

## James Brogden in Russia 1787 – 1788

by James Cracraft

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A volume of forty manuscript letters written by a young Englishman during a tour of the Continent in 1787-88 has recently come to light. The letters are not the originals but copies made and then bound by the author soon after his return to England in mid-November 1788: the handwriting is uniform throughout (and for the most part easily legible) and each letter is signed 'James Brogden' - signatures identical with that which appears with the date '1788' on the inside front cover of the volume. Eighteen of the letters were sent from Russia, which was visited first; they are, with one or two exceptions, much longer and more detailed and altogether more interesting than those which Brogden wrote during the latter stages of his journey. When he was on the point of leaving Russia he himself remarked, in a letter from Narva dated 10 June 1788, that 'as I intend making a journal of my tour, I shall not upon all occasions be quite so particular as formerly'. And while there is no evidence that he ever bothered to write up such a journal, historians perhaps have little reason to regret its absence, at least so far as the Russian phase of his travels is concerned: a deliberately composed memoir could not have matched the immediateness and fresh informality of the surviving letters. The latter are a useful new source for the study of Russian 'society and manners' in the 1780s.<sup>1</sup> James Brogden died at Friar's Oak, his house in Sussex, in 1842, leaving only his wife and sister to mourn him. He was born in 1765, the elder son of John and Mary Brogden, who left Narborough, in Leicestershire, and moved to their house on Clapham Common when James was seven. He was at Eton in 1780-81. Later (1796-1832), he was M.P. for Launceston, in Cornwall. An obituary notice published at the time of his death states that 'in his early Parliamentary career Mr Brogden took a decided part with Mr. Fox and the Whigs, and he frequently spoke on commercial subjects'.<sup>2</sup> According to official records, Brogden spoke in the House rarely, and then briefly. But he must have impressed his colleagues as a man of probity, for in 1812-13 he was a lord of the Treasury and in 1813 was named Chairman of the Committees of the House. He retained this post for almost the whole of two parliaments, until the autumn of 1826 when, at the opening of the new session, Canning accepted his resignation. Brogden's name had become involved in a scandal connected with certain irregularities in the management of the Arigna Iron and Coal Mining Company, of which he was a director. Throughout the early part of that session one Alderman Waithman, in a righteous sort of way, kept bringing up the matter; finally a select committee was appointed to look into it; in December 1826 Brogden expressed himself 'perfectly safe in the hands of those to whom the investigation had been entrusted'; and the matter was not referred to again.<sup>3</sup> During the last six years of his parliamentary life Brogden spoke only once, in 1831—a luckless defence of 'small' boroughs. On this occasion he declared himself an enemy of the 'darkness of Catholicism and the mischief of democracy' and an 'independent' devoted to the country's best interests.<sup>4</sup> By the reforms enacted the following year, which he had opposed, his constituency was abolished.

But if Brogden did not shine in Parliament, he met with success in the City. From the debates devoted to the Arigna affair it appears that he had simultaneous interests in several companies. The records of the Russia Company show that he was a member or 'freeman' of that organisation for over fifty years: in March 1793 he was elected to the Company's Court of Assistants, an office he filled without interruption until resigning in 1840. At one point (1817) Brogden was made a consul and company auditor as well, positions of great respectability.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, he must have considerably increased his inheritance, if only to maintain his several houses; for in addition to the family house on Clapham Common,<sup>6</sup> and Friar's Oak, in which he died, he owned a country house at Trimsaran, in South Wales. In later life he was reputed to have continued his father's philanthropy to the poor of Narborough, where both his parents, and eventually he himself, were buried. He would have combined money-making, public service and private charity with a comfortable, even gracious style of living. To his contemporaries, both in the City and at Westminster, and at places like Launceston and Narborough, he must have seemed an important figure. His name perhaps lived on, or lingers still, in the intimate memories of his family; for the rest, with death came almost perfect obscurity.<sup>7</sup>

With one exception, James Brogden's letters are addressed either to his father or to his sister Susan, for whom he seems to have had a special regard. It is clear from reading them that there existed close bonds of loyalty and affection within the Brogden family (which included also a second son, Henry, who figures little in the letters; in 1787-88 he was still at Eton). Equally, it is clear that the tour recorded in the letters was his first trip abroad, that he undertook it both to 'improve' himself, in the eighteenth-century way, and, more importantly, to learn at first-hand, in St Petersburg, the practical business of the Russia Company, with which his father had been long connected.<sup>8</sup> Indeed it was this connection, and the fact that John Brogden had himself spent some time in Russia (which can be seen from the letters), that would account for his son's journey there; while the notion of making a more extended tour of the Continent seems to have come to James Brogden during his stay in St Petersburg. It can be deduced from his letter of 22 February 1788 that his original plan had been to go to St Petersburg and to travel in Russia, thence to return to England directly, by sea; for in that letter he asked his father for additional funds to return by land, that is, by way of the Baltic states, North Germany, and Paris - which was, in the event,

precisely what he did do: evidently his father had been persuaded that the change of plan was worth the extra expense. Thus, it would be misleading to call James Brogden's visit to Russia in 1787-88 part of a Grand Tour<sup>9</sup> or to consider his letters in the context of ordinary English travel literature.

In various of the letters which he sent from St Petersburg Brogden writes of his desire 'to obtain solid improvement', of his ambition to learn Russian and to better his French, of his concern that his father's bounty 'shall seldom contribute to folly & never to vice'. Yet so far as can be judged from the letters themselves, he spent more time dining out and dancing than he did inspecting dreary 'fabriks' (factories) or studying languages. At one point he refers to having 'heard', not read, a lot about St Petersburg, from which we may infer (and not only from this) that he had not made any special intellectual preparations for going to Russia (though there were a number of books about Russia, admittedly most of them bad, then available in English).<sup>10</sup> But this is not surprising. Backed by the probably considerable means of his devoted parents, James Brogden was in the way of becoming a gentleman, an agreeable occupation which left little time for reading books. He appears to have been the first of his family to have gone to Eton. His letters suggest, moreover, that between leaving Eton and going abroad his days had passed in the congenial society of family and friends; that summer holidays had been spent at Brighton; that during the London season he had frequently attended parties and balls and had often gone to the theatre. As the elder son of old John Brogden, James had begun, too, the process of succeeding to his father's business interests, and as both a gentleman and a man of affairs his trip to Russia was probably meant to cap his apprenticeship. Thus, after less than a fortnight in St Petersburg, Brogden remarked to his father that 'as I begin now to think of myself as something of a Merchant, I must use mercantile phrases'. And late in February his father was assured that 'We continue in our intention of setting off for Mosco on Thursday, & I have great expectation of obtaining in this town much useful information as a merchant (which is & ought to be my first object)'. Three months after his return to London he was admitted to the Russia Company 'by patrimony' and took his 'oath of freedom' before the Court of Assistants.<sup>11</sup>

James Brogden's letters convey directly the reactions to Russia of a young Englishman of his class. They were written as a labour of love, and out of a sense of filial duty. Brogden seems to have had, as yet, few fixed attitudes. His 'English prejudices' (as he once called them) can be easily understood. His relative ordinariness and lack of fashionable sophistication ensured that his impressions of Russia were fresh and uncomplicated. In this respect particularly his letters contrast favourably with the published works of British travellers in Russia during the reign of Catherine II.<sup>12</sup> There are in the letters none of the wearisome philosophical-historical digressions so characteristic of the latter. Brogden was content to report and describe without attempting to interpret. Moreover, his father's connections secured for him very useful introductions to the English community in St Petersburg, in its social composition a sort of transplanted City of London in miniature. He stayed with the family of John Cayley, a merchant who had just been made British Consul-General and agent of the Russia Company, and was immediately taken into Cayley's circle of friends; and Charles Eraser, British Secretary of Legation and acting Charge d'Affaires, was an old friend from Eton. Thus Brogden was remarkably well placed to observe the life of the English community, a circumstance which lends special interest to his letters. More than that, they contain a wealth of often new information about—for instance—theatrical life in St Petersburg, about the problems of travelling in Russia or about the linen and other industries at Yaroslavl, which he had visited; they corroborate many of the impressions of other contemporary observers of the Russian scene (particular instances of which I have not thought it necessary to point out in my notes) and illustrate admirably some of the main currents in Russian social history of the time. The deep cultural cleavage between the recognisably European upper classes and the impoverished mass of ordinary Russians; the lamentable contrast between the fantastic glitter of court life and the desolation of the countryside; the growing popularity (among courtiers) of English, at the expense of French, fashions; or the peculiar mixture of Asiatic and European elements in Russian civilisation—are all in the letters in one way or another touched upon.

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The extracts (to be found in the Slavonic and East European Review Vol XLVII No 108 January 1969) are from fifteen of the eighteen letters Brogden wrote during his stay in Russia. The other three letters contain nothing of interest: one of them duplicates the contents of an earlier letter and two others are entirely taken up with purely personal matters (like arranging with his father to send him a seal). Portions omitted from the letters printed here consist mostly of uninteresting family gossip or of repetitious reports of his social activities. I have left the original spelling and capitalisation intact but have supplied most of the punctuation.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> I am indebted to Mr Paul Grinke for bringing Brogden's letters to my attention, for lending them to me to study, and for kindly allowing me to publish these extracts from them.

<sup>2</sup> *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 1842, New Series, vol. 18, p. 428.

<sup>3</sup> *Hansard*, New Series, vol. XVI, col. 73-81, 137-42, 147-52, 196-200, 207-8, 243-84, 300.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, Third Series, V, col. 218.

<sup>5</sup> See the Court Minute Books of the Russia Company, in 14 vols, in the Guildhall Library, London (Ms. 11,741/1-14); vols. 8-12 cover the period of James Brogden's association with the Company. Also the Treasurers' Account Books (Ms. 11,893/1-7; see vols. 4-5 for the period 1783-1841). All Mss. subsequently cited are deposited in the archives of the Guildhall Library; hereafter only their catalogue numbers will be given. I am grateful to the Librarian and staff of the Guildhall Library for their courteous assistance. It must be noted that except for N. C. Hunt's specialised study 'The Russia Company and the [British] Government, 1734-1742' (*Oxford Slavonic Papers*, VII, Oxford, 1957, pp. 27-65), the modern history of the Russia Company has not been written. In the 18th century the Company's affairs were run by a governor, four consuls, and a court of twenty-four assistants, all elected annually (on 1 March) at the General Court or assembly of the freemen of the Company. The Court of Assistants, including the consuls, and presided over by the governor, met in London about once a month (in winter more often) to transact the Company's business—the supervision and regulation of British trade with Russia, which could be engaged in only by members of the Company. At St Petersburg the Company maintained a full-time agent as well as a clerk to the British Factory (the association of British merchants resident there); it also paid the salaries of two British chaplains, one attached to the Factory and the other to the English church on the island of Kronshtadt (see also below, notes n, 16).

<sup>6</sup> A lithograph of a sizable house on Clapham Common, described as the 'Villa of the late James Brogden, Esq. M.P.\*', is in the Clapham Public Library: the house was called 'The Wilderness' and was pulled down in 1851. In his letters Brogden himself calls the house 'The Grove', a name probably referring to a grove of oaks which grew close by it, as can be seen in the lithograph.

<sup>7</sup> For details of Brogden's life; *The Eton College Register, 1753-1790*, Eton, 1921, p. 71; *Notes and Queries*, 7th Series, vol. XII, p. 472; *The Gentleman's Magazine*, *loc. cit.* His father's death was noticed in *ibid.*; 1800, vol. 70, pt. ii, p. 805; his mother's, fourteen years later, in vol. 84, ii, p. 411.

<sup>8</sup> John Brogden, like his son after him, was for many years a prominent member of the Company: as early as 1756 he was elected to the Court of Assistants; from 1776 to 1784 he was also an auditor; for two years he was a consul (1785-86); thereafter, until his retirement in 1792, he remained an assistant and auditor (Ms. 11,741/7-9, *passim.*).

<sup>9</sup> For the characteristics of a proper Grand Tour, see W. E. Mead, *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*, Boston, 1914.

<sup>10</sup> For a list of such books see the bibliography in William Coxe, *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark*, London, 1784.

<sup>11</sup> Minutes for the meeting of 24 February 1789 (Ms. 11,741/8, f. 258). The 'freedom' of the Company was obtained by one of three ways; \*by Act', i.e. by applying, paying a fee of £5 and taking the oath according to the provisions of an act of Parliament; by 'Patrimony', i.e. by the special method reserved for the sons of freemen; or "by Servitude", i.e. on the recommendation of a freeman to whom the applicant had been apprenticed. The first was the most common way.

<sup>12</sup> There are at least nine such travel books, all of them published more or less at this time. That by Cox, referred to above (n. 10), is the best known and the most useful. On Cox and his book, and for a list of the published letters and memoirs of British travellers in Russia during the period, see P. Putnam (ed.), *Seven Britons in Imperial Russia, 1698 - 1812*, Princeton, 1952, pp. 237-49, 414-16. For a list of the travel literature on Russia in English and other European languages, see J. Pinkerton, *General Collection of the Best and Most Interesting Voyages and Travels*, London, 1806-14, vol. XVII, pp. 25-37; also E. G. Coxe, *A Reference Guide to the Literature of Travel*, vol. I (vol. IX of 'University of Washington Publications in Language and Literature', 1935), pp. 195 ff.

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