

## Impact case study (REF3b)

<b>Institution:</b> Queen Mary University of London (QMUL)
<b>Unit of Assessment:</b> D28B (Modern Languages and Linguistics: Modern Languages)
<b>Title of case study:</b> RECASTING AND DEMYTHIFYING CHEKHOV
<b>1. Summary of the impact</b> (indicative maximum 100 words)

Donald Rayfield's biography of Chekhov, *Anton Chekhov: A life* has transformed Russia's understanding of its cultural icon, as attested by the fact that the Russian government has bought 200 copies of it to disseminate among higher education institutions. The biography has achieved this: 1. by challenging myths about the great humanity of the playwright and stimulating public debate around this – both in Russia and further afield – in light of the facts it unearthed about Chekhov's tumultuous private life, which had been excised from Soviet editions of his works and correspondence; and 2. by inspiring filmmakers, theatre directors and actors to create new works that disseminate new interpretations of Chekhov's personality and of the relationship between his writings and his life.

<b>2. Underpinning research</b> (indicative maximum 500 words)
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The basic research for the biography of Chekhov was carried out in the Chekhov archive (much of it previously unexamined except by archivists and most of it not divulged) in the Manuscript Department of the Russian State Library in Moscow. Substantial further research came from archival holdings in the Russian State Archives for Literature and Art in Moscow, the Pushkin House in St Petersburg, and Chekhov museums and archives in Taganrog, Yalta, etc. Consultation was made by travelling through Russia and the Ukraine from Sumy to Ufa, visiting Chekhov's summer houses, etc, in car journeys between 1992 and 1997.

The novelty of the research rests on an examination of some 10,000 letters to Chekhov (which are often more revealing of his inner and everyday life than his own letters), in addition to the correspondence and (unpublished) diaries of his family, friends, and contemporaries. Research reveals the way in which Chekhov's prose and drama uses material (letters, remarks, characters, events) from the lives of others around him.

The main findings were 1. that Chekhov was, for much of his life, a ruthless womaniser, even a sexual tourist; 2. that there were sporadic actions in which, contrary to his established reputation, he treated people (especially those close to him) and even pet animals with what can only be called cruelty; 3. that many incidents, characters, even phrases in his work are taken from letters written to him, so that a number of short stories and at least two of the plays ('The Wood Demon' and 'The Seagull') can now be read as bombshells designed to explode in the theatre and affect a small number of persons in the audience (who see themselves caricatured) — thus creating a drama which is simultaneously enacted on stage and in the stalls and boxes of the theatre, and which has a cathartic effect on his own life; 4. that Chekhov read rather more widely than has been assumed, and that such works as a biography of the Brontës, profoundly influenced his own; 5. that he had a relish for pornographic light verse and, on occasions in his letters, for unprintable verbal abuse; 6. that he nurtured, rather than suppressed or treated his own illness.

The biography and related publications thus resulted in a complete recasting of the received understanding of Chekhov's personality and in a thorough debunking of the nearly hagiographic account presented in Soviet publications. A number of discoveries and assertions in the biography have been subsequently developed by others in the field.

The research was undertaken by Prof. Donald Rayfield, then Chair of the Russian Department at Queen Mary, between 1993 and 1997. The biography was published in 1997 (London), 1998 (New York), and again in 2009 (London). The Russian version, published first in 2004 and now in its sixth edition (2011), was updated and translated by Olga Makarova, then Research Assistant at Queen Mary, and revised by Rayfield.

<b>3. References to the research</b> (indicative maximum of six references)
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**Impact case study (REF3b)**

Donald Rayfield, *Anton Chekhov: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 1997), 674 pp; (N.Y.: Henry Holt, 1998), 674 pp; (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 674pp. (London: Faber Finds, 2009), 704 pp.

Donald Rayfield, *Zhizn' Antona Chekhova*, transl. by Ol'ga Makarova (Moscow: Nezavisimaia gazeta, 2005, 2006; Moscow: B.S.G.-Press, 2007, 2008, 2010, 2011), 781 pp.

The English version of the biography was included in the RAE2001 submission and contributed to the unit's 5 rating.

**4. Details of the impact** (indicative maximum 750 words)

When it initially came out in Russia, Rayfield's Chekhov biography generated much agitation and criticism. Reviews published in newspapers and in major 'thick journals' (addressed to the broad reading public), almost unanimously objected to the emphasis on Chekhov's private life and especially to the inclusion of numerous allegedly 'unnecessary' details. This applies equally to major literary critics such as Andrei Nemzer and to prominent writers like Viktor Erofeev. Reviews came out in *Zvezda*, in the Moscow cultural events magazine *Afisha*, as well as in numerous academic journals. Radio Liberty staged a polemic between Rayfield and Erofeev (03/07/2005).

However, by 2010, when Russia celebrated the 150 anniversary of Chekhov's birth, public opinion began to recognise the intrinsic value of Rayfield's biography. The famous actor Oleg Tabakov was quoted stating that the biography should be sent free to all Russian schools (<http://goo.gl/YxhmPi>). The MKHAT theatre, where Chekhov's plays were first staged, placed an extended discussion of the biography on its website. In it, Anatoli Smelianski, then the Director of Moscow Arts Theatre School, states that 'I don't remember any monograph by a Western scholar on a Russian author having such success ... Nikita Mikhalkov said that before this book came out we didn't know Chekhov' ([www.rg.ru/2010/04/05/chehov.html](http://www.rg.ru/2010/04/05/chehov.html)).

The public debate inspired by the biography prompted several interviews with Rayfield on radio, TV, and in newspapers. The biography became the object of a radio programme (1). The Russian TV channel *Kul'tura* broadcast an interview with Rayfield (2). Major, broad-circulation newspapers such as *Novaia gazeta* (7), weeklies (8, 9), and internet magazines (12) likewise published interviews. Reviews appeared in mainstream literary newspapers (10), magazines (11) and internet journals (13). Blogs and reader reviews also demonstrate a lively engagement (14). The biography was discussed at a roundtable at the Institute of Russian Literature of the Academy of Sciences in 2010 ([http://lit.lib.ru/k/karalis\\_d\\_n/text\\_0990.shtml](http://lit.lib.ru/k/karalis_d_n/text_0990.shtml)). Filmmaker Andrey Mikhalkov-Konchalovsky recommended it in his blog ([www.konchalovsky.ru/recommendations/](http://www.konchalovsky.ru/recommendations/)) and praised it on Russian Pervyi Kanal TV as recently as New Year 2013 (<http://goo.gl/4gG09g>).

The biography was then used by documentary and feature filmmakers to produce movies that explore Chekhov's private life and recast the received understanding of his personality. Evgenii Tsymbal (Bafta award, 1989) and Sergei Golovetskii produced the documentary film *The Mystery of Chekhov* (2010), released on DVD, which explores the international resonance of Chekhov (3). It features an interview with Rayfield, along with Peter Stein, Falk Richter, and Alexander Sokurov. Swiss television (SF1 and 3sat) produced a movie about Chekhov's relationship with women based largely on Rayfield's biography, *Tschechow Lieben: Work und Leben von Anton Tschechow*, dir. by Marina Rumjanzewa (4). It again includes an interview with Rayfield. The compound audience rating of its various runs is above 105,000 viewers. The Russian TV network Rossiia broadcast a programme that similarly presents a more differentiated view of Chekhov's personality. Produced by Aleksandr Avilov, *Chekhov in the 21C: Doctor Chekhov; A Recipe for Immortality* (2010) was broadcast on Russian TV Rossiia on 25/01/2010. The synopsis of the film acknowledges the use of Rayfield's biography (5). Much the same applies to the documentary film broadcast on Russia's other major TV network Pervyi kanal, *Chekhov; Unpublished life* (2010), dir. by Sergei Kozhevnikov, in which Rayfield is interviewed as the main authority on Chekhov's life (6). It was broadcast on 30/01/2010 and online.

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

The biography also informed the production of recent feature films about Chekhov's life. The movie *Poklonnitsa* (The Worshipping Lady) (Lenfilm, 2011), dir. by Vitalii Mel'nikov, which depicts the illicit love affair between Chekhov and writer Lidia Avilova, rests significantly on Rayfield's biography ([www.afisha.ru/movie/210231/](http://www.afisha.ru/movie/210231/)). In an interview published in *Rossiiskaia gazeta* (02/04/2009), the director acknowledged the impact of Rayfield's 'remarkable' book, which 'removes all the veils, destroys all the stereotypes about the writer' ([www.rg.ru/2009/04/02/kino.html](http://www.rg.ru/2009/04/02/kino.html)). His film, produced by one of the two major Russian film studios, features famous actors such as Oleg Tabakov and Svetlana Kriuchkova and won two prizes. In a discussion of the movie, Tabakov praises Rayfield's biography as one of the books that shaped his understanding of Chekhov (*Rossiiskaia gazeta*, 05.04.2010) ([www.rg.ru/2010/04/05/chehov.html](http://www.rg.ru/2010/04/05/chehov.html)).

The biography also inspired a theatrical production. The 'documentalist' playwright Elena Gremina turned Rayfield's biography into a play entitled *Brat'ia Ch.* (The Brothers Ch.), staged in the Moscow Stanislavsky Theatre in 2010. The critic Marina Davydov called the play 'a dramaturgic (and extremely terse) paraphrase of Rayfield's book' (<http://goo.gl/iQ3CoR>). In the US, writer, director, and producer of theatre and film Laura Strausfeld wrote a screenplay on the relations between Chekhov and Suvorin partly based on Rayfield's biography, which is currently in pre-production. Much of the theatre and film work she has done in the past 10 years was likewise inspired by Rayfield's biography.

Meanwhile in England Rayfield's biography has set a model of scrupulous fact-based biographical writing. Michael Frayn called it 'without question the definitive biography of Chekhov'. Arthur Miller wrote a laudatory review in *Sunday Times*, and so did William Boyd in *The Guardian*. Although these reviews predate 2008, Rayfield's biography remains a reference. In an article published in *The Observer* on 2 October 2011, William Boyd praises Claire Tomalin's biography of Dickens as 'worthy to stand beside Richard Ellmann on Joyce, Donald Rayfield on Chekhov and Jean-Yves Tadie on Proust' (<http://goo.gl/aSOHOO>).

**Indicators (2008-2013)****Radio programmes**

(1) Radio Svoboda. 02/02/2010. Discussion of merits of Rayfield's biography. [www.svobodanews.ru/content/transcript/1946763.html](http://www.svobodanews.ru/content/transcript/1946763.html)

**TV programmes and documentary films**

(2) Channel Kultura, 28/11/09. Rayfield interview. [www.tvkultura.ru/news.html?id=397092](http://www.tvkultura.ru/news.html?id=397092)  
Available on Newstube: [www.newstube.ru/media/kniga-zhizn%27-antona-chexova-donal%27da-reifilda](http://www.newstube.ru/media/kniga-zhizn%27-antona-chexova-donal%27da-reifilda).

(3) *Zagadka Chekhova* (2010): [www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/5425957/?item=5425311](http://www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/5425957/?item=5425311)

(4) *Tschechow Lieben: Work und Leben von Anton Tschekhow* (2010): [www.sendungen.sf.tv/sternstunden/Nachrichten/Archiv/2011/03/10/sternstundeneinzel/Filme-der-Sternstunde-Kunst-2010](http://www.sendungen.sf.tv/sternstunden/Nachrichten/Archiv/2011/03/10/sternstundeneinzel/Filme-der-Sternstunde-Kunst-2010)

Audience figures:

*Swiss Public Television SF 1*: 12/12/10, (TV-Premiere), 43700; 14/12/10, 6500; 18/12/10, 17100; 24/07/11, 26700; 25/07/11, 4500; 30/07/2011, 8200.

*3sat, Television for german speaking territories*: 25.10.2012, 5000

The movie was also available on [www.sternstunden.sf.tv](http://www.sternstunden.sf.tv)

(5) Chekhov XXI veka. (Doktor Chekhov. Retsept bessmertii) (2010)

<http://rutracker.org/forum/viewtopic.php?t=2698573>

Available online: [http://kinolis.ru/news/chekhov\\_xxi\\_veka\\_2010/2011-11-03-114](http://kinolis.ru/news/chekhov_xxi_veka_2010/2011-11-03-114)

(6) *Chekhov. Neopublikovannaia zhizn'* (2010):

[www.1tvrus.com/channel1/announce/7417](http://www.1tvrus.com/channel1/announce/7417)

Available online: <http://video.mail.ru/mail/lyudmila-1946/klassik/822.html>

**Impact case study (REF3b)**

**Print interviews of Rayfield and other references to Chekhov biography**

(7) *Novaia gazeta*. 03/02/10. Interview with Rayfield.

[www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2010/008/21.html](http://www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2010/008/21.html)

(8) *Stanislavskii/Nezavisimaia gazeta*. 20/01/10. Interview with Rayfield

[http://stanislavsky.ng.ru/tochki/2010-01-01/90\\_rayfield.html](http://stanislavsky.ng.ru/tochki/2010-01-01/90_rayfield.html)

(9) *Kommersant Vlast'*. 25/01/10. Interview with Rayfield

<http://kommersant.ru/doc/1303723>

(10) Andrei Turkov, *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 30/07/08. Review of biography

<http://www.lgz.ru/article/5278/>

(11) Anatolii Shenderovich, *Znamia*, vol. 3, 2008. Comments about biography

<http://magazines.russ.ru/znamia/2008/3/sh17.html>

**Internet magazines and news portals**

(12) *Infox.ru*. 72/09/2009. Interview with Rayfield

[http://infox.ru/afisha/book/2009/11/26/rayfield\\_print.phtml](http://infox.ru/afisha/book/2009/11/26/rayfield_print.phtml)

(13) *Litprom.ru*. 06/04/2012. Review of Rayfield's biography

<http://litprom.ru/print46123.html>

**(14) Blogs and Reader reviews (samples)**

<http://uborshizza.livejournal.com/601751.html> 18/07/2009,

[www.liveinternet.ru/users/1150469/post64407522](http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/1150469/post64407522) 21/01/2008

[www.liveinternet.ru/users/apriori-next/post106894583/](http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/apriori-next/post106894583/) 29/07/2009

<http://chto-chitat.livejournal.com/7398688.html> 02/09/2010,

[www.ljpoisk.ru/archive/9385032.html](http://www.ljpoisk.ru/archive/9385032.html) 04/2011

[www.livelib.ru/book/1000107373](http://www.livelib.ru/book/1000107373) (13 reviews)

[www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/3655568/](http://www.ozon.ru/context/detail/id/3655568/) (8 reviews)

[www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/81601/](http://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/81601/) (6 reviews)

<b>5. Sources to corroborate the impact</b> (indicative maximum of 10 references)
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Websites listed above.

The following four individuals can corroborate claims about the ways Rayfield's biography has changed Russia's understanding of Chekhov and has underpinned new artistic production.

1. Director, MkhAT (Moscow Art Theater)
2. President, Mkhath School, Deputy Artistic Director, Mkhath
3. Independent film director
4. Director Chekhov Centre

This person can corroborate the impact of Rayfield's biography on her own theatre and film work:

5. Writer, director and producer of film and theatre