1 The Road to Moscow

I ENTERING UNKNOWN COUNTRY

In the last week of January 1705 – or 1704/5, as it was called at that time, when the year ended on 31 March – a lengthy procession of carriages, baggage wagons and open well-laden sledges crossed from Prussia into Poland, on the road from Königsberg to Vilna. It was the equipage of Charles Whitworth, on its way to Russia. He had been appointed by Queen Anne nine months before as Envoy Extraordinary to the Court of Peter I, Tsar of Muscovy. His friend at the Treasury had told him in July that they had ordered the preparation of his credentials on vellum, with ‘the flourishing of His Czarish Majesty’s Titles, for the Czar and the Eastern Princes delight in gilt letters’: but it was only at the beginning of October that the document, together with his own instructions and a sum of money, had been dispatched in a tin box, ‘not to be spoiled in the post’.

In the meantime, the new minister had not concealed that he was far from enthusiastic about the appointment. He had been serving for nearly three years as English representative in Ratisbon (Regensburg) at the Diet of what was still officially the Holy Roman Empire, and latterly in the English Embassy at Vienna. To leave the civilised comforts and placid flow of events in that elegant city was an alarming prospect. He had had (he wrote on 19 April to the Treasury) ‘another project’ for some time – to go as ambassador to Venice, where he not only knew the political situation but could use his Italian, which he knew better than he did High Dutch when he went to Ratisbon. He was even ready to take less than the £500 allowed for envoys, for the sake of that post. As for Russia, it was ‘a country so remote’, ‘so wild a country’, so ‘cold’ (he wrote in various dispatches all through the remaining months of 1704) that he had never thought of it. Even as late as 18 June 1704, in
a letter to Secretary Harley, Whitworth obviously clutched at the long delay in sending him the necessary documents, in order to say that he was ready to return to his old post at Ratisbon.

When at last the instructions came, he wrote to the Duke of Marlborough himself (25 October), asking ‘leave to write to you from time to time and to beg the continuance of your favourable protection in that barbarous country’. Marlborough replied (10 November) wishing him success in his mission, and saying he would be ‘glad of such accounts as you shall favour me with from that unknown country’. That was not encouraging either. But there were signs that he would be very welcome in Russia. He had had by that time a letter from Alexander Stanhope, the English minister at The Hague, telling him that the Muscovite ambassador there was ‘very inquisitive’ to know when Whitworth was leaving, ‘pressing that it may be as soon as possible’. Moreover, Stanhope said (7 November 1704), that he had just been instructed ‘to make a most profound compliment from Her Majesty to the Czar by his Ambassador here, on his taking of Narva, and most kind thanks for his great care of securing our merchants and their effects in that disorder, with assurances of her corresponding by all suitable returns to his Czarish Majesty’.

Now there was a new worry: how to get to the Tsar’s dominions, crossing extensive territories no less involved in war than was western and central Europe at that time (the Anglo-Dutch War of the Spanish Succession against France and Bavaria). Whitworth wrote on 15 November from Vienna to his friend Davenant, ‘The worst is how I shall get thither to pass through Swedes, Poles, Saxons, Cossacks and Turks, puts me in mind of the several Monsters your heroes of romances are used to encounter before they can achieve their adventure, and after all the fair lady often proved to be the homely Dulcinea del Toboso.’ Another care, he said, was ‘how to lug along in this dirty weather two heavy baggage wagons, a new coach and 10 or 12 horses for my public entry’. In fact, he wrote to his mother from Danzig on 5 January, he had more than once been tempted to wish ‘I had never engaged in the undertaking’.

However, he was careful to say that this was only due to the expenses involved (he had had to draw bills on his father to the