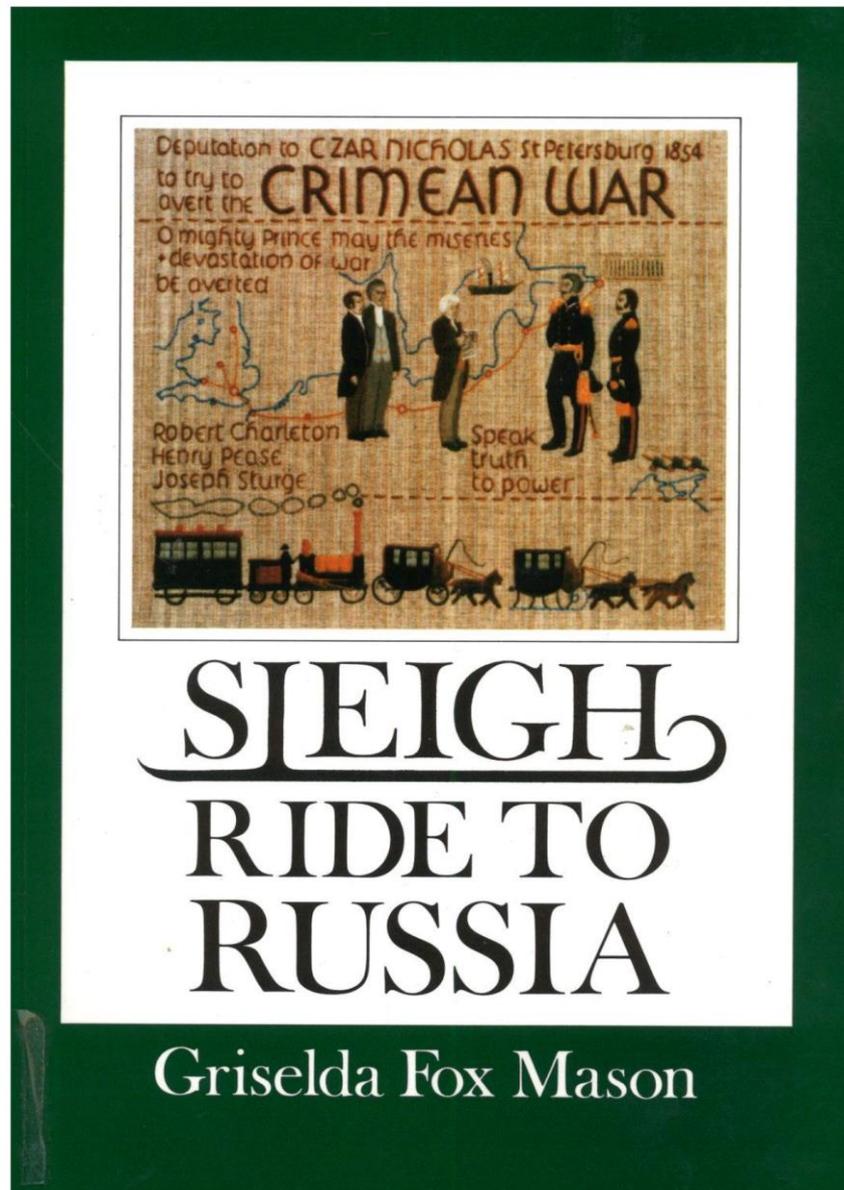


Sleigh Ride to Russia

by **Griselda Fox Mason**

published in 1985



This understated little book concerns a dramatic episode in the lives of three brave men who were tasked to attempt to prevent the outbreak of what became known as the Crimean War. It is an unusual insight (mostly through the medium of their letters) into a unique moment in history.

Joseph Sturge, Robert Charleton and Henry Pease made a 2000 mile round trip over three weeks in February 1854 to meet with the Emperor of Russia and present an address penned by English Quakers urging peace, on avowedly religious rather than

political grounds. The book is put together by the great grand-daughter of Henry Pease – Edward (Father of the Railway) Pease's youngest son.

They travelled first by rail, until the tracks ran out in Königsberg, modern-day Kaliningrad. Henry is rueful when reporting back to his brother on the efficiency of German trains, that they run in 'a style well calculated to lower an Englishman's pride as to railway management'. Thereafter it was a carriage, on a sleigh, drawn by six horses at a top speed of six miles an hour – unless impeded and on occasion entirely overwhelmed, by snowdrifts. Having three sets of letters home to draw from, there are plenty of individual insights into the cultural and geographical worlds discovered en route. Russia's 'dead markets' make a big impression for instance – the way the frozen produce has to be hacked up with mallets...

Three weeks then, of considerable tension, what with the hazards of the journey, the vanishing window of opportunity to put their case, and the uncertainty as to whether they would even be granted an audience. The British press was sceptical: the undertaking was reported in the 'Times', for instance, as 'a piece of enthusiastic folly'; our own 'Darlington and Stockton Times' had 'no faith in the success of their mission'.

There is a touching glimpse into the personal impact of the big day itself in one of Henry's accounts of it, where he talks about waiting to be admitted into the Emperor's presence: 'trying to appear at ease when in reality it was not just so'. The address and the Emperor's reply are reproduced in full in the text. The former was received politely, but the response was implacable: "On the present occasion, my great duty is to attend to the interests and honour of my country."

In fact, war was declared five weeks after the visit of what the cartoonists called 'the three doves'. The remainder of the book is devoted to a round-up of 'what they did next': all three continued undaunted in their efforts to promote the interests of peace in other contexts.