

# WILL RYAN

William Francis Ryan

13 April 1937 – 2 November 2023

elected Fellow of the British Academy 2000

by

SIMON FRANKLIN

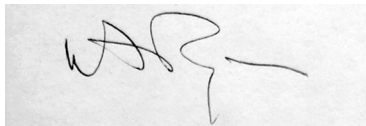
*Fellow of the Academy*

*Summary.* William Francis Ryan, former Academic Librarian at the Warburg Institute, was a leading historian of the culture and texts of early modern Russia and of the medieval East Slavs. He wrote the definitive history of magic in Russia. His co-edited text and translation of the East Slavic version of the *Secret of Secrets* is a landmark in the study of this Pseudo-Aristotelian work that circulated very widely in many languages. He also contributed to research on the history of scientific instruments, and of voyages. He was a conspicuously good citizen of academe, through his service to learned societies.

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In December 1955 L.J. Cheney, headmaster of Bromley Grammar School for Boys, wrote an open reference ('To whom it may concern') for one of the cohort of pupils that were leaving:<sup>1</sup>

W.F. Ryan entered here in 1948. In due course he passed the Ordinary Level examination in English Language, English Literature, Geography, History, French, Mathematics and Latin, and has since added Russian to this list.

He passed the Advanced Level examination last summer in Latin and French. He is entering again next year with the hope of gaining a State Scholarship.

He is a School Prefect.

W.F. Ryan has a very perceptive mind and a rare taste for languages. (He has done quite a lot of Greek). His mind is original and he might do really first-class work. The difficulty so far, has been to narrow his interests so as to enable him to cope satisfactorily with his examinations.

He is a Catholic among a host of Protestants, he is popular and has a lively sense of humour.

He should do very well indeed.

L.J. Cheney himself wins top marks for perceptiveness. Anybody who encountered W.F. Ryan (in full, William Francis; in his publications, W.F.; to friends and colleagues – and henceforth in this Memoir – just Will) at any time over the subsequent half century would recognise the characterisation of him even from these few phrases. He did indeed go on to 'do really first-class work'; and – fortunately for scholarship and for all who had the pleasure of his conversation – he continued to find it difficult to 'narrow his interests'. It is no surprise to learn that Will was a School Prefect. He was also a dedicated Boy Scout, becoming Troop Leader, and in 1953 he received a Queen's Scout award. Throughout his career he was not only a good scholar but a good citizen both of academe and of learned societies: prepared to step into positions of responsibility and service, trusted to use that responsibility wisely and fairly. As for Cheney's somewhat incongruous remark that Will was 'a Catholic among a host of Protestants': nothing changed. Will's faith was a very important part of his life. At his funeral his son Ben ended his eulogy by reflecting on how amused Will would have been that all his Protestant friends had to sit through a full Catholic mass.

Will's background was not academic. His father – born in Wandsworth, brought up in Dublin, and eventually working for London Underground as an electrician and then as a telephone engineer – is believed to have left school at the age of twelve. Will was the eldest of five children: three girls and two boys. His mother worked in an orphanage, and then as a bookkeeper. The family lived in Petts Wood in Kent, just south of Bromley, at whose Grammar School for Boys he so excelled.

<sup>1</sup>I am grateful to Janet Hartley for supplying this letter.

As L.J. Cheney's reference shows, Will started to learn Russian at School, but his intensive engagement with it began during his national service in the navy. In 1957 he was posted to the Joint Services School for Linguists (JSSL). JSSL courses provided an ultra-intensive training in language, pursued with a military discipline that modern university teachers might view with incredulity and envy. Fail to achieve the pass mark of 60 per cent in two consecutive fortnightly tests, and you would be 'returned to unit': that is, kicked off the course and consigned to regular military training. Will was assigned to the JSSL branch at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies (SSEES) in London.<sup>2</sup> These were not, however, university courses as such. The teaching schedule did not observe the rhythms of term and vacation, but was interrupted only by public holidays. Literature was a tool of language learning from the early stages. Word-lists were to be memorised every night. Significant attention was paid to military vocabulary, though not always of the kind that might have contemporary practical relevance. Naval trainees might learn, for example, the russified Dutch naval terms imported by Peter I at the start of the 18th century. The JSSL experience not only gave Will a very solid grounding in Russian, but may also have helped to stimulate his abiding interest in technical terminology, in navigation and its tools.

Life as a *kursant* was not unremittingly serious. Apart from the general enjoyment of intelligent companionship, there were extra-curricular opportunities. In 1957 Will Ryan co-wrote a pantomime in the form of a parody of the JSSL course, set in a tropical island jungle. The actors included the future interpreter for Margaret Thatcher in her negotiations with Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as future professors of Computing and of Economics. In later decades, former JSSL *kursanty* were widely dispersed in university and school departments of Russian and Slavonic Studies, and many became prominent in diplomacy, business, the media and the arts. Alumni included, for example, a Governor of the Bank of England (Eddie George), several leading writers (Michael Frayn, Alan Bennett, Dennis Potter, D.M. Thomas), and industrialists (e.g. John Harvey-Jones).<sup>3</sup>

After the navy, Will read French and Russian at Oxford. Among his teachers were Boris Unbegaun and John Simmons. Both were fine scholars, and both were rooted in librarianship. Unbegaun (1898–1973) was Professor of Comparative Slavonic Philology.<sup>4</sup> Born in Russia, his academic career began in Paris, where in 1929 he produced the *Catalogue des périodiques slaves des bibliothèques de Paris*. His doctoral thesis was on

<sup>2</sup> See Faith Wigzell, 'Training Russian Military Interpreters during the Cold War (1951–58): A Neglected Page in the History of SSEES', *School of Slavonic and East European Studies UCL Alumni Stories* (2015).

<sup>3</sup> For a detailed account of the various JSSL courses see Geoffrey Elliott & Harold Shuckman, with an Introduction by D.M. Thomas, *Secret Classrooms. An Untold Story of the Cold War* (London: St Ermin's Press, 2002).

<sup>4</sup> More on Unbegaun in C.L. Drage & Anne E. Pennington, 'Boris Ottokar Unbegaun (1898–1973)', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, 51 (1974), 448–51.

nominal flexion in 16th-century Russian. He published on Russian versification and on the Serbian literary language. He was also a lexicographer: General Editor of the *Oxford Russian-English Dictionary*, and author of a widely admired study of Russian surnames.<sup>5</sup> If Boris Unbegaun was a scholar who had been a librarian, John Simmons (1915–2005) was the quintessential scholar-librarian.<sup>6</sup> He was recruited to oversee the Slavonic collections in the Bodleian and Taylorian libraries, and from 1970 to 1982 he was Codrington Librarian at All Souls and a Senior Research Fellow of the college. Simmons was interested in books as objects: how they were made, collected, stored. He wrote on print history, watermarks and collections. He believed in bibliography as a core academic discipline, and his graduate seminars on Russian bibliography were highlights of what would now be termed the ‘training’ of early-career researchers at Oxford (I still have the handouts from 1977). Simmons also cultivated a network of international correspondents and friends that was astonishing for the time. He was known and revered not only in major centres of learning, but deep into the Soviet provinces. In February 1975 a session of the ‘Voronezh Circle of Bibliophiles’ even heard a paper by its chair, Oleg Lasunskii, on ‘John S.G. Simmons – Friend of the Russian Book’. Lasunskii’s remarks were published the following month in a Moscow-based journal.<sup>7</sup>

Will’s third important mentor at Oxford was Anne Pennington, his supervisor for his DPhil thesis on ‘Astronomical and Astrological Terminology in Old Russian Literature’. Pennington, who became the successor to Boris Unbegaun as Professor of Comparative Slavonic Philology, was very firmly a text-based scholar. Her own most substantial work was an edition, with commentaries, of the description of Muscovy by the 17th-century diplomat Grigorii Kotoshikhin,<sup>8</sup> probably written in Sweden in 1666, the year before Kotoshikhin was beheaded for murder in a drunken brawl. Formally, Will’s doctoral training was in language; but in the choice of theme for lexical analysis, and the texts in which they were embedded, one can see the prehistory of his broader studies of science and magic.

In 1962–63 Will spent a year in Leningrad, under the Anglo-Soviet cultural exchange agreement. This was a volatile period in Anglo-Soviet relations: on the one hand, it coincided with the Cuban missile crisis (in late October 1962), perhaps the moment when the Soviet Union and the United States came closest to a nuclear confrontation. On the other hand, scholars and intellectuals were still feeling the benefit of Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘Thaw’, which allowed somewhat more scope for cultural expression within the Soviet

<sup>5</sup>B.O. Unbegaun, *Russian Surnames* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972).

<sup>6</sup>See Christine G. Thomas, ‘John Simon Gabriel Simmons (1915–2005)’, in *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (version of 19 May 2011). <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/96098>

<sup>7</sup>O.G. Lasunskii, ‘Drug russkoi knigi’, *Knizhnoe obozrenie*, 22 (30 March 1975), 14.

<sup>8</sup>A.E. Pennington, *O Rossii v carstvovanii Alekseja Mixajloviča: Text and Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980).



Union, and which was less isolationist with regard to cultural contacts with the west. On 21 October 1962, *Pravda*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, published Evgenii Evtushenko's poem 'The Heirs of Stalin', denouncing not only the former dictator but those who kept his legacy alive. In 1963 the journal *New World* (*Novyi mir*) published Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's labour-camp novella *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*. Exciting times, then, for a former naval reservist, Russianist, and now graduate student.

British exchange students in the Soviet Union enjoyed significant privileges. Their stipends were higher than those of their Soviet equivalents. If they travelled to Moscow, in the Lenin Library (now the Russian State Library) they were allocated to Reading Room No. 1, otherwise reserved for professors and academicians. Their rarity made them interesting. A serious research interest in Russian history and culture was much appreciated by Soviet scholars who had very little opportunity for direct contact and dialogue with colleagues abroad (and who, for the most part, were not themselves able to travel). In Leningrad, Will was noticed by the one of the leading historians of early Russian and Russian textual and literary culture, Dmitrii Sergeevich Likhachev (1906–1999). Likhachev's two-volume commentaries on the 12th-century *Primary Chronicle*, first published in 1950, are unsurpassed to this day. He had published numerous studies of individual medieval texts. His chunky monograph *Tekstologiya* came out in 1962, and he had begun to produce a series of broad surveys which took to a new level the study of medieval East Slav texts as components of a *literary* culture. The British graduate student in 1962 could not have known just how high Likhachev's star would continue to rise. In 1967 he was awarded an honorary doctorate at Oxford. In the *perestroika* and immediate post-Soviet years he became probably the most revered intellectual figure in Russia, with a moral authority to match his scholarly stature. In the pantheon of Will's formative mentors, Likhachev occupies a special place.

The world was smaller then. In 1963 for the first time Will crossed paths with another British graduate student, Anthony Cross (A.G. in early publications, Tony in life), who was visiting Leningrad while based for the year in Moscow. As it happens, Tony had also been a *kursant* at JSSL, though in the army rather than the navy. As it happens, Tony would also go on to become a Fellow of the British Academy. And as it happens, in Leningrad, just as Will met one future recipient of an Oxford honorary doctorate (Dmitrii Likhachev), Tony met another, the poet Anna Akhmatova.<sup>9</sup>

In Leningrad, Will stumbled upon greatness beyond academe. One evening, after a performance at the Kirov (now the Mariinskii) theatre, Will finally reached the front of the long queue for taxis – only to be jostled aside by a stranger who seemed to be claiming a taxi for someone else. Will refused to give way. The 'someone else' suggested that

<sup>9</sup>Email recollection from A.G. Cross, 18 May 2025.

they share. ‘Who are you?’ asked the man, when they were in the taxi. ‘Vil’iam Raian, graduate student. And who are you?’ ‘Mstislav Rostropovich, musician.’

Apart from his encounters with leading scholars and musicians, in Leningrad Will also met and (on 28 March 1963) married his first wife, Marina. They subsequently had two daughters, Maria in 1965, and Elizabeth in 1966. Will and Marina divorced in 1970.

Back in Oxford, Will worked at the Clarendon Press, where he assisted Unbegaun on the preparation of the *Oxford Russian-English Dictionary*, and then as an assistant curator at the Museum of the History of Science. In 1967 he was appointed to his first and only university teaching position, a Lectureship at the School of Slavonic and East European Studies in London. In a sign of times long past in UK higher education, SSEES in that year appointed not one, but two new lecturers interested in the medieval and early modern periods: Will Ryan and Faith Wigzell (then Faith Kitch). Faith’s dissertation was on 14th-century literature, but she was also interested in folk beliefs. It was a productive pairing. In later years Will and Faith ‘happily collaborated on parallels between Russian folk belief and early texts’ – even if, according to Wigzell, in those early years Will Ryan ‘seemed sniffy’ about the subject.<sup>10</sup> In Faith’s recollection he had ‘considerable gravitas’, and also a very clear focus: he had a ‘relative lack of enthusiasm for teaching 19th-century Russian literature. Indeed, he wasn’t much interested in reading novels, going to the theatre, film etc., but was, as we know, utterly devoted to his research.’

The strong implication is that Will was not fully comfortable with all the dimensions of the life of a university lecturer. In 1976 he moved to what became his permanent professional home, taking up the post of Academic Librarian at the Warburg Institute. It suited him perfectly. Although almost all of Will’s own scholarship was focused on Russian and Russia, he was employed specifically as a Russianist only for a few early-career years. At the Warburg Institute there was no requirement for him to ‘narrow his interests’ (to borrow a phrase from his old headmaster’s report). The wider community of Russianists benefited hugely from the wider cultural perspectives that were natural in Will’s environment but not so common among ‘specialists’ in the field.

Nevertheless, Will’s career as a university teacher, though relatively brief, did not pass without consequences. In 1975 he taught a language class that included a first-year graduate student, Janet Hartley. Then he taught her palaeography. Eleven years later, in September 1986, they were married. Their son Benedict was born in 1990, and their daughter Isabel in 1995. Janet went on to become a distinguished historian of Russia, a professor at the London School of Economics, author of several books on the Russian

<sup>10</sup> Email from Faith Wigzell, 15 May 2025. For the fruits of such collaboration see W.F. Ryan & Faith Wigzell, ‘Gullible Girls and Dreadful Dreams: Zhukovskii, Pushkin and Popular Divination’, *Slavonic and East European Review*, 70 (1992), 647–69.

empire during the ‘long’ 18th century, as well as a history of the people of Siberia, and a history of the Volga. Will and Janet did not become co-authors, but they were an effective academic partnership. While Will might otherwise happily have explored whatever paths intrigued him, Janet was a firm editor who believed in deadlines. As John Simmons had exclaimed when told that Will and Janet were getting married: ‘What a team!’

In the pre-Warburg years, most of Will’s publications reflect his work in the history of science, and in lexicography. Several of his articles were on astronomy, and scientific and navigational instruments: ‘John Russell RA and Early Lunar Mapping’, in the *Smithsonian Journal of History* in 1966; or, the following year, ‘Some Russian Contributions to the History of the Microscope’, in that delightfully little-known journal, *Proceedings of the Royal Microscopical Society*. There was an article on the early history of the astrolabe in Russia. For the Royal Horological Society he translated (and edited and revised) V.L. Chenakal’s book *Watchmakers and Clockmakers in Russia from 1400 to 1850*, as well articles by the same author on English astronomical instruments in 18th-century Russia, and on sundials (both in the *Journal for the History of Astronomy*).<sup>11</sup> He was particularly pleased with a brief article on ‘John Tradescant’s Russian Abacus’, published in *Oxford Slavonic Papers* in 1972, on the grounds that he had definitively corrected the identification of an object in the Museum of the History of Science, where he had been an assistant curator. Besides scientific instruments and terminology, Will worked in general lexicography through his role in *The Oxford Russian-English Dictionary*, published in 1972, with Unbegaun as its ‘General Editor’. Nearly a quarter of a century later he contributed the English-Russian half of *The Penguin Russian Dictionary*. And there were always texts. In 1971 he curated and introduced a reprint of *Domostroi*, a 16th-century Muscovite manual of household management and advice, in the much-appreciated ‘Rarity Reprints’ series from Bradda Books, at the time an important publisher of Russian texts for the educational market.<sup>12</sup>

Somewhat later and more substantial was a semi-hidden gem of Will Ryan’s scholarship: his annotated translation, from Church Slavonic, of the account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land by Abbot Daniel (c. 1106–8), which appeared in 1988 in a volume of translations of 12th-century Jerusalem pilgrimages.<sup>13</sup> The volume was one product of Will’s long association with the Hakluyt Society, where he served as honorary

<sup>11</sup> For details of all of these, see ‘Publications of Will Ryan’, in Janet M. Hartley & Denis J.B. Shaw (eds), *Magic, Texts and Travel: Homage to a Scholar, Will Ryan* (London: Study Group on Eighteenth-Century Russia, 2021), pp. 365–70.

<sup>12</sup> *Domostroi*, introduction by W.F. Ryan (Letchworth: Bradda Books Ltd., 1971). This does not figure in the bibliography of Will Ryan’s works in *Magic, Texts and Travel*.

<sup>13</sup> *Jerusalem Pilgrimage, 1099–1185*, edited by John Wilkinson with Joyce Hill & W.F. Ryan (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1988).



secretary, series editor, and eventually president.<sup>14</sup> As series editor he oversaw several of the Society's publications, but the translation of Daniel's pilgrimage seems to have been the only product of his own scholarship to appear through the Society. His achievement was strangely underplayed. In order to discover that Will was involved in anything other than an editorial role, one has to pick up a passing reference in Wilkinson's preface, which mentions that 'Doctor William Ryan ... has done a new translation from the Russian original of Abbot Daniel's *Pilgrimage*', and that 'all notes to do with the ... Russian text [are] by Ryan'.<sup>15</sup> There is no indication of the fact that this was by some distance the longest of the volume's texts, or that the 'Russian' of the original was actually Church Slavonic, expertise in which was rare. The notes, while not copious, were, of course, meticulously scholarly. Perhaps because of the modesty of presentation, Will Ryan's contribution has passed beneath most radars, except as a quasi-anonymised component of the volume of which it is part. It does not appear in most bibliographies of early Rus literature, which tend to refer only to a translation (from French) that had appeared exactly a century earlier. In a contribution to Will's 2021 *Festschrift*, Simon Dixon had to invent a standard-form bibliographical reference to Will's version.<sup>16</sup>

Another example of Will's self-effacing service was his role in bringing to fruition the project known as The Anne Pennington Catalogue, in tribute to its initiator, Will's former doctoral supervisor. Before her tragically early death in 1981, at the age of 47, Anne Pennington had been one of the architects of a plan to produce a union catalogue of Cyrillic manuscripts in British and Irish collections. The work was taken over by her former assistant, Ralph Cleminson, while Will Ryan and Veronica Du Feu supported the project through to completion as General Editors; and, with characteristic modesty, in the Preface they credited everybody's contribution apart from their own.<sup>17</sup>

Scientific instruments, the lexicography of modern Russian, a 16th-century household manual, a 12th-century pilgrimage, general editorship of a catalogue of manuscripts: a cursory glance at some of the areas of Will's early publications can make his efforts seem somewhat scattergun; a *pot-pourri* of admirable but disparate works, rather than an *oeuvre*. In Isaiah Berlin's metaphor, he might have appeared to be more like a fox than a hedgehog, diffusely curious rather than relentlessly focused on a single grand project. He enjoyed the oddness of oddities. His enthusiasms were not hierarchical. Nothing was too offbeat to take seriously. And that, over time, turned out to be a particular strength.

<sup>14</sup> See Jim Bennett, 'Will Ryan and the Hakluyt Society', in *Magic, Texts and Travel*, pp. ix–x.

<sup>15</sup> *Jerusalem Pilgrimage*, p. vii.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Dixon, 'Pilgrimage and Politics: Two "Sailor Princes" in Jerusalem, 1859', in *Magic, Texts and Travel*, p. 329, n. 1.

<sup>17</sup> *A Union Catalogue of Cyrillic Manuscripts in British and Irish Collections*, compiled by Ralph Cleminson, general editors Veronica Du Feu & W.F. Ryan (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1988), pp. vii–viii.

It gave his work unusual breadth and nuance. There is no landscape without the sidetracks. Piece by seemingly unconnected piece, Will created a subject; or rather, he developed at least two subjects: the history of efficacious knowledge in Russia (partly science, but then, in particular, magic); and the history of a single text – the Pseudo-Aristotelian *Secret of Secrets*. Both were to occupy him for decades.

Will's *magnum opus*, his sole large-scale single-author book, was *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia*, published in 1999. This was more than a 'landmark' in its subject. It created the subject. In the words of Valerie Kivelson, the distinguished historian of Early Modern Russia (and an International Fellow of the British Academy), 'as for his contribution to the field, he *is* the field.'<sup>18</sup> The claim is not that Will was the first scholar to be interested in magic in Russia, but that nobody anywhere had investigated the subject and the sources so comprehensively, so systematically, and with such clarity. Just to open the book is to see that it must be definitive; not in the sense that it says everything that can be said, but in the sense of being foundational, of being the first to map and populate a territory.

Will was not a theorist, though he was well aware of theoretical issues. In the Introduction to *The Bathhouse at Midnight* he touched on the perennial problems of definition and delineation with regard, especially, to the concepts of magic, religion, and divination. For him, there was no point in trying to make clear distinctions. Religion tends to involve beliefs that try to explain the world, magic tends to refer to practices that aim to act upon the world, and divination tends to involve practices that aim to enhance knowledge of the workings of the world beyond the practitioner's space or time. However, in cultural history there are vast zones of overlap and intersection between the three. Will focused on practices and their functions, their forms, and to some extent on the personnel. His chapter headings include: 'Wizards and Witches', 'Popular Divination', 'Signs, Omens, Auguries, Calendar Predictions', 'Predictions from Dreams and the Human Body', 'Spells, Curses and Magic Prayers', 'Talismans and Amulets', '*Materia magica*', 'Magic of Letter and Number', 'Geomancy', 'Alchemy and the Virtue of Stones', as well as two chapters on astrology, and one on texts as amulets.

The focus on function was one of the qualities that set his work apart from much of the scholarship in the Russian tradition itself. It would be easy to see *The Bathhouse at Midnight* as out of step with scholarly fashion of the late 20th century. The bibliography does not bristle with the names of French cultural theorists. Will was even wary of claiming that his thematic chapter headings constituted any kind of 'classification'.<sup>19</sup> He positioned himself as a mere gatherer of texts – robustly empirical, with a whiff of

<sup>18</sup> Email from Valerie Kivelson, 30 April 2025.

<sup>19</sup> W.F. Ryan, *The Bathhouse at Midnight: An Historical Survey of Magic and Divination in Russia* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), p. 6.

enthusiastic antiquarianism. And indeed, *The Bathhouse at Midnight* can be read at this level. It allows readers to enjoy it without feeling obliged to follow the twists and nuances of an argument. Every page of *The Bathhouse at Midnight* is evidence of how Will relished the materials themselves, enjoyed assembling and interrogating the words and the objects that served as his sources. Will himself wrote about divinatory practices that involved opening a text at random (most commonly, the Psalter). One can play the same game with *The Bathhouse at Midnight*. So, I open at random, and find, in no particular order:

p. 183, under ‘spells for impotence’: ‘There is a bony mountain, on it a bony chair. On this bony chair sits a bony tsar leaning on his bony staff. The hat on his head is of bone, the gloves on his hands are of bone, the boots on his feet are of bone ...’ One can see where this is going.

p. 107: ‘Animal oracles: chickens. There are many kinds of chicken oracle (*alectryomancy*), some of which are of ancient origin.’

p. 279, in the section on *materia magica*: ‘*Sova* (lit. ‘owl’). A fearsome plant which sent men mad if they came upon it, and made them lose their way. Its virtue was in that if it were placed on the track of a thief he would be obliged to return.’

p. 136: ‘The practice of scapulimancy, or divination from markings on a sheep’s shoulder blade, is known in many different cultures: the various peoples of Central Asia, North Africa, the Chinese and Japanese, North American Indians, and is also known in many parts of Europe. In the British Isles Gerald of Wales records a 12th-century Flemish community in Wales as practising scapulimancy – apparently the earliest European textual references.’

This last example reveals another important dimension of the book. The ease with which the sentence on scapulimancy slips from exoticism into erudition is typical. The book is about Russia, but it is suffused with the Warburgian spirit of comparison. A great deal of the book is about sources and analogies: about the translated Greek, Latin and sometimes Hebrew texts that lay behind some of the Slavonic sources, and about equivalent practices elsewhere in Europe and beyond. Will combined the approaches of textual historian, cultural historian, ethnographer or anthropologist, and lexicographer, and brilliantly managed to hold them in balance. On the textual side (as on the conceptual side) the ‘default’ was to be inclusive. Besides the evidence of manuscripts of ‘popular’ magic (spells, divination, handbooks of lunar or calendrical prediction, etc.), which tended to appear quite late, Will used clerical sources such as penitentials and prayer-books, as well as learned tracts never intended for anybody but a tiny elite. The sections on astronomy and astrology range from texts that reflect translations from Byzantine Greek, through to texts derived from western European almanacs. The physical objects such as amulets likewise covered a very broad spectrum, from expensive luxuries cast in

precious metal, through to dolls and nets. Will's lexicographical interest is embedded in the narratives throughout. The book is not just about sources and practices, but about words – both *as* magic, and *for* magic. A brief appendix to Chapter 3, on words for magic and magicians<sup>20</sup> could have been expanded as a substantial essay in its own right.

*The Bathhouse at Midnight* thus worked on at least three levels. It was a uniquely rich storehouse of materials, manifestly the product of extensive and meticulous scholarship. It was helpfully structured by topic and function in a way that made the scholarship navigable. And it was written with a clarity and energy, a sense of pleasure in communication, that made the book accessible to anybody with an interest in its theme.

Will positioned the book as 'a general survey for an English readership'.<sup>21</sup> Even allowing for the fact that 'English' here should be interpreted to mean 'Anglophone', this was a characteristic understatement. To be sure, his notional Anglophone readership set the tone. The book had to serve as an introduction. Will could not assume that his primary audience was familiar with any of the written sources or with the languages in which they were written. However, he was also aware that no equivalent volume existed in countries where scholars *were* able to deal with the sources in their original languages. The issue was not lack of previous attention to the materials; indeed, *The Bathhouse at Midnight* would have been impossible to produce if there had not already been a long tradition of (mainly Russian) study and publication of relevant sources. The problem was in the framing and creation of a subject. Magic as such, in the broad sense envisaged by Will, was barely a topic in Russian scholarship, which had, at various times, reflected somewhat different dominant paradigms and hierarchies of knowledge and practice. Studies of magical texts tended to have been framed in terms of superstition, paganism, folk medicine, ethnography, popular Christianity, folk ritual, occultism and esoteric learning, or as evidence of a pagan-Christian 'double faith' that has often (inappropriately) been vaunted as a distinctive feature of Russian popular culture. Any and all of these topics were of interest to Will, but his survey was not constrained by any of them. He was in any case aware of the paradox of trying to locate 'popular' culture on the basis of surviving written texts which, by definition, were produced by and for a literate elite. Some of his sources seem to reflect real pastoral concerns of priests on the front line, so to speak. Others are highly learned. Many were in any case translations, whose existence and dissemination may reflect curiosity but which have no necessary bearing on traditional practices Russia. *The Bathhouse at Midnight* was a non-hierarchical, non-judgemental compendium. Will might even have agreed that it was, in some sense, a mish-mash of heterogeneous materials. That was its huge strength. It did not pre-judge.

<sup>20</sup> *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, pp. 84–6.

<sup>21</sup> *The Bathhouse at Midnight*, p. 1.

*The Bathhouse at Midnight* cemented Will's reputation. In 2000 he was elected a Fellow of the British Academy. In Russia, too, *The Bathhouse at Midnight* was instantly and correctly recognised as a work whose importance extended well beyond its modest claims for itself as 'a general survey for an English readership'. The Russian translation was published in 2006.<sup>22</sup> Its editor, A.V. Chernetsov, was clear about its significance. Although it made use of extensive Russian scholarship, and although the late-Soviet and post-Soviet years had witnessed a surge of interest in magic-related themes both within and beyond academe, *The Bathhouse at Midnight* was the first serious attempt at a comprehensive survey of the subject in any language.<sup>23</sup> In 2007 Will was awarded an honorary doctorate by the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Will's work on the *Secret of Secrets* lasted throughout his academic career. The earliest known versions are Arabic, from the 10th century. The *Secret of Secrets* was translated into Hebrew and Latin, and thence into at least a dozen European vernaculars. The core of the work was a long letter ostensibly from Aristotle to his pupil Alexander the Great, on rulership (that is, in the traditions of medieval 'mirrors of princes'), but there were quite substantial textual accretions in various branches of the tradition. In addition to the Pseudo-Aristotelian core, the Slavonic translation (*Tainaia tainykh*) included, for example, three segments of medical works by Maimonides, as well as a further medical treatise by Abu Bakr al-Razi ('Rhazes' in western tradition). The Slavonic version was produced in the late 15th century, from a Hebrew original, in the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, in the register of East Slavonic that now tends to be labelled Ruthenian. Almost all the surviving manuscripts are from Russia. Will's first article about the *Secret of Secrets* was published in 1965: an analysis of a late-16th-century manuscript (possibly the oldest extant Muscovite copy of the text) in the Bodleian library.<sup>24</sup> The culmination of the project was the appearance, over half a century later, of the edition, translation and commentary which he produced jointly with his long-term friend and collaborator Moshe Taube from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, a specialist in the Hebrew version, who had been writing on the *Secret of Secrets* and related texts for a mere quarter of a century.<sup>25</sup> In the intervening decades Will had published several articles on the Slavonic text. In addition, at the Warburg Institute he

<sup>22</sup> V.F. Raian [= W.F. Ryan], *Bania v polnoch': Istoricheskii obzor magii i gadaniia v Rossii* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2006).

<sup>23</sup> A.V. Chernetsov, 'Ob etoi knige i ee avtore', in Raian, *Bania v polnoch'*, pp. 5–10.

<sup>24</sup> W.F. Ryan, 'A Russian Version of the *Secreta secretorum* in the Bodleian Library', *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, 11 (1964), 40–8. In later works Will switched from the designation *Secreta secretorum* to *Secretum secretorum*.

<sup>25</sup> *The Secret of Secrets: The East Slavic Version*, with introduction, text, annotated translation, Slavic index, ed. W.F. Ryan & Moshe Taube (London: the Warburg Institute, 2021). Moshe Taube's first work specifically on the *Secret of Secrets* appears to be 'The Spiritual Circle in the *Secret of Secrets* and the *Poem of the Soul*', *Harvard Ukrainian Studies*, 18:3–4 (December 1994; published 1998), 342–55.



had co-edited a volume of essays on the wider traditions of the *Secret of Secrets*, as well as a volume on Pseudo-Aristotle in the Middle Ages. It is fitting that the Ryan-Taube edition of the Slavonic text was also published by the Warburg Institute.

After an eighty-page Introduction on the text and its history and on the scholarly tradition around its study, the edition itself fills just under three hundred pages,<sup>26</sup> with the Slavonic on the left-hand page and the English translation on the right. There are two sets of textual apparatus: one provides variant readings from the manuscripts and is set at the foot of the Slavonic text; the other, set under the English translation on the facing page, mainly provides notes on how the Slavonic relates to its Hebrew original. Then comes the appropriately authoritative bibliography; and finally, nearly a hundred and thirty pages of what is misleadingly headed 'Slavic Index'.<sup>27</sup> Under such a heading one might have expected a simple word-list with the relevant page references, in the manner of the far briefer 'General Index' at the end of the book. In fact, Ryan and Taube print a bilingual (or, much of the time, trilingual, including Hebrew) dictionary of the Slavonic text, providing not only Slavonic headwords and references, but their English equivalents – or, in many cases, their multiple and varied English equivalents, with full cross-references to each. So, for example, the entry for *delo* gives the following senses as reflected in the translation: 'deed', 'affair', 'conduct', 'business', 'work', 'task', 'act', 'action', 'effect', 'preparation', 'matter', 'duty', 'craft', 'influence'. In most of these meanings the entry lists not only separate references to the Slavonic text, but also separate equivalents in the Hebrew original. In effect, therefore, the 'Slavic Index' is a seriously textured work of lexicography in its own right. A long path had been travelled since the *Oxford Russian-English Dictionary*.

*The Bathhouse at Midnight* and the edition of the *Secret of Secrets* are the major summations, the most visible monuments. However, important though they are, to focus mainly on them is to risk creating a false impression (or, at any rate, a very limited impression) of Will Ryan's scholarship. He was irrepressibly curious. Indeed, a glance through his publications might at first sight give the impression of a certain quirkiness: 'Limelight on Eastern Europe: The Great Dissolving Views of the Royal Polytechnic', in issue 4 of *The New Magic Lantern Journal* in 1986; 'Russia and the Magic of Cats', in a special issue of the Slavonic librarians' journal *Solanus* dedicated to the ninetieth birthday of John Simmons in 2005. But Will's curiosity was unfailingly rigorous, and the scholarly gaze prevented the quirky from being trivialised. His amusement was always serious.

Will Ryan's contribution to scholarship was by no means restricted to his own writings as a scholar. He was conspicuously (but never ostentatiously) supportive of the

<sup>26</sup> *The Secret of Secrets*, pp. 84–368.

<sup>27</sup> *The Secret of Secrets*, pp. 380–508.

work of others. His role as a catalyst for others can be summarised on three levels: editorial, institutional, and personal.

Whether as a series editor, or as co-editor of collective volumes across more than four decades, Will was unfailingly attentive both to the academic substance and to the minutiae of professional production standards. His unflagging meticulousness, well past the stage when he might have been expected to pass on the invisible but essential tasks to others, comes across in the preface to his co-editor's tribute to him in his very last such volume, which was published after his death. In her 'Acknowledgements', Ágnes Kriza wrote: 'Finally, and most importantly, this book could not have been possible without the collaboration of the late Professor William F. Ryan, who tirelessly and selflessly supported this project. He not only contributed to this volume with an essay which encapsulates some of the greatest findings of his extensive scholarly work on medieval Russian occult literature but also took on the task of translating two articles from Russian into English. He patiently and meticulously read through the entire manuscript, offering corrections and providing numerous insightful comments on the studies.'<sup>28</sup> It is astonishing – or perhaps not so astonishing – that, far into his ninth decade, Will was still prepared not merely to read and comment on the work of others on its way to publication, but to take on the job of translating it.

A common thread in reminiscences of Will, across the many institutions that he served, both formally and informally, is the fact that, in whatever capacity, he seems to have had a knack of combining the inspirational and the practical. As Academic Librarian at the Warburg Institute he oversaw the infrastructure for scholarly endeavour both in the organisation of knowledge – for example, in the transition from the old card catalogue to integration with the University of London's computer catalogue – and at the 'nuts and bolts' level (literally) though his legendary DIY solutions, aided by a Black and Decker power drill.<sup>29</sup>

Beyond his 'day job', Will's communities were notably diverse. For all of them he was more than a participant, but was prepared to take on – and was gratefully trusted with – responsibility. Somehow one is not surprised to read, in L.J. Cheney's letter of 1955, that Will was a School Prefect. While at SSEES he was chair of the staff assembly, and for several years he was editor of *The Slavonic and East European Review*. He was a long-standing member of the Study Group on 18th-Century Russia that was founded in 1968, and was a regular attendee at the Group's annual residential conferences in Hoddesdon. These conferences became and remain – nearly six decades later – internationally recognised, and hugely enjoyed by participants, perhaps in part because of their

<sup>28</sup> *Enigma in Rus and Medieval Slavic Literatures*, ed. Ágnes Kriza in collaboration with W.F. Ryan (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 2024), p. v. Will's own essay in the volume was 'Occult and Esoteric Texts in Sixteenth-Century Russia: The *Secret of Secrets* and the *Rafl'i*', pp. 125–39.

<sup>29</sup> Charles Burnett, 'Will Ryan and the Warburg Institute', in *Magic, Texts and Travel*, p. vi.

determinedly unfashionable format, with an emphasis on companionship and conversation rather than on the proliferation of strictly regulated parallel panels; their emphasis on discussion rather than discussants. The list of eleven editors and translators of an edition of over 250 documents from the age of Peter I reads like a roll-call of members of the group.<sup>30</sup> Besides co-editing (and typesetting) the volume, Will translated many of the documents. In 1974, along with Anne Pennington and others, Will was an inaugural member of the Slavonic and East European Medieval Study Group. This, too, still thrives – the only group of its kind in western Europe – with regular seminars every six months.

These were the scholarly groups that were closest to most of Will's own research, at least to the extent that their members could share readings of the same medieval and early modern Slavonic texts. But Will was equally active – indeed, in some ways more active – in supporting the work of societies whose interests extended far beyond the culture and history of any one language or country, societies that were by nature multi-disciplinary, multi-lingual, multi-cultural. In 1975 he joined the Hakluyt Society, whose mission was and is to publish scholarly editions of accounts of voyages and other travels. He became honorary secretary of the Society in 1990, series editor in 1995, and president in 2008. Apart from his own contribution to the 1988 volume of Jerusalem pilgrimages, Will saw several of the Society's major publications through the press. In 2013 he was awarded the President's Medal of the Society.<sup>31</sup> Then there was the Folklore Society. From 1999 to 2002 Will served as its Honorary Librarian, as President of the Society from 2005 to 2008, and as Vice-President from then until 2015.<sup>32</sup> His Presidential Addresses to the Society were published in *Folklore* in 2008 and 2009.<sup>33</sup> He also served, at various times, on the Council of the Society of Antiquaries of London, as Secretary and Treasurer of the London Medieval Society, as a member of the Archives Commission of the Royal Society, as a member of the Bibliography and Historical Instruments Commissions of the International Union of the History of Science, as well as on the Council of the British Society for the History of Science, and as a member of the International Policy Committee of the British Academy (2002–2008).

Perhaps the most splendidly named body on which Will served was the Committee on Charms, Charmers and Charming (a sub-group within the International Society for

<sup>30</sup> *Britain and Russia in the Age of Peter the Great: Historical Documents*, translated and edited by Simon Dixon, A.G. Cross, W.G. Jones, M.S. Anderson, R.P. Bartlett, Paul Dukes, Janet M. Hartley, Lindsey Hughes, L.R. Lewitter, Isabel de Madariaga & W.F. Ryan (London: School of Slavonic and East European Studies, 1998). Incidentally, this was a rare occasion on which Will and Janet's names appeared on the title page of the same book.

<sup>31</sup> Bennett, 'Will Ryan and the Hakluyt Society', in *Magic, Texts and Travel*.

<sup>32</sup> Caroline Oates, 'In Memoriam: William Francis (Will) Ryan (1937–2013)', *Folklore*, 135 (June 2024), 300–3.

<sup>33</sup> W.F. Ryan, 'Games, Pastimes and Magic in Russia', *Folklore*, 119 (2008), 1–13; 'W.R.S. Ralston and the Russian Folktale', *Folklore*, 120 (2009), 123–32.

Folk Narrative Research), in which – according to the obituary written by one of its members – ‘W.F. Ryan was involved since before it was officially founded’.<sup>34</sup> He was a member of the editorial board of the Committee’s journal, *Incantatio*, from its first issue in 2011. It is fitting that his very last article, on book-curses in Russian manuscripts, was written for *Incantatio*. When Will knew the seriousness of his final illness, he set himself two goals to be achieved before he died: to give away his daughter in marriage, walking her down the aisle; and to complete the article for *Incantatio*. He succeeded in both.

The last article was duly submitted, though it was published posthumously.<sup>35</sup> It can be seen as a kind of distillation, bringing together many of his interests: magic, manuscript texts, the *Secret of Secrets*, even libraries. A book curse was a kind of library security device: a curse on anybody who steals or defaces a manuscript. Book curses were most commonly written into the relevant manuscripts as marginalia (‘Whoever forgets the wrath of God and commits a sacrilege and takes one of these books, that person will be judged at the Day of Judgement ...’). In Russia they begin to appear from around the mid 17th century. Will noted that book curses were included in many donation inscriptions from Patriarch Nikon (1605–1681; Patriarch of Moscow 1652–1666), including his copy of the *Secret of Secrets*. Typically, in Will’s exposition the ripples of this small marginal note in one manuscript spread outwards. The article touches on the history of book curses since the ancient world, the textual history of the *Secret of Secrets*, library donations, psalmomancy (Will cites an episode in which Nikon apparently strung together a sequence of excerpts from psalms in a way which implied a veiled curse). To the end, Will kept his curiosity about curiosities, pursued with lightness of narrative and scholarly rigour.

For his colleagues and admirers (and it would be hard to find a colleague who was not an admirer), Will was more than the sum of his publications. His support for the work of others was not just institutional, in his professional capacity as Academic Librarian and in his voluntary service on learned societies. The inspiration was personal. Will delighted in robust conversation, and his knowledge and enthusiasm enriched the work of others. Valerie Kivelson recalls:

I encountered Will through our shared interest in Russian magic and witchcraft. From the moment our paths crossed, he was welcoming and supportive. He truly loved thinking about these subjects and was unflagging in his enthusiasm to share

<sup>34</sup> Andrey Toporkov & Alexey V. Chernetsov, ‘Will Ryan (1937–2023)’, *Incantatio*, 11 (2023), 127–31. See also A.V. Chernetsov & A.A. Turilov, ‘Pamiati Vil’iama Frensisia Raiana (13 aprilja 1937 – 2 noiabria 2023)’, *Drevniaia Rus’: Voprosy medievistiki* (2025.1), 171–4.

<sup>35</sup> W.F. Ryan, ‘The Russian *Secret of Secrets* and Patriarch Nikon’s Book Curse’, *Incantatio*, 11 (2023), 9–25. This was Will’s last piece of writing, despite the fact that it was published earlier than his contribution to *Enigma in Rus and Medieval Slavic Literatures* (see above, n. 28). Although the latter appeared only in 2024, it derived from contributions to a conference held in 2019.

information and ideas, whether in conversation or correspondence. He would write to me with a new discovery that he thought might be helpful to me and would reply immediately with ideas about puzzling texts or explanations of arcane practices. It always felt a little like Christmas when an email from Will would pop up on the screen, because it would inevitably contain a treat.<sup>36</sup>

On the experience of collaborating with Will on the edition of the *Secret of Secrets* Moshe Taube writes:

During those years I would regularly come over to Will's place in Croydon and stay with Will and Janet for a week or two, either in the summer or during the winter break, almost every year, and we would work intensively from morning till dusk, with a break for lunch followed by a long walk in the woods nearby, during which Will would show me the first bluebells popping up in early spring and explain to me the meaning of the noun 'common' ... Since we had very different backgrounds, it was a great opportunity for me to learn from him. And there was so much to be learned! ... He was profoundly versed in the esoteric sciences (which figure prominently in the *Secret of Secrets*) and their traditions both in the West and in Eastern Europe, as well as in the History of Science among the Slavs and in Russian history in general. He was also an incomparable editor, to which the volumes of the Warburg Institute Reviews and books amply bear witness.

'But', Taube continues:

first and foremost, beside all his erudition and skills, he was a *mentsh*, a man of integrity, honour and compassion. Many young scholars from the Eastern European countries (then the Communist Block) who came to the UK and visited the Warburg Institute were helped by Will, with writing applications and with letters of recommendation, as well as with material help, but he never mentioned it. I only know of it from the scholars themselves who benefitted from his help and remained forever indebted to him.<sup>37</sup>

W.F. Ryan is hugely respected as an original scholar. Will Ryan is remembered with warmth and gratitude as a source of intellectual stimulation and practical support for the scholarship of others; and just as really good company. As predicted by the headmaster of Bromley Grammar School for Boys in 1955, he did 'really first-class work'; he was also 'popular and had a lively sense of humour'. He 'did very well indeed'.

<sup>36</sup> Email from Valerie Kivelson, 30 April 2025.

<sup>37</sup> Email from Moshe Taube, 27 April 2025. Note that three of the contributors to Will's *Festschrift*, *Magic, Texts and Travel*, were scholars from Bulgaria whose work Will had encouraged when they came to the UK.



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