

PETER NASMYTH: *Georgia. In the Mountains of Poetry*. xv, 306 pp., incl. 3 maps. London: Curzon Press Caucasus World. 1998.

Writer and journalist Peter Nasmyth published in 'Georgia. A Rebel in the Caucasus' (Cassell, 1992) his first impressions of several regions of Georgia during their final Soviet years. Since then the country has achieved independence, undergone two ethno-territorial wars (in S. Ossetia and Abkhazia) that have left these regions *de facto* independent of the central government, experienced a civil war, seen its first democratically elected president (the late Mingrelian Zviad Gamsakhurdia) overthrown in a bloody coup, and returned to power in his original fiefdom, Eduard Shevardnadze, long reviled as a pro-Kremlin Party Boss. Clearly, there was ample scope for updating.

Almost all of the original 222 pages are repeated here, the new thoughts (from p.187) representing Part II of the work. Part I has undergone some tinkering, most noticeably the excision of 'Khevsureti in conversion', though now this region too boasts an eye-witness account. Personally, I would have preferred to see more changes to pages 1-186, but some have gone too far, producing a palpably less grammatical book, as when '(a) phenomenon' degenerates into today's common solœcism of '(a) phenomena' -- on four occasions (vid. Corrigenda)! Nasmyth earlier styled Georgia's third virtually independent region (on the southwestern border with Turkey) 'Ajaria', according to its Russian designation; perhaps attempting to render its Georgian name (Ach'ara), Nasmyth produces the quite impossible 'Ajara'. B/w photographs have replaced Tamara Alavidze's fetching pen-and-ink sketches.

Nasmyth manages to be both informative and infuriating -- informative because a perceptive eye, extensive travel-experience and a wide range of acquaintances combine to produce many insights (positive AND negative) into the Georgian character. And yet, as with so many journalistic reports from this complex region, there are just too many examples of lack of attention to detail or superficiality of analysis, which need amending for any future edition.

Transcription

Though presenting a perfectly adequate transcription-system for the Georgian alphabet (p.9), Nasmyth strangely refuses throughout to mark any glottalised consonants and confusingly prefers to render [q'] as simple 'k'. I note such instances only when they appear in items quoted for other reasons.

Myth vs Fact

The ancient Greek land of Colchis, which was a rather indeterminate area running perhaps from northern Abkhazia around the Black Sea coast into today's Turkey, is too narrowly identified with the western Georgian region of Mingrelia, a widespread Georgian fallacy. Argonaut Jason is then several times referred to as though he were a historical figure, and Medea is still ascribed Medes(!) as father; even the 1975 Georgian translation of Apollonius Rhodius' *Argonautica* allows her correct parentage: 'Æetes: king of the Colchians, son of Helios, brother of Circe, father of Calciope, Medea and Apsirte'.

History

Whilst Xenophon (*Anabasis* IV & V) mentions a tribe of Taokhoi in roughly the historical Georgian region of T'ao (today in Turkey), there is no proof that these were 'Georgians' (p.43). It was not simply the range of Georgian dialects or even the existence of the four Kartvelian languages that caused the Arabs to style the Caucasus 'Mountain of Languages' (p.70). Not everyone would describe Menshevik Georgia 1918-21 as 'halcyon years' (p.52) -- cf. "'The Free and Independent Social-Democratic State of Georgia" will always remain in my memory as a classic example of an imperialist "small nation". Both in territory-snatching outside and bureaucratic tyranny inside, its chauvinism was beyond all bounds' (Carl Eric Bechhofer [Roberts]'s 'In Denikin's Russia and the Caucasus, 1919-1920', 1921, p.14). I would refrain from even suggesting to casual readers wild speculations about links between the Caucasus and 'Etruscans (and hence[?!] the Romans)', 'Pelasgi, the forerunners[?!] of the early Greeks', 'Basques and Celts' (p.70), much less the Sumerians (pp.114, 156, 234). The reference to Shamil and his 1853 military actions against the Russian invaders is muddled in the extreme; readers are referred to Gammer (1994). Donald Rayfield's 'Georgian Literature. A History' (1994, about to be republished by Curzon) is cited as source for the statement that in the 12th century Georgian had as many speakers/readers as English had in Shakespeare's day (p.146) -- how on earth can one know this? The Abkhazian Kingdom did not 'merge' with western Georgia 'to repel Abkhazia's historical enemy[,] the Turks' (p.175) -- Abkhazian king Leon II at the end of the 8th century extended his domains upto the mountain-range dividing western from eastern Georgia and at that stage moved his capital to Kutaisi (p.279). In 978 Bagrat' III became the first king by right of dynastic succession (Georgian father, Abkhazian mother) of the united Kingdom of the Abkhazians and Georgians; the capital of this kingdom shifted to Tbilisi in the 12th century. Conquest is rather a strong description for the Turkish landings in Sukhum in 1578 (p.258). The intriguing statement that Mingrelians, whose most prominent scion was Lavrent'i Beria, have been 'traditionally resistant to Tbilisi' (p.244) demands some sort of elucidation! Georgia had no king at

the time of Tsar Alexander II (p.262) to present him with anything. The Georgian and Armenian branches of Orthodoxy split in 607, not the 8th century (p.272).

Language-issues

The four Kartvelian languages are Georgian, Mingrelian, Laz and Svan, and so I would prefer not to see Svans and Khevsurs, who speak a Georgian dialect, equated as examples of 'Georgian tribes' (p.78), just as it is the Kartvelian (not Georgian) peoples who have a language-family to themselves (p.8). On p.226 Khevsurian is awarded the status of a separate language, whilst on p.242 it reverts to its proper category of dialect, though a mysterious addition claims it to be 'too similar to Kartvelian Georgian' [sic!] -- in truth it is one of the most divergent dialects from standard Georgian. The assertion that Svan lacks the rich oral tradition possessed by the Khevsurs (p.234) is unsustainable -- at least 4 large volumes (without translations) of Svan oral prose plus one each of (translated) poetry and proverbs were published during the Soviet period, whereas I can think of only one volume (Khevsurian Poetry, 1931) devoted to this dialect's oral heritage. Stating that Svan 'is said to be similar to the Georgian language of the fourth century AD' (p.147), an interesting comparison made also by the late 19th century alpinist Douglas Freshfield, might lead one to think that a knowledge of Old Georgian would facilitate studying Svan -- in truth, it would not.

Abkhazia

It is far too simplistic to assert (p.22; cf. 173-74, 246) that just because Georgia sought freedom after 70 years of communism, the South Ossetians (hardly 'recent colonisers of Georgian territory') and Abkhazians claimed parallel freedom from Georgia. For full details of the Abkhazian case see Hewitt (1998), though each Abkhazian might argue, *pace* Nasmyth's lamentation at 'the absence of such tact today' (p.178), that their motivation is indeed Uncle Sandro's very dictum (from Fazil Iskander's 'Sandro of Chegem') 'I'm just myself' -- I simply cannot interpret references to: (a) Abkhazians as perhaps once willing to view themselves as Georgians (p.173); (b) their 'peculiar need for aggressive self redefinition' (p.174); (c) 'this nationality within a nationality' (p.175). As a rebuttal of the widely believed Georgian propagandist claims of scale-tipping Russian involvement in the Abkhazian war, see Billingsley (1998a; 1998b). Another canard repeated here (pp.172, 196, 206, 246, 304) in connection with that war is that the 'entire' local 'Georgian' population (actually over 90% Mingrelian) of '250,000' persons was 'ethnically cleansed', resulting in their becoming exiles in Georgia (proper). Whilst upto 200,000 (maximum) Kartvelians (viz. Mingrelians, Svans and Georgians) may well have fled when Shevardnadze's fighters were expelled from Abkhazia in September 1993, it has been demonstrated (vid. the 'Report of a UNPO [Unrepresented Nations and Peoples' Organisation] coordinated human rights

mission to Abkhazia and Georgia' in Central Asian Survey 14.1.127-154, 1995) that this flight largely took place before the arrival of any Abkhazian forces -- the flight of an ethnic group, here Kartvelians, no matter how justified their instinctive fears might have been, cannot be equated with a policy actively to cleanse a territory of that group. This charge is far too flippantly levelled by journalists and politicians alike. The only helicopter on a humanitarian mission (see p.170) that I know to have been shot down during this war was the M1-8, downed by Georgian fire on 14 Dec 1992, killing over 60 Abkhazian women and children. The resort of (in Russian) Novyj Afon (Georgian 'akhali aponi') is New Athos (not 'Athens', p.184). It takes two hours (p.245) to drive from Mingrelia to Sukhum [sic] -- Nasmyth notes Batumi as an older alternative to Batumi (p.207), and so courtesy requires this alternative without Georgian's nominative i-ending, just as using Georgian terms for Abkhazian dress (p.181) is somewhat insulting: the 'papakhi' woollen hat should be 'akhəlpəɾč', whilst cartridge 'masra' is 'ahazəɾ', though, if the accompanying picture properly represents the headgear, we are dealing with 'akhtəɾpa' (Geo. 'q'abalakhi' -- see Hewitt & Khiba 1997). The open palm on the Abkhazian flag (and I am not aware of any earlier two-handed variant) (p.246) repeats a motif from mediæval Genoese maps of this region and presumably is a sign of traditional hospitality (p.258) rather than a warning to Kartvelians to 'stay away'.

General

If 'so beautiful even the sun daren't look at her' (p.46) is meant to capture Georgian 'mzetunakhavi', the translation should be 'unseen by the sun' (sc. 'white-skinned'). 'Pirosmani' was directed by Giorgi (not Eldar) Shengelaia (p.100). Nasmyth seems to misunderstand the sense of the term 'Upper Svaneti(a)' (pp.153ff.): the Svan settlements in the upper reaches of the Ingur valley form Upper Svaneti(a), whereas those in the upper reaches of the Tskhenists'q'ali valley are known as Lower Svaneti(a). Two main dialects exist in each of these areas, Upper Svaneti(a) having Lower Bal and, above the village of Becho, Upper Bal. The Upper Bal region was known until the latter half of the 19th century as Free Svaneti(a), because it recognised the writ of no external authority. Nasmyth seems to imagine 'Upper Svaneti(a)' designates historical Free Svaneti(a) exclusively. Problems in S. Ossetia flared up when this Autonomous Region awarded itself republican status, causing Gamsakhurdia to annul its autonomy altogether (p.191). The translations on pp.230-31 contain inaccuracies -- e.g. 'The stones are drunken' seems to misread 'tvreba' for 't'q'vreba' (= 'it cracks loudly'). Bertubani is in Georgia (not Azerbaijan) (p.269). The work offers a 'Select Bibliography', in which not a single Georgian grammar is recommended. As one who believes it impossible fully to understand a culture without knowing its language I find this omission quite extraordinary.

After the traveller's experiences are related, one cannot help wondering wistfully what has become of the sensitive, early guide Tamuna: 'Unlike any other Georgian I'd met she seemed to detect something dark looming beyond the radiant ambitions of the nationalists, but felt her voice drowned by the political hysteria sweeping the streets' (p.88). It has been Georgia's misfortune not only that its Tamunas were (are) far too few but that none in positions of influence dared to speak out against the disastrous path along which those late 80s' demagogues led their naive fellow citizens. One can only speculate how different Nasmyth's update might then have been...

Corrigenda

p.ix: Lagodekhi; p.xiv et passim: Ajaria or Ach'ara; p.12 l.1: view of; p.13 l.1: Qarachogheli; p.22 l.13up: independence with which; p.25 l.10up (& p.95 l.11 & p.304 l.2): workers'; p.29 l.11: Caucasus; l.16: not cloaked; p.42 l.4up: all the Europeans; l.1up (& p.73 l.19up & p.84 l.20up & p.180 l.4up): phenomenon; p.48 l.6: warrior; p.49 l.2: Tergi's or Terek's; p.57 l.20: higgledy-piggledy; p.68 l.11up: protest at or against; p.69 l.13: similar; p.71 l.14up: 20 demonstrators killed; p.73 l.20up et passim: Giorgi; p.85 l.17up: as, no doubt, did; p.86 l.10: brought; p.87 ll.16 & 18 (& p.96 l.16): couple of; p.99 l.2: quickly; p.103 l.4: Sul(u)guni; ll.14up & 23up: Khvanch'k'ara; p.108 l.4: vigorous; p.114 l.17: Svet'i Tskhoveli means 'Living Pillar'; p.115 l.17: monarchist; p.118 l.17up: benefited; p.119 l.21: out of; p.121 l.5: dared not; p.123 l.2up: extraordinary; p.128 l.6: indestructability; p.129 l.7: dessert; p.132 l.10: began; p.134 l.1: 1944; l.2: 100,000; p.142 l.21: nein; p.144 l.12: gmadlobt; p.154 l.22up et passim: Lat'ali; p.157 l.8up: Lenjeri; p.160 l.7up: haloes; p.161 ll.3 & 9 & p.306 l.1: Theodore; p.162 ll.9up & 19up: Lalkhor; p.165 l.9up: Chvibiani; p.164 l.2up & p.166 ll.4 & 6up: Chazhashi; l.15up: What's; p.169 l.11up: parents'; l.1up: referring; p.170 l.7: had; p.173 l.22up: Georgians, who, he felt; p.175 l.12: translation, if; p.177 l.4up: 1992-1993; p.178 l.10up: Iskander's; p.180 ll.7 & 11: Sergej; p.186 l.16: café; p.195 l.2: an; p.196 l.4: émigrés; l.17: Shevardnadze's; p.201 l.3: surely Vak'e is needed in place of Vera? l.9: bich'o; p.203 l.12: insight; p.210 l.19up: mafioso; p.211 l.13: Gogebashvili; p.213 l.19up: merchants'; l.9up: Prospekt Stalina; p.221 l.2: listener's; p.224 l.9: Atoneli; p.226 et passim: Leila; p.229 l.4up: indefinable; p.231 l.7: snakes'; ll.1up & 2up: Barisakho; p.240 l.15up: gkviat; p.260 l.1up: Nabokov; p.264 l.4up & p.266 l.9up: what does 'Daghestan Caucasus' mean? p.267 ll.11 & 30 & p.306 l.3up: Nizami('s); p.271 l.10up: caves; p.273 l.16up: Uplistsikhe; p.276 l.13: what are 'blibbles'? p.279 l.6 & p.305 l.27up: Bagrat'; l.16up: Shkhara; l.13up: the Writers' Union Building (Tbilisi); p.283 l.4: visitors'; p.293 l.16: Vnukovo; l.14up: tsnobili means 'famous'; p.296 l.16up: Fauré's; p.300 l.7up: Tocsin

or Alarm-bell (not Toxin!); Eshmak^{is}; p.303 1.2up: Murad; p.304 1.11up: Abkhazia;
p.306 1.20: Shengelaya, Giorgi.

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