the skin you love.

On your remaining sight  
you will carry forever  
small spots of blindness  
as a perpetual testimony  
of the hostile voodooos  
that the years passed  
have nailed on your back

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one to two hundred pages and thereby pay off some of my debt to medicine, towards which, as you know, I have behaved just like a swine". Would that such idealism might replace the avarice of contemporary medicine! And in the same letter, his thoughts on the pathetic plight of the unfortunate convicts on Sakhalin, afford us insight into Chekov's social conscience: "All civilised Europe knows that it is not the warders who are to blame, but all of us, yet this is not a concern of ours, we are not interested".

Chekov gained more at Sakhalin, perhaps, than even he could have anticipated—he saw into the very soul of the human condition, that which would later be enshrined in the Beckettian "I can't go on, must go on". The sadness and misery of Sakhalin, which so profoundly affected Chekov, cannot fail to leave the readers of this book untouched, even a century on, and so we are grateful when a benevolent destiny sees fit to bestow a little happiness on a weary physician returning from Sakhalin via Ceylon: "When I have children I'll say to them, not without pride: 'you fellows, in my time I made love to a dark-eyed Hindu maiden—where?—in a coconut grove on a starlit night.'"

Back in Russia, Chekov wrote his expiation—*The Island of Sakhalin*—in which he drew the attention of Russian society to the plight of its convicts. This was not without effect, and in 1896 a

government commission was sent to the island to investigate and make recommendations which helped to ameliorate the prisoners' pain and suffering which was to haunt Chekov for the rest of his days: "I have rendered just tribute to learning and to that which the old writers used to call pedantry. And I rejoice because the rough garb of the convict will also be hanging in my wardrobe. Let it hang there".

As an ardent admirer and student of Chekov, the writer, I am grateful to Coope for restoring to Chekov what I

suspect is little known by even his most ardent literary followers, namely his dedication to the down-trodden—the unfortunate helpless of society. Indeed, had he lived in a later age, he would surely have earned a Nobel laureate for his persistent, masterly and sensitive exploration of this theme.

One last word on this delightful book, and this on the quality of publication. All too often in today's world of the massive publishing conglomerates, a shameless disregard for the quality of photographic reproduction is manifest

by publishers and their printers, especially for black-and-white photographs. Happily this criticism cannot be levelled at Cross Publishing which has preserved the quality of some excellent photographs and reproduced these moreover within a fresh and tasteful overall design.

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