

NORMAN E. SAUL

A Russian “Yankee Doodle”

Enclosed in a letter, written in September 1815 by William David Lewis (1792–1881) to the United States minister in Sweden, Jonathan Russell (1771–1832), is an interesting and unique example of an American’s effort to compose verse in the Russian language. Though only a curiosity of Russian literature, “Yankee Doodle” illustrates the degree of facility gained by one of the first American students of Russian after more than a year of study. Of additional interest is the pronunciation guide which Lewis furnished Russell—rare evidence on how Russian was actually spoken in the early nineteenth century.¹

Lewis arrived in Russia in May 1814 at the request of his elder brother, John Delaware Lewis, who owned an export-import company in St. Petersburg, and with the assistance of Henry Clay, who agreed to take him as his private secretary by the only safe and secure way to cross the Atlantic during the last months of the War of 1812—on the *U.S.S. John Adams*, which was carrying the American commissioners to the peace negotiations at Ghent. On the journey Lewis became acquainted with another member of the delegation, Jonathan Russell, who had been American chargé d’affaires in London when the war began and who would proceed to a new diplomatic position in Sweden.²

Since American shipping was still absent from the Baltic in the summer of 1814 and business was slow, John Lewis assigned his brother the task of learning the Russian and German languages for the purpose of facilitating transactions with local and foreign merchants. William began his study under Professor Miltendorf at a gymnasium in St. Petersburg, but then in August he moved to Moscow with the hope of obtaining a more complete immersion in the language. There he studied under Dr. Philip Strahl, director of the

1. W. D. Lewis to Russell, Sept. 28, 1815, Russell Papers, Special Collections, John Hay Library, Brown University. I am indebted to the staffs of the John Hay Library and of the Historical Society of Pennsylvania for their assistance in the use of the Russell and Lewis-Neilson manuscripts, respectively. Research was supported by the American Philosophical Society and the General Research Fund of the University of Kansas.

2. For additional background information on Lewis and Russell see my articles, “America’s First Student of Russian: William David Lewis of Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography*, 96, no. 4 (October 1972): 469–79, and “Jonathan Russell, *President Adams*, and Europe in 1810,” *American Neptune*, 30, no. 4 (October 1970): 279–94.

Moscow Practical Commercial Academy. "Under his guidance," Lewis later wrote, "I read the works of the best Russian authors whether in prose or poetry and in time became enamored [*sic*] of the language which is full of beauties and sublimities."³

With Professor Strahl supervising his work, Lewis began a schedule of study similar to that of an intensive language course today. He met with his Russian master for two hours in the morning, until 11:00 A.M., then spent an hour on exercises. In the afternoon he received instruction in German from one to three and, after additional homework, had little time left for other pursuits.⁴ This simultaneous study of both Russian and German was particularly taxing, and Lewis was discouraged by his slow progress. He wrote to his brother in St. Petersburg in September, "My translations and exercises . . . almost entirely occupy my time. The labor of learning two languages at a time admits of but little relaxation for pleasure, and, altho. I cannot think they can be perfectly acquired in a year, I shall do my utmost to acquire as much of them in that time as I can."⁵

The first stumbling and hesitant compositions in Russian were devoted to typical student themes: a description of Novgorod (August 1814), "Bell and Bell-ringer," "Dog and Cat," and a number of essays on Greek gods.⁶ His translations into English show greater sophistication and are considerably longer, probably because he was more interested in the subjects. In September Lewis translated excerpts from Vladimir Izmailov's travels through southern Russia (*Puteshestvie v poludennuiu Rossiuu*) and during the winter Vasilii Golovnin's account of his experiences in Japan, serialized in *Vestnik Evropy*.⁷

William Lewis apparently did not consider publishing these results of his studies, nor did he evidently complete an outline for a Russian grammar in English. Only one chapter, on Russian orthography, is in finished form.⁸ Lewis was charting new ground in composing these grammatical notes, for the only basic grammars then available were those in German, by J. Vater

3. William David Lewis autobiography (1870), pp. 34–37, box 54, Lewis-Neilson Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania (hereafter L-N, HSP). Strahl, also a young man at the time, later published several books on Russian history and the Orthodox Church.

4. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Dec. 24, 1814, Letterbook, 1814–15, L-N, HSP.

5. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Sept. 21, 1814, *ibid.*

6. "Russian Notebooks," box 65, L-N, HSP.

7. *Ibid.* Golovnin's travelogue was published separately as *Zapiski flota kapitana Golovnina o prekliucheniakh ego v plenu u Iapontsev v 1811, 1812 i 1813 godokh* in 1816, and was followed by English, French, and German editions.

8. "Notes on the Russian Language," Literature Section, L-N, HSP. Lewis had already studied French and Italian and had published some poetry in the *Philadelphia Repertory*. A continuing literary ambition is evident from a large number of manuscript verses, including several written in Russian (e.g., "In Novgorod City Great" and "Description of a Petersburg Beauty"), in the Lewis-Neilson Papers.

(1808) and A. W. Tappe (1810).⁹ There is no evidence that Lewis relied directly on any published grammar, though his tutor, Strahl, may have used one. The notes were left unfinished, in rough outline, probably because a Russian grammar in English was in little demand at that time. They provided, however, valuable practice and reference material for his own continuing study of the language.

By November 1814 Lewis was reading the local newspapers and the literary journal *Syn otechestva*. In the latter he was pleasantly surprised to find a flattering view of America written by Pavel Svinin, who had just returned to Russia from Lewis's native Philadelphia.¹⁰ That Svinin and Lewis did not meet in Russia was most likely owing to the tendency of foreign merchants to refrain from mixing in Russian society. In St. Petersburg and Moscow, Russian merchants who had business with foreigners generally spoke German, while the Russian nobility would invariably speak French. This circumstance was, in fact, a major obstacle to satisfying the American's foremost objective—being able to converse fluently in Russian. His social contacts were mostly limited to a few Englishmen (with whom he toured the Borodino battlefield) and to the German merchant community in which he lived. And all of these foreigners, most of whom had resided many years in Russia, spoke very little if any Russian. Even in the exchange, where products were bought for export, German was used, and bad German at that, Lewis noted.¹¹

After six months in Moscow, Lewis began concentrating all of his formal study upon Russian, recognizing along with his brother that this would be the most valuable of the two languages. Besides, he had much more opportunity to pursue German informally among the young ladies of the foreign community: "It is true many of them are very agreeable and I frequent their company a good deal, I do it, however, as I would go to school in German."¹² Speaking Russian remained a serious problem, as he admitted to his brother,

9. W. K. Matthews, *Russian Historical Grammar* (London, 1960), p. 313.

10. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Nov. 25, 1814, and to Jonathan Hughes, Dec. 7, 1814, Letterbook, 1814–15, L-N, HSP. Svinin's articles were published in a separate volume the next year. See Pavel Svin'in, *Opyt zhivopisnago puteshestiia po Severnoi Amerike* (St. Petersburg, 1815).

11. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 4, 1815, Letterbook, 1814–15, L-N, HSP. Lewis recollected in his autobiography: "The difficulty I experienced during all that time in finding opportunities to speak the native language of the country can hardly be overstated. With my teacher whom I paid for so doing, my servants, and the shopkeepers who spoke nothing else, I could get some practice, but among the educated class, my almost constant and only fit companions, whose language of society with each other was almost exclusively French, it was only by way of favor that they would converse with me in their native tongue, the ladies invariably evincing the most consideration in that respect." P. 50, box 54, L-N, HSP.

12. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 18, 1815, *ibid.*

"I am much at a loss for practical opportunities and . . . consequently my progress . . . is not as rapid as it would be under circumstances offering me these opportunities."¹³

Through the assistance of Professor Strahl, Lewis attempted to find a Russian home in which to live, but found that none of the nobility would take him: "In a priest's house I could live no doubt, but after having lived so long at Mr. Z's [Zencker's] I should not be willing to go into any other house in Mosco than that of a respectable man, which is a rare thing among the priesthood here and besides that could be just as well done at St. Petersburg."¹⁴ This problem and the fact that Strahl was preparing to leave for home caused William Lewis to consider returning to St. Petersburg in March. But suddenly, and much to the surprise of his friends and brother, and perhaps on the advice of Strahl, he left for the provincial city of Tver, where he spent the next five months.¹⁵ In contrast with the situation in St. Petersburg and Moscow, he found that in Tver "even at the tables of the very first people Russian is the language which is spoken."¹⁶ Pretending not to know French and living with Russians, Lewis found that his conversational ability naturally improved. And in August 1815, after a year away from the capital and after fifteen months of concentrated language study, he returned to St. Petersburg to begin work in his brother's business.

During his travels in Russia Lewis corresponded with friends he had met on the *John Adams*. Jonathan Russell showed more inclination than the others to reciprocate, probably because he was closer and also more isolated from America at his post in Stockholm. Knowing of Lewis's study of Russian, Russell wrote in June 1815 to request that he demonstrate his newly acquired skill by writing a Russian version of "Yankee Doodle," then at the peak of its popularity in the United States.¹⁷

In a reply, penned three days after his return to St. Petersburg, William D. Lewis recounted his travels, describing Moscow as "a great ugly, monstrous, unwieldly [*sic*], muddy place affording very little comfort," an impression no doubt influenced by the effects of the French occupation and fire of 1812, but he added that "by the attention and hospitality of the people [I] rendered 8 months in quite a passable manner, that is to say in a noisy laughing one at least. I was for the most part among the Germans there, who you know are a very vulgar people, yet they seem like such good hearted fellows when they get their pipes in their mouths and their glass of grog upon the table," but "at Tver I was much more among the Russians, . . . a good

13. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 4, 1815, *ibid.*

14. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Mar. 25, 1815, *ibid.*

15. W. D. Lewis to Russell, Mar. 30, 1815, *ibid.*

16. W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 22, 1815, Letterbook, 1814-15, L-N, HSP.

17. Russell to W. D. Lewis, June 25, 1815, Misc. Letters, L-N, HSP.

hospitable people and I like them very much." Lewis concluded, "I will seize some other opportunity, when I shall have more leisure to court the muses, to send you the piece you request in Russian verse to the tune of Yankee Doodle—you shall have it however."¹⁸

True to his word, six weeks later Lewis wrote to Russell:

I do not suppose you had the slightest idea that I would ever attempt to comply with the jesting request contained in your last favor to write you "some Russian verses to the tune of Yankee Doodle." You will therefore not be a little surprised on opening this letter, to find enclosed in it a great sheet full of strange and barbarous characters constituting a parcel of doggrels which may really be sung to that delightful and life-inspiring Air. Indeed I had previously discovered *my poetical abilities* in this tongue, and had once like to have got my head in my hand, for writing a pasquinade upon a governor; I had even gone so far as to write several love epistles to young ladies, but rather distrusting my northern muse, I took care always to address them to those of so "gentle a nature" that I felt no uneasiness about their rejection, the consequence of which was that in every instance my efforts were crowned with the most complete success.—Joking apart, it is certainly to you sir, that the world is indebted for a Yankee Doodle in Russ, for I have every reason to believe that my present attempt is the first song in this language in which Yankee Doodle comes in for any share. I intended when I begun it, to write something witty but finding my brain rather muddy, I was compelled to put those words in it which I could make rhyme together, without paying much attention to the sense, or caring any thing about what is called point; which is the more excusable, as many of my poetical brethren make no bones of doing this in their own language. And if this little poetical license (namely that of paying no attention to the sense) is to be denied me in Russ, I shall think it rather a hard case I confess. . . . Having dedicated to your Excellency this portion of my labours, I shall certainly have a right to expect something of the same kind from you in that tender and expressive language, the Scandinavian, in which I have no doubt you are now quite a proficient. Will not our country owe us much for spreading the glory of her exploits through these northern regions, and even giving ourselves the trouble of putting them into northern rhymes? If Mr. [President] Madison makes me no remuneration for the sleepless nights this Russian Yankee Doodle has occasioned me, all I have to say is that "he may kill the next Hotspur himself."—So as to make it more intelligible to you I have put a stroke thus — under every syllable separately, and the accent over each word in its proper place, and altho' our characters are quite incompetent to render completely the Russian sounds, yet they come sufficiently near to give you some idea of them. Yankee Doodle finally dispatched, let us talk of other matters. . . .¹⁹

Russell was impressed by Lewis's labors and saved the original for posterity (Lewis apparently did not keep a copy):

It certainly furnishes conclusive evidence that you have turned your time to good account and have made a very respectable progress in the Russian language. I have been too great a truant in the acquisition of the Scandinavian to be able, at this moment, to meet your demand for a remittance of a poetical essay in that tender and expansive language. My muse is, however, hard at work in studying the

18. W. D. Lewis to Russell, Aug. 17, 1815, Russell Papers, Brown University.

19. W. D. Lewis to Russell, Sept. 28, 1815, *ibid.*

black letters and I will belt her with runic stones if she does not accord me the necessary inspiration.

I have good hope that we shall not only make these barbarous languages of the north teem with sentiments hitherto entirely unknown to them, but that before many years we should be able to compel or to persuade the Tartars, the Goths and Vandals, and the rest of the benighted world to join heartily in a patriotic reel to the tune of Yankee Doodle.²⁰

Unfortunately, one can only speculate about whether Lewis's chauvinistic description of the underdog Yankees beating off the British lions in the War of 1812 actually circulated in Russia. It is conceivable that Lewis would entertain Russian friends by reciting his Yankee Doodle.

But did Lewis ever use his Russian, probably the best knowledge acquired by any American up to that time? His ability to negotiate directly with local Russian merchants in their own language (a few business letters survive) may have been one reason for the rapid rise of John D. Lewis and Company to one of the three largest import-export firms in St. Petersburg, a position it held into the 1830s. William Lewis possessed greater ability for gathering information about the Russian market than other Americans, a fact well advertised to foreign clients. He left St. Petersburg in 1818, however, largely because of a business disagreement that resulted in a public insult to the American consul general, Levitt Harris.²¹ A night in a St. Petersburg jail and the notoriety connected with the incident made his continued presence in Russia a liability for the company.

Back in Philadelphia, William Lewis operated his own shipping business, acted as American agent for his brother, later became a prominent banker and railroad director, and with the patronage of Henry Clay was appointed collector of the Port of Philadelphia in 1849. A prominent citizen of the city, Lewis also served as president of the Philadelphia Academy of Arts. During his long life (he died in 1881), Lewis continued to read Russian literature in the original and published translations of Russian romantic verses anonymously in local journals. In 1849 these were collected into a separate, privately printed volume along with his most significant translations of Pushkin's "Fountain of Bakhchisarai" and Derzhavin's "Ode to God."²² Lewis deserves credit for being the first American to translate these particular works into English, and his translation of Pushkin has been rated among those "which seem to have some special distinction."²³

20. Russell to W. D. Lewis, Oct. 26, 1815, Misc. Letters, L-N, HSP.

21. W. D. Lewis to Russell, Sept. 13, 1817, Russell Papers, Brown University.

22. *The Bakchesarian Fountain, by Alexander Pooshkeen, and Other Poems, by Various Authors, Translated from the Original Russian by William D. Lewis* (Philadelphia, 1849).

23. Samuel H. Cross and Ernest J. Simmons, *Alexander Pushkin, 1799-1837: His Life and Literary Heritage (with an English Bibliography)* (New York: American Russian Institute, 1937), p. 76.

Alongside the Russian script Lewis transcribed the Russian into English equivalents, so that Russell, who obviously did not know any Russian, could sing along to the tune of "Yankee Doodle." The result is one of the earliest transliterations of modern Russian. Considering its novelty at the time, Lewis accomplished an excellent phonetic rendering and demonstrated an ear for the Russian sounds. The transliteration also reflects Lewis's study pattern, learning grammar and composition first and then conversational Russian in Tver, where the Russian spoken, as he noted in a separate letter, was the same as that of Moscow.²⁴

Though Lewis devised his own system, he did not always follow it consistently, and, while explaining some of the peculiarities of Russian in brief notes, he did not attempt to distinguish the ь for his friend Russell. Without elaboration, however, he did note the difference between long and short vowels (ы, for example, as *y* and *oui*, respectively). French (*j* for ж) and German (*shtch* for щ, *ss* for с, and *s* for в) can be detected. A few colloquialisms can also be found (*ko*chda* for когда). But Lewis did not hesitate to abandon the system in favor of a more direct and understandable English equivalent (Даѣ as Dye, for example).²⁵

24. Matthews, *Russian Historical Grammar*, p. 175; W. D. Lewis to J. D. Lewis, Apr. 25, 1815, Letterbook, 1814–15, L-N, HSP.

25. I wish to thank Professor Sam Anderson of the University of Kansas for assistance in analyzing Lewis's transliteration.

ЯНКИ ДУДЕЛЬ

Есть такой смѣшной народъ
Гдѣ щастіемъ всѣ исполны
Какъ хочется всякой живеть
Ибо они всѣ вольны.

[Chorus]

Янки дудель всѣ кричатъ
Ахъ! голосъ какъ прекрасный!
Можно по этому пѣсать
Иль вѣди въ боѣ ужасный!

YANKEE DOODLE

Yest takói smaišnói naróde
Gđiai shthshástiem vsai eesspótny,
*Kack *chóchetsa vsiahkói jeeviote,*
Ebo onny vsiai vóllny.

[Chorus]

Yankee Doodle vsiai kreechátt
Ach! góloss kack praikrássnoi*
Mójno po áitomoo pliassátt,
Eel éedty v'boi oojássnoi.

Notes by Lewis to the English transliteration: "All the *chs* marked with a * should be pronounced guttural as in the German *Ach!* The letters *iai* should be pronounced as tho' constituting but one syllable; the truth is it is impossible in our characters to render the Russian letters *e* and *ѣ*. I have therefore in some instances written them with *ai* merely, which I mean to be pronounced as in *sail* *brail* etc. For the Russian *ы* I have put a *y*. It is the nearest that any of our characters come to it & should everywhere in this song be pronounced as in *city*." [Note: Accents mentioned by Lewis in his letter to Russell have been included in this reproduction, but the underlining has not.]

Случилось только другой день
 Тамъ жаркой споръ поднялся,
 И шумъ отъ тѣхъ чужихъ племень
 Повсюду раздавался.
 Янки §
 Я знаю точно отъ чего
 Тамъ много львовъ ревѣли,
 Того народа пѣлаго
 И поглотить хотѣли.
 Янки . . .
 О! Боже! они были всѣ
 Велики и престащны,
 Бежали въ бѣшенствѣ звездѣ
 Гривили все ужасно.
 Янки . . .
 Ах! бѣдны Янкивъ думалъ Я
 Теперь рокъ приближаетъ
 Въ роты тѣхъ львовъ ваша судьба
 Упасть васъ принуждаетъ.
 Янки . . .
 Но они не боялись тѣхъ,
 Хоть много ихъ ня мало,
 А собирая скоро всѣхъ,
 На нихъ они упали.
 Янки . . .
 Тогда, о чудо! гордый левъ
 Бѣжаая отъ нихъ скоро,
 Какъ пылалъ въ немъ прискорбныйгнѣвъ
 Отправился на море!
 Янки . . .
 Какъ прочь онъ плылъ онъ все кричалъ,
 Теперь чувствую живо,
 Не хорошо Я сдѣлалъ все
 Спасибо! ахъ, спасибо!
 Янки . . .
 Но Янкивъ прежде всякой зубъ
 Ему уже отбили,
 Такъ что отпущенъ бѣдныйглушъ
 Жаль! лишень былъ всей силою.
 Янки . . .
 Стадо послѣднее его
 Лежить во вѣрной связи,
 Спокойно тамъ и хорошо
 Во миссисипской гряды.
 Янки . . .

Sloochéeloss tolko droógoi dain
Tam járkoi spore podniálsa,
E shoom ot tiaich choojéech* plemáin*
Po vsóodoo razdaválsa.
Yankee . . .
Ya znáyou totchno ot chevó,
Tam mnógo lvoŋ raiváily,
Tavó naróda tsáilavo
*E poglotéet *chotáily.*
Yankee . . .
O! Bójet onný bouílly vsiai
Velécky e praistráshny,
Baijáilly v'baishenstvai vezáily,
Grozéely vsio oojásno.
Yankee . . .
Ach! Biaiŋny yankees dóomal Ya*
Tepáir roke prebleejáhyet
V'rotie tiaich lvoŋ vashá soodbáh*
Oopásst vass prenoojdáhyet.
Yankee . . .
*No onný nai boyáhleess tiaich**
**Chote mnógo eech* nai máhlo,*
Ah sobeeráya skóro vsiaich,*
Na neech onný oopáhly.*
Yankee . . .
*To*chdá ol choóda gordy liaiff*
Baijáhya ot neech skóro,*
Kack pouílall v'nióme prescórnbnoigniaiff
Otpráveelsa na mórai.
Yankee . . .
Kack prótche on plouil, on vsió kreechál,
Tepáir choovstvóbyoo jeévo,
*Nai *charasho ya sdáilal vsió,*
Spaseébo ach, spaseébo.*
Yankee . . .
No yánkees préjdy usákoí zoop,
Yemoó oóje otbeély,
Tack shto otpóoshtshen biaidnaigloop
Jalle! Leéshen bouil vsiai seély.
Yankee . . .
Stáhdó possláidnoyai yaivó
Laijeét vo vátrnoi sviásy,
*Spokoíno tam e *charasho*
Vo Mississippskoi griáhsy.
Yankee . . .

Казалось что Марсь самъ пришелъ
 На помощь къ Янкивъ этимъ,
 Высоко парить ихъ орель,
 Гордясь своимъ успѣхомъ.
 Янки . . .
 Дай Богъ что къ намъ опять когда
 Они бы приближали,
 Что бы та самая судьба
 Ихъ всёхъ тамъ ожидали.
 Янки . . .

Санктпетербургъ
 Сѣнтябрь 25, 1815
 Сочиненіе дикаго чловѣка изъ лѣсу.

Kazáhloss shto Mars sam preeshóle
Na pómoshitsh k'yankes áiteem,
Vouisóko páreet eech orióle,*
*Gordiáss svoyeém oospái*chom.*
Yankee . . .
*Dye Bóge shto k'námm opiátt ko*chdá*
Onný boui preebleejálly,
Shto boui tak sáhmaya soodbáh
Eech viaich tam ojeedálly.*
Yankee . . .

Socheenáimiyai deékavo chelováika
eéz láisoo.

Translation (literal) by Lewis:

1. There is such a ridiculous nation in the world where every one is happy, each lives as he takes it into his head, for they are all free. *Chorus.* Yankee Doodle they all cry out, Oh! what a beautiful tune, it will do to dance by or advance by to the terrible battle.

2. It happened but the other day that a violent quarrel arose there & the noise from this strange race resounded everywhere.

3. I know very well the cause of it, many lions were roaring among them & wished to devour this entire people.

4. O God! How big were they! How terrible! They ranged about in their fury, & threatened all with ruin.

5. Ah! poor yankees thought I, your destinies are now fulfilling, fate obliges you to fall into these lions' mouths.

6. But altho' there were so many, they did not fear, but collecting all their forces fell upon them violently.

7. Then O! wonder! the proud lions running from them rapidly, whilst distressful anger burnt in his bosom, *put off to sea!*

8. As he swam away he cried out lustily, alas! I now feel sensibly that I have done wrong, spare me, oh! spare me.

9. But the yankees had first knocked out each of his teeth, so that the liberated poor fool, what a pity! was deprived of all his strength.

10. His last troop lies now in faithful fellowship quietly & well accommodated in the mud of the Mississippi.

11. It seems as tho' Mars himself had come to the help of these yankees, high soars their eagle proud of his successes.

12. God grant that, if they should again approach us, the same fate may await them there.

The production of the wild man out of the woods.