

From *SEEFA Journal* to *Folklorica* (2001-06)

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In the spring of 2001, the President of SEEFA, Natalie Kononenko wrote: “SEEFA continues to struggle along. Our biggest problem is the journal.” She was making an urgent plea for a member to step forward and assume the editor’s mantle. I read this at a time when I had stepped down as Chair of the Russian department at SSEES, and, with parental commitments diminishing, I was at greater liberty to reconnect with the wider academic world and to travel abroad to conferences and for research. Although I had begun as a literary scholar working on medieval Russian hagiography, I had developed an interest in Russian folklore, which over time moved from the wings to centre stage. For some fifteen years I had taught a course on Russian folklore and folk belief, while researching aspects of the relationship between Russian literature and folklore (the writer Nikolai Leskov in particular). Over the previous decade I had also become increasingly interested in aspects of popular belief (dream interpretation, divination and near-death experiences). By 1998 when I joined SEEFA, I thought of myself as a folklorist, though some traditionalist colleagues in Russia did not regard my interest in a dream tradition based on popular books as “real” folklore. I felt the need to strengthen links with folklorists outside Russia, in particular in North America. In the UK the British folklorist Liza Warner had retired and there were few others with a serious interest in Russian and Slavic and East European folklore more broadly (Florentina Badalanova and Will Ryan were obvious exceptions). And so with experience of book editing under my belt, I decided to volunteer. I could almost hear the sigh of relief across the ocean. I would edit while Natalie Kononenko and Peter Holloway functioned as publishers.

Natalie had made it clear that the founding principles of the journal remained the same: “making articles written by Russian and other East European colleagues available to the American audience is a worthwhile service and it has been a big part of SEEFA’s mission.” I was entirely happy with that, especially as the 1990s and 2000s in Russia and the former Soviet Union were producing an exciting diversification in the field. This applied both to research areas like popular religion, so long downplayed, or urban culture, much of it previously regarded as unimportant, but also to interpretive approaches. New private universities in Moscow and Petersburg made it their mission to stock their libraries

with key texts and journals from North America and Western Europe. Young scholars were emerging who seized on anthropological, cultural and other theories and approaches to take a fresh look at familiar topics or tackle new ones. I was also aware that there were similar developments in other countries in our area.

My aspiration for the journal, apart from following its guiding principles, was greater professionalization, with the aim of enhancing its reputation. The system of two readers assessing anonymized typescripts was formalized. With experience of the cavalier attitude of some East European colleagues towards house rules, more precise guidelines were issued and, in my role of fire-breathing dragon, I would return accepted submissions, which, say, used the wrong referencing or transliteration systems to the author to make the changes him or herself (often with mixed results). Natalie had not pulled her punches about the time involved in “englishing” or translating articles. I decided that I personally would not translate, restricting my efforts to turning articles into readable English prose. This decision had the effect of lowering the number of submissions, but did reduce the workload somewhat. Some translations continued to be done by noble SEEFA members like Jim Bailey and Jeanmarie Willoughby. I cannot thank them enough.

Putting the journal together twice a year was a challenge. Particularly in the first couple of years of my editorship, there was a scarcity of quality submissions, meaning that sometimes I had to lean on close colleagues to offer something. I also accepted very long articles, and spread the net as widely as possible in terms of discipline and approach. The workload was nonetheless considerable, and by the time I had edited three issues it was clear that I needed more support. I tried and failed to find a member of the editorial board of SEEFA willing to take on the promotion of the journal (persuading libraries and individuals to subscribe), or more people to help “english” articles, but a plea for a book review editor was answered by Jason Merrill. He took over in 2003 and quietly but efficiently has brought this section up to international standards. I remain extremely grateful.

Jason and I have never met. All our communication has been done by email. Indeed email was crucial to the functioning of the journal, both when working with authors on articles or sending text to Peter Holloway for formatting. It was not without its problems; odd letters, diacritics and bits of formatting and even an important review disappeared in transmission. I faced another challenge in the differences between British and American English and the conventions each use in academic

publishing. My view was simple; *SEefa Journal* was an American publication and, as has been observed, the English language should be regarded as a joint stock company where the Americans own most of the shares! I bought a copy of Webster, and did my best to Americanize (note the “z” rather than “s”) my orthography. I did not entirely succeed, and Natalie and Peter had to remove insidious “Britishisms.”

In 2003 the journal finally left behind its early years as a newsletter when it changed its name to *Folklorica*. From 2005 it was published from the Peter and Doris Kule Centre for Ukrainian and Canadian Folklore in Alberta, which provided some welcome secretarial assistance in dealing with submissions, as well as a valuable Ukrainian input (I was always worried that, with me at the helm, the journal might become too russocentric). As submissions improved in number and quality, the main problem shifted onto the printing costs, and it was decided that from 2006 *Folklorica* would come out annually. At the same time I felt that five years was a good stint as editor and it was time to devote more time to other things. My final issue in the fall of 2006 was the first to be published in the new small format, in which *Folklorica* matches the appearance of the majority of academic journals.

Looking back I am struck even more forcibly than at the time that I could not have managed without the permanent support of Natalie Kononenko. Whenever I had concerns and problems, she was always there. But the unsung hero of the past years is the unflappable Peter Holloway (if he flaps, all I can say is that he was never grumpy with me). Peter helped me with all manner of technical problems such as how to put a Macedonian keyboard on my computer, and did wonders with format and presentation.

It has been a pleasure to see the journal continue to grow in quality and reputation, especially when I look at the lamentable state of Slavic folklore studies in Britain; there are now no courses in the subject and hence no young scholars emerging. By contrast, the situation in Russia is much more optimistic; there is much greater diversity in approach which in a country with strong inclinations towards the enforcing of uniformity is encouraging. Life is not easy for scholars, many of whom have to take two or more jobs to survive and learn how get grant money to allow them decent amounts of time for research. Nationalism and exceptionalism still rear their heads, insisting on the uniqueness of Russian culture and ignoring parallels, but the best scholars, many from the younger generation, mingle happily with colleagues in related areas who live abroad. May these trends continue.