

OBITUARY

WILL RYAN (1937–2023)

On November 2nd, 2023, after a serious illness, William Francis Ryan, an outstanding researcher of Russian magical culture and written tradition, member of the British Academy, Doctor Honoris causa of the Russian Academy of Sciences, and the author of a number of monographs and of dozens of scientific articles, died at the age of 87. W. F. Ryan was involved with the ISNFR Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming since before it was formally founded, and he participated in international conferences organized by the Committee, served on the editorial board of the journal *Incantatio* since the journal's first issue, and published his wonderful articles in *Incantatio*, as well as reviews of books written by his colleagues.

W. F. Ryan was born in London on April 13th, 1937, into a Catholic family of Irish descent. He began studying Russian in secondary school, and then continued with this while serving in the Royal Navy between 1956 and 1958, qualifying as a military translator. From 1958 to 1961, Ryan studied Ancient and Modern Russian language and literature at the University of Oxford (Oriental College). Among his teachers in Oxford were the outstanding linguist Boris Genrikhovich Unbegaun (1898–1973) and the great expert in Russian bibliography, John Simmons (1915–2001).

After graduating from university, Ryan was sent by the British Council for a year-long internship at Leningrad University. The

works of the young foreigner attracted favourable attention from Academician Dmitry Likhachev. During his stay in Leningrad, Ryan worked in archives and libraries and made numerous trips to explore manuscript collections in other cities.

Between 1963 and 1965, Ryan worked at Oxford University Press, where he took part in the preparation of a Russian-English dictionary. Following this, he joined the Museum of the History of Science at Oxford University, combining his museum work with teaching modern and medieval Russian literature and language. Between 1967 and 1976, Ryan taught Russian language and literature in the School of East European and Slavonic Studies at the University of London. From 1976 until his retirement in 2002, he was academic librarian at the Warburg Institute, University of London. From 2000, he was also a professor of Russian studies at the same institution.

In 1970, W. F. Ryan was awarded a doctorate for his dissertation 'Astronomical and Astrological Terminology in Old Russian Literature'. In 1977 he was elected a Member of the Society of Antiquaries. In 2000, William Francis Ryan was made a member of the British Academy. He served as president of The [British] Folklore Society between 2005 and 2008. For many years, Ryan was the editor-in-chief of two of the Warburg Institute series (the Warburg Colloquia and the Warburg Surveys and Texts), as well as editor-in-chief of the *Slavonic and East European Review*, a journal founded in 1922. Will also served as president of the Hakluyt Society, an organisation founded in 1846 to publish scientific materials on travel and geographical discovery, between 2008 and 2011.

Works by W.F. Ryan are noted for their rare combination of broad-mindedness and large-scale generalizations based on an excellent knowledge of sources with a penchant for careful, detailed analysis. Of his early works, particularly noteworthy are his study of an early Russian translation of the biography of Aristotle Diogenes Laertius (1968) and, especially, his 1971 work on the oriental twelve-year animal cycle in Old Russian manuscripts. The latter article clearly demonstrated the author's exceptional ability for scholarly research.

W. F. Ryan's main book (his *magnum opus*) is *The Bathhouse at Midnight. An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*

(1999). In 2006, a Russian translation was issued by the *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* (New Literary Review) publishing house. The English original of the book and its Russian translation attracted many positive reviews in English, Russian, and other languages. In 2005, W. F. Ryan gave, with great success, a series of three lectures at the British Library, later published as a separate book, *Russian Magic at the British Library* (2006). The book consists of three chapters: ‘William Ralston: Russian magic and folklore in England’, ‘Ivan the Terrible, Stoglav and Russian Magic’, ‘Travellers’ Stories and Russian Magic’.

While still a young man, W. F. Ryan came across an ancient Russian manuscript in the Bodleian which contained a translation of *The Secret of Secrets*, a body of knowledge in the fields of politics, science, magic and fortune-telling. Beginning in 1965, he published a series of works devoted to this extremely complex text, the language of which is difficult even for those scholars who are skilled in Old Church Slavonic.

In addition to publishing individual articles, W. F. Ryan served as publisher and co-principal author of two collections of multilingual versions of *The Secret of Secrets* in a series published by the Warburg Institute. Together with Professor Moshe Taube of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, he prepared a critical edition of *The Secret of Secrets* with a historical introduction and a translation into English. This was published in 2019. In this edition, we find not only the exemplary publication of a Slavic text of a most complex kind, but also sections relating to Hebraic studies, prepared by a highly qualified specialist, that are of exceptional value.

The range of interests of W. F. Ryan was extremely wide, and covered not only the Russian magical tradition in the entire spectrum of its manifestations, ancient Russian literature, notes from travellers about Russia, relations between Russia and England in different historical periods, but also the history of science, instrument making, and maritime affairs.

The phenomena of Russian culture were considered by W. F. Ryan against a broad comparative background, fully aware of their sources in the culture of late antiquity and the early Middle Ages,

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as well as parallels in the countries of central and western Europe. Of particular importance is his conceptual article on whether Russia was an exception to the witch craze of early modern times (1998).

The death of W. F. Ryan is an irreparable loss; we will not be able to fully appreciate it immediately. We express our sincere condolences to the family and friends of the deceased, his colleagues and students, and to all admirers of his research works. His works are destined to have a long life.

To the bright memory of this great scholar!

A. L. Toporkov, A. V. Chernetsov

WORKS MENTIONED

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(Translation by Jonathan Roper)