

# Reviews

***Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya: Literary Works*. Ed. Andrew Donskov. Ottawa: Slavic Research Group; Moscow: State L. N. Tolstoy Museum, 2011. 528 pp. Softcover. ISBN: 978-0889274198.**

In 2011 a Russian-language volume of Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya's collected works was published in Ottawa with accompanying critical work by Professor Andrew Donskov, the Director of the Slavic Research Group at the University of Ottawa.

A year after the publication of an enormous tome and autobiography of Sofia Tolstaya, the 1125-page *My Life*, translated into English by John Woodsworth and Arkadi Klioutchanski, and edited and introduced by Andrew Donskov, the Slavic Research Group is releasing yet another volume. This latest work is dedicated to the wife of the great Russian writer—a wonderful boon to the memory of Sofia Tolstaya, surfacing on the eve of her marriage's 150-year anniversary.

This is a highly anticipated volume. The various publications of Tolstaya's works, scattered around disparate books, have almost never been the subject of focused research and academic comment. Indeed, they have never been published in a single anthology of her work. Andrew Donskov and the Slavic Research Group have made an important and long-awaited step toward the reader and researcher's familiarization with Tolstaya's work.

Without doubt, Sofia Andreevna—wife, mother of numerous children, creative assistant, editor, translator and publisher for her husband's work, mistress and custodian of Yasnaya Polyana—has

long deserved this dedicated anthology, which has surfaced almost 150 years after she became the Countess Tolstoy on September 23, 1862.

In the work's introduction, Andrew Donskov writes that

Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya's independent role as editor and publisher of Tolstoy's works is not to be underestimated, certainly not by Tolstoy's biographers, who have provided a good deal of documentation on her life (though sadly neglecting her own literary pursuits). (6)

In addition, he notes that until recently there was very little objective research on the life and work of Sofia Tolstaya. Donskov divides the vast majority of publications on Tolstoy's wife into two categories: In the first he includes material written by the Tolstoyans and their close associates, in which Sofia Tolstaya is generally portrayed in a negative light; in the second, the publications of her friends, visitors, and correspondents, who were persuaded of her talents, dedication to her family and the value of her assistance to her husband. In the latter category, Donskov mentions the names of the artists Ilya Repin and Leonid Pasternak, the composers Sergei Taneev and Anton Arensky, the philosophers Nikolai Grot and Pavel Bakunin, the directors Konstantin Stanislavskii and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko, and the literary critics Nikolai Strakhov and Vladimir Stasov, as well as a great number of writers and publishers such as (amongst others) Fet, Turgenev, Gorky, Zinaida Gippius, Nikolai Leskov, and Anna Dostoevskaya. Many of these cultural figures noted, amongst her

numerous merits, Sofia Andreevna's gift as a writer.

Exhaustively tracing the history of the publication of Tolstaya's works, Donskov notes the considerable interest in this topic both in Russia and the West over the past decade. As the centenary of her death in 2019 approaches, this interest will only grow; thus this edition of this impressive woman's work is of particular importance now. The appearance in academic circles of her works will play an important role in the preparation of a full critical biography of Sofia Tolstaya. Donskov notes in the introduction:

The task, though obviously worthwhile, is indeed daunting: It must take into account the sum total of her works (including her autobiographies, letters and diaries) and the reminiscences authored by almost all the members of her extended family and wide circle of acquaintances. (11)

He sees the publication of a single anthology of the collected works of Tolstoy's wife as the first step in this direction.

A brief academic analysis precedes Tolstaya's works in the volume at hand. It outlines the history of the works' authorship, theme, and influence on and relationship with Tolstoy's works, which is undoubtedly of extreme importance and utility. The book's detailed chronology of Tolstaya's life is based on her diaries and autobiography. It introduces the reader to the fascinating, eventful, and multi-faceted life of Sofia Tolstaya, who managed to be not only the wife of one of the world's most renowned authors, but also the mother of numerous children, her husband's assistant and secretary, his advisor and co-author, his publisher, the manager of his estate, the custodian of his manuscripts, a photographer, artist, pianist, and, lastly, author in her own right. Thus before us in her entirety is presented the most worthy of companions to her genius husband:

Finally, the comprehensive three-part bibliography will give the reader an idea not only of the extensive scope of her writings, but also of the vast number of references to Tolstaya and her literary pursuits that have appeared—over the hundred or more years that have passed since these works first came to public attention—not only in scholarly articles and dissertations, but in a whole variety of books, plays, and Internet publications. (11)

The book is comprised of two parts, accompanied by genealogical tables of the Tolstoy and Behrs families, a chronology of Tolstaya's life, a bibliography, table of names, and beautiful illustrations from the Moscow Tolstoy Museum's art and photo collections. In "Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya: A Literary Life in Context," Donskov uses Tolstaya's *My Life* to describe the three main periods of her life, which in his opinion, "left their mark on Tolstaya's career as a writer, and are worth exploring in some detail" (13). In special detail and with deep insight he writes of her formative years, using her letters, diaries, *My Life*, and Maksim Gorky's fine essay on the authoress. Donskov is sure that

on the basis of all the information presented both in this current volume and her writings, especially *My Life*, it is evident that SAT's [Tolstaya's] own writing career was not completely atrophied, that she left to history a *remarkable* (given the constraints on her life) literary legacy worthy of study. (18)

Discussing Tolstaya's deep interest in philosophy, Donskov includes a list of philosophers who wrote to her over the course of the years. He also writes about her work on the translation into French of her favorite of Tolstoy's philosophical tracts, *On Life*. On this note, Donskov mentions Tolstaya's platonic relationship with Prince Leonid Urusov, who "was largely responsible for introducing her to study of philosophy" (21). She herself wrote in *My Life* that

it was L. D. Urusov who set me and later guided me along this path. I became quite attached to him, and loved him for a long time because of this—in fact, I have never really stopped loving him either, even though he has been dead a long time. (3: 39)

Noting the important role of music in Sofia Tolstaya's life, Donskov writes in particular detail on the death in 1895 of Vanechka, her youngest son. Music was for Tolstaya a powerful means of consolation in this time of terrible grief. The composer Sergei Taneev then arrived at Yasnaya Polyana; his talent for performance appealed to Sofia Andreevna, and had on her a healing influence:

Again, just as with Urusov, SAT took pains to deny any kind of romantic relationship with her musical muse: "I refused to entertain such a thought. I would always deny it and was actually afraid of it, even though there was one time when the influence of Taneev's personality was very strong. Once that kind of feeling surfaces, it kills any sense of importance in the music and art. I wrote a long piece on that." (24)

Editorial and publishing work occupied a great deal of Sofia Tolstaya's life, and on this subject, Donskov writes in detail of Tolstoy's renunciation of copyright, beginning in 1883, when he limited his royalty payments to those for works written before 1881 only. In 1891, Tolstoy announced a complete rejection of copyright. Naturally, this affected his wife. Nonetheless, between 1886 and 1911, she released eight volumes of his collected works and a large quantity of individual works, for which she also carried out all editorial and proofreading duties.

Through her intensive publishing work, Tolstaya befriended Nikolai Strakhov, who became a close colleague in issuing her husband's works:

Her exchange of eighty-seven letters with Strakhov [1872–95, published in Donskov's *Tolstoj I S.A. Tolstaja*] is another testimony to her tireless efforts along this line. In addition, they offer a rare insight into both Lev Nikolaevich's and Sofia Andreevna's personal lives, as well as their thoughts on their family and acquaintances which they shared with one of their closest friends. (27)

Through Strakhov, Tolstaya also made the acquaintance of Anna Dostoevskaya, Dostoevsky's widow:

Sofia Andreevna and Anna Grigor'evna developed not just a professional relationship but a personal friendship as well, which they continued to maintain through correspondence and occasional visits. Both these women aspired to preserve for posterity valuable archival materials as well as other representative samples of their husbands' personal effects. (30)

During the preparation for print of the fifth volume of Tolstoy's works, Sofia Andreevna encountered difficulties with censorship, especially with regard to Volume XII, which included works previously forbidden by the censorship such as *Confession*, *What Then Must We Do?*, and *My Faith*—in the fourth part of *My Life*, Tolstaya describes her meeting with Konstantin Pobedonostsev and Evgenii Feoktistov. A no less serious situation occurred in 1891 on the publication of *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which Tolstaya included in Volume XIII of her husband's collected works. She was obliged to attend a special audience with Alexander III himself, during which she

managed to both make a personal impression on him and secure his permission for including *The Kreutzer Sonata* in her own edition of Tolstoy's *Complete Collected Works*. Her face-to-face meeting with both the Emperor and the

Empress are vividly and engagingly described in *My Life* (Vol. 92–94). (35)

In the chapter titled “Autobiographical Writings,” Donskov divides all of Tolstaya’s autobiographical materials into three categories: her diaries, *My Life*, and a shorter version, *Autobiography*. He exhaustively analyses each of these elements in historical retrospect and in terms of structure and content. Chapter Four contains a short critical commentary on each of Tolstaya’s literary works, which are printed in the second part of their book in the original:

These comprise: (1) *Natasha*, a story she wrote in her maidenhood; (2) SAT’s contributions to her husband’s anthology *A New Primer [Novaja azbuka]*; (3) a series of five stories published in 1910 under the collective title *The Skeleton-Dolls and Other Stories [Kukolki-skelettsy I drugie rasskazy]*; (4) her novella *Who Is to Blame? [Ch’ja vina?]*, penned in the early 1890s partly as a response to LNT’s controversial novel *The Kreutzer Sonata*, though not published in her lifetime; (5) a subsequent narrative (written following the death of her last son Vanechka in 1895) entitled *Song Without Words [Pesnja bez slov]*, which also remained unpublished until 2010; and finally, (6) *Groanings [Stony]*, which was crafted as a “poem in prose” (a lyrical composition in poetic form but without traditional poetic devices such as metre or rhyme); this was published in 1904 in a Russian women’s literary magazine. (65)

This volume of Sofia Tolstaya’s literary works, which has been prepared appositely by Andrew Donskov, shows in its entirety the undoubted literary gift of the author. The early, now-lost story *Natasha* delighted Tolstoy by the “energy of its truth and simplicity.” Sofia Andreevna’s poetic experiments—especially her *Groanings* cycle, published in 1904 in the *Journal For All (Журнал для всех)* are not even known to every Tolstoy

specialist. Andrew Donskov’s invaluable work in preparing, academically commenting on, and editing Tolstaya’s literary efforts has given us a fabulous opportunity to acquaint ourselves with the work of this surprising woman, Tolstoy’s wife, mother to thirteen children, grandmother to twenty-five and—as is now entirely evident—gifted writer. Accordingly, the next task for the researcher is the preparation of a first real critical biography of Sofia Andreevna Tolstaya.

Galina Alekseeva  
Yasnaya Polyana Museum  
(Translated by Ian Garner)

### Works Cited

Donskov, Andrew, ed. *L.N. Tolstoj i S.A. Tolstaja: Perepiska/The Tolstoys' correspondence with N.N. Strakhov*. Ottawa: Slavic Research Group at the University of Ottawa; Moscow: State L.N. Tolstoy Museum, 2000.

Tolstaya, Sofia Andreevna. *My Life*. trans. John Woodsworth and Arkadi Klioutchanski. Ed. Andrew Donskov. Ottawa : U of Ottawa P, 2010.



**Tolstoy, Leo. *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. trans. Dora O'Brien. Richmond (London): Oneworld Classics, 2010. 320 pages. Softcover. ISBN: 978-1847491428.**

**Tolstoy, Leo. *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. trans. Judson Rosengrant. London: Penguin, 2012. xviii + 468 pages. Softcover. ISBN: 978-0140449921.**

I made myself read *Детство* in Russian before reading either translation of the trilogy. I hadn’t remembered loving *Childhood, Boyhood, Youth*. I hadn’t remembered how many glorious scenes and moments there are (so many!), and I hadn’t expected a twenty-three-year-old Tolstoy to out-Dickens his hero Dickens in his dramatization of childhood feelings (but he does!):