

Rasputin: A Short Life

By Frances Welch

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Told with humor, intrigue, and a shrewd eye for detail, this riveting short biography sheds much-needed light on the life of nineteenth-century Russian icon Grigory Rasputin.

Grigory Rasputin, a Siberian peasant turned mystic and court sage, was as fascinating as he was unfathomable. He played the role of the simple man, eating with his fingers and boasting, “I don’t even know the ABC.” But, as the only person able to relieve the symptoms of hemophilia in the Tsar’s heir Alexei, he gained almost hallowed status within the Imperial court.

During the last decade of his life, Rasputin and his band of “little ladies” came to symbolize all that was decadent, corrupt, and remote about the Imperial Family, especially when it was rumored that he was not only shaping Russian policy during the First World War, but also enjoying an intimate relationship with the Empress…

Rasputin’s role in the downfall of the tsarist regime is beyond dispute. But who was he really? Prophet or rascal? A “breath of rank air...who blew away the cobwebs of the Imperial Palace,” as Beryl Bainbridge put it, or a dangerous deviant?

Writing for historical aficionados and curious readers alike, Frances Welch turns her inimitable wry gaze on one of the great mysteries of Russian history.

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Editorial Review

Review
“In this elegant and insightful short biography, Welch has enormous fun...she has done an excellent job of digging out the kind of telling detail that often gets swamped by the grand political narrative.” (*Mail on Sunday*)

“In this slender and enjoyable biography, Frances Welch sets about her search for the man with common sense, wry observation and insight." (*The Sunday Times*)

“No. 1 Non-Fiction London Bestseller Feb 2014” (*Evening Standard*)

“Top 10 MOST REVIEWED Books of the Week Feb 2014” (*The Bookseller*)

“Hats off to Frances Welch for an absolutely crackling,richly packed biography.” (*The Independent, Ireland*)

“Top Summer Book 2014” (*The Times*)

“Welch’s entertaining romp brims with details of the rumbustious rascal with superb seduction skills (despite his foul breath and food-encrusted beard) and a weakness for drink. A jollier account of the Siberian peasant-turned-mystic’s life would be hard to find." (*Daily Mail MUST READ*)

“Welch is a mistress of wry description not only inthis book but in three other sharply observed works on the Russian court.” (*The Times, Roger Boyes*)

“Frances Welch combines historical insight with a novelistic flair for character.” (*Evening Standard*)

“Welch writes with a limpid style and a cool intelligence.” (*Sunday Telegraph*)

"Extraordinary... A delight to read, if horror can be delightful." (*The Daily Telegraph*)

"Inspiring [and] humorous." (*The Guardian*)

About the Author
Frances Welch is the author of *The Russian Court at Sea* (2011), *Romanov Fantasy* (2008), and *Sydney Gibbes* (2004). She lives in Suffolk, England.

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Rasputin
Rasputin never had any difficulty reconciling his weakness for beautiful young princesses with a passion for the simple life. During his last years, he spent many a happy hour at palaces repeating one of his favourite instructions: ‘Be glad at simplicity.’ He was full of invitations as unlikely as they were picturesque: ‘Come with me in the summer . . . to the open spaces of Siberia. We will catch fish and work in the fields. And then you will really learn to understand God.’

He evidently wanted his listeners to know he set great store by his Siberian origins. But, as with so many of Rasputin’s pronouncements, it is hard to gauge the extent of his sincerity.

What is certain is that the spiritual pride of puritans was among his biggest bugbears. The traditional Siberian had no qualms about embracing wine, women and song. In this Wild East of Russia, if a man could prove he had been drunk when attacking a judge, he would get only three days in prison. A Siberian picnic comprised a parcel of fresh cucumbers and a hearty pail of wine. According to one contemporary traveller, female binge drinkers in comic headgear lined the streets on freezing winter nights. The traveller described one incident during which the women hurled snow at men, then, in a grand crescendo, fell down and threw up their legs, ‘revealing the most remarkable sights’.

The prevailing hedonism was combined with mystical fervour. Hunters in Siberia were reputedly able to teleport themselves from covey to covey. Religious sects flourished in the forests, ranging from groups of Old Believers quibbling over alterations in the liturgy to fanatics burning themselves to death. In extreme sects, baptisms by fire included male castration; women had their nipples and clitorises cut off while holding icons.

Pilgrims, ‘stranniki’, wandered through the villages, telling spell-binding stories of their travels in return for food and a bed. Villagers left bowls of food and milk on their doorsteps; these would be snapped up by the stranniki, vagrants or escaped convicts, whoever was first. In Pokrovskoye, where Rasputin grew up, the bowls would have been particularly appreciated by the pigs that wandered freely up and down its main street.

In Rasputin’s day, the village comprised 1,000 people in 200 houses. The villagers endured harsh winters, with temperatures dropping to minus 50, followed by spring thaws which reduced the rough main track to a sea of liquid mud.

The Rasputins were one of Pokrovskoye’s oldest established families, with roots dating back to 1643. Rasputin’s supporters have been quick to point out that the family name was derived from ‘rasput’, meaning ‘crossroad’, and not ‘rasputnik’, debauchee, as was sometimes claimed. Indeed, in the early 1800s, Rasputin’s forebears, Ivan and Miron Rosputin (sic), were listed among the village’s ‘better souls’.

Whether Rasputin’s father, Efim, carried on in the ‘better souls’ family tradition is a matter of argument. According to some reports, he liked strong vodka and was a ‘deplorable drunkard’. Though primarily heterosexual, he successfully cultivated young male lovers: this despite his appearance: ‘chunky, unkempt and stooped’.

But at his funeral the family spoke of his religious dedication and untiring work on the farm. His dutiful granddaughter, Maria, portrayed him as a gentleman of the old school, sipping China tea while railing against the horse thieves who blighted the ‘better souls” lives: canny thieves would lasso their prey then make silent escapes, with the horses’ hooves wrapped in rags.

It was claimed, by his supporters, that Efim Rasputin acquired conversational skills and wisdom through his job driving carts. This seems unlikely. He certainly took pride in his work, flaunting a smart carter’s badge on his left arm and a cap with an Imperial eagle. But rides on his route, ‘Trakt 4’, linking Tyumen and Tobolsk, were so rough that passengers in the clattering carts were obliged to lie full length on piles of hay to save their spines.

Maria’s claim that Efim read the Bible to his family also seems far-fetched. In an 1877 census, conducted when little Grishka was eight, Efim indicated, with crosses, that the whole family was illiterate. Twenty-two years later, another census revealed that no progress had been made: the Rasputins, now including Grigory’s wife Praskovia, were still unable to read or write.

Rasputin’s mother, Anna, was described in one report as ‘short and rotund’ but in another as ‘tall, slim with shining eyes’. The photographic evidence is flawed, as the images are blurred and there are conflicting captions. One indistinct photograph of her apparently exists in which she peers intently at the camera, perhaps suspicious of the new technology. Her loyal granddaughter, Maria, claimed that Anna kept a meticulously clean house.

Rasputin’s parents married in 1862, when Efim was 20 and Anna 22. The Rasputins were relatively well off, apparently occupying an izba with an unlikely sounding eight rooms and owning 12 cows and 18 horses. They may have used their yard as a latrine, but they were not reduced to creating windows out of stretched animal bladders.

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