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Vodolazkin**

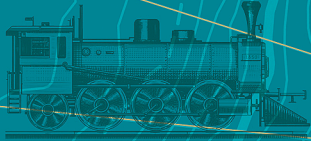
A NOVEL

**A
HISTORY
OF THE
ISLAND**

*Translated by
Lisa C. Hayden*

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finest contemporary novelists."

Rowan Williams



A History of the Island

A NOVEL

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To Tatyana and Natalia

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And the ground will shake,
and black water will ignite in the North,
and a fiery water will begin to flow in the South.
And ash will float from the heavens,
and your hearts will turn to ash.

Agafon's Prophecy

From the Publisher

News of the continuation of *A History of the Island*, our country's renowned first historical chronicle, has recently piqued the interest of the Island community. Discovery of the continuation made publication of a new and complete edition of the chronicle a necessity.

A History of the Island has been published more than once in its previous form. It is part of the curriculum at schools and universities and has long been widely quoted. "We shall see how this all ends." "He understood that war is capable of resuming, for he was one of those who wished to resume it." "Happy are the times that do not enter the annals." "It, time, has nowhere to hurry." These phrases have entered our everyday life so firmly that not everyone remembers that they date back to the chronicle.

We requested that Their Royal Highnesses Parfeny and Ksenia have a look at the full text of *A History of the Island*. Their opinions of the published work felt extraordinarily important to us and they agreed to share them. Their notes unexpectedly took on a journal-like character, which pleased us inexpressibly, for any word from the royal couple is the word of history itself. With the authors' permission, we have divided the notes into chunks and published them as a running commentary on the text of the chronicle.

Events of the last year changed our initial publication plans: we have now lived long enough for ancient prophecies to begin coming true. One cannot call this time joyful but it has taught us a great deal. We have become wiser and, as Ecclesiastes tells us, in much wisdom is much grief.

The whole world has looked at what has taken place on the Island and reflected on the essence of history. Not only about our

A HISTORY OF THE ISLAND

history but about history in general. The recent release of the film *Justification of the Island*, directed by the great Jean-Marie Leclerc, furthered those reflections. It was initially a surprise for many that the film's main characters agreed to be consultants for the French director, but the movie's grand success confirmed that they made the right decision.

The release of this book into the limelight has a special purpose now, as our people stand at a crossroads. And so: into the limelight, from the darkness of our time.

FEODOR

Long ago, we had no history. Memory preserved isolated events, but only those events with a propensity for repeating. Our existence thus seemed to take a circular path.

We knew that night follows day and spring follows winter. The luminaries floating in the firmament create those circles and their wayfaring is limited to one year. The year was also the natural boundary of our memory.

We vaguely recalled dreadful hurricanes and earthquakes, fierce winters when the sea froze, and internecine wars and invasions of other tribes, but we could not specify when they were happening.

We said only: That happened one summer. Or: That happened in spring, many springs ago. And thus all hurricanes blended into one large hurricane and internecine wars became for us one unending war.

With Christianization, we heard the word of the Holy Scripture, though previously we heard only one another's shabby old words. Those words crumbled to dust, for only that which is written is preserved and we had no written language before Christianization.

Books arrived on the Island later and we then learned of events that occurred before us. This helped us to understand the events of today.

We know now that human history has a beginning and is hastening toward its end. With these thoughts in mind, we shall set about to describe the years and events that flow past.

Bless us, O Lord.

PARFENY

Monks wrote *A History of the Island*. Nothing surprising there: only someone focused on eternity is capable of depicting time, and one who thinks of the celestial is the best person of all to understand the earthly. Time was different then, too: boggy, viscous. Not as it is these days. Time is slow during childhood, it lingers, but later it takes a running start and then, toward the end of life, it flies. That is pretty much common knowledge. Isn't the life of a people rather similar to the life of an individual person?

People suppose that the chronicle's first chapters are the work of Father Nifont the Historian. In the entire history of its existence, the manuscript never once left the walls of Island Monastery of the Savior. That was most strictly forbidden.

In the chroniclers' opinion, when a history was located within a sacred space, it was protected from forgery. People handle a history more freely now: anyone at all, in any place, writes history. Might the reason for numerous falsifications lie there?

The prohibition on bringing the chronicle out of the monastery did not preclude the possibility of familiarizing oneself with it inside the monastery's walls. For the ruling princes, at any rate. It was thought (as now, too) that knowledge of the past is essential for those holding power. That notion seems fair to me. True, it is also fair to say that knowledge of history has yet to prevent anyone from making mistakes.

The Island was Christianized in the days of devout Prince Feodor. The prince was named Alexander until that time and not Feodor. And he was not devout. And he ruled only the northern part of the Island but seized the southern part during internecine war and became prince of the entire Island.

In the eighth year of his rule, he said:

Everyone gather on the Sandbank and you will be baptized there.

He said:

Whoever does not accept baptism is not my friend.

Everyone – or nearly everyone – was baptized, understanding that it is a difficult matter to not be a friend of the prince.

KSENIA

According to Byzantine Emperor Justinian's *Novel 47*, historical events are dated based on the current length of the reign of the emperor in power. Following the Byzantine tradition, Nifont the Historian (as well as all subsequent chroniclers) dates events with the ordinal number denoting how many years the prince has reigned. As is commonly known, we did not have emperors.

The Gospel was brought to the Island and read to people, and everyone learned of the life of our Lord Jesus Christ.

It was ascertained about old gods that they were wooden idols, that they did not need to be defended since if they were gods they would defend themselves. And nobody particularly clung to them beyond the few sorcerers who served them.

When the pagan gods were burned, sorcerers said the day would come when words in books would also burn. No one believed them

since everyone thought they spoke from powerless malice. And also, perhaps, because they had never known written words. The words they uttered hung in the air until the next wind, when they were carried off.

In the twentieth year of Feodor's reign, historical books were sent to the Island. We store them most carefully: There is nothing worse than remaining without history at a time when you are only beginning to understand what history is. From those books we discovered that history is singular and universal and, even when it is mislaid on an unknown island, it is one branch of our common tree.

We also learned that history was predicted in prophecies that encompass both its entire whole and its minor parts. A prophecy surmounts time and thus opposes the ordering of time. The great prophet Elijah, who rose to the heavens in a fiery chariot, was freed by the Lord from death and time, which, when all is said and done, are one and the same.

The people of the Island have a prophet of their own, by the name of Agafon the Forward-Looking. He speaks according to inspiration, not according to books, for there are not yet books about the Island. He gives predictions covering a long period, thus there has yet to be an opportunity to verify them. Nonetheless, Agafon's way of thinking and overall degree of concentration speak to his forecasts coming true, so we place our trust in them. Particularly the prediction that the hostility wracking this piece of dry land will be broken for a long time when two princely lines come together as one.

I think enough has been said about prophecies. We will not delve deeply into the future and, remembering that history recounts the past, we shall return to what has already been stated.

PARFENY

Agafon the Forward-Looking taught that a prophecy does not imply limitations to the freedom of future generations. It stands to reason that they, our descendants, are unrestricted in their actions insofar as circumstances allow. The reason for circumstances, says Agafon, is people, not God.

It is hard not to agree with him: long life has convinced me that people themselves create their own circumstances. Obviously, they are most often unfavorable. God sees them and reveals them to people through prophets. Sometimes.

And so, through Agafon, it was revealed to us when hostilities would break out on the Island. Nifont the Historian refers to that prophecy as not yet coming true. It is now known to all that it did come true. It was, so to say, a medium-term prophecy.

There was, however, one more of Agafon's prophecies that touched on distant times. It did not reach us. Unlike the others, which carried a more or less private character, this one was devoted to the fate of the Island in its entirety. Unfortunately, we haven't the slightest sense of its insights. Or perhaps that is fortuitous, though that can only be decided after reading it.

Saint Agafon dictated his principal prophecy in the literal sense, into the ear of chronicler Prokopy the Nasal. Agafon, who by then had reached the age of one hundred and twenty, had very strictly forbidden the one writing to loosen his tongue. For Agafon's part, that of a person who was (if it may be expressed this way) of a mature age, this was a joke to some degree (after all, nobody prohibited saints from joking) since Prokopy's tongue was cut off for using

foul language back in the years of his youth. One did not need to worry about asking him to hold his tongue.

Prokopy, however, acted unexpectedly, in a way that required no tongue. After taking apart the manuscript of the chronicle, he removed the prophecy and, according to rumor, secretly forwarded it to the mainland, to a likely (as people now say) adversary.

Prokopy's deed – if reports are true – suggests that the secret information did not look especially optimistic for Island residents. It's possible it could have somehow strengthened the aggressive designs of those on the continent – nothing raises an adversary's spirit like a prophecy received in a timely fashion.

The only possible way to pass judgment on Prokopy the Nasal's goals would be to familiarize oneself with the prophecy's text but, as has been stated, it was lost without a trace. Why did he not rewrite it instead of pulling it out of the manuscript? After all, his action deprived his compatriots of the opportunity to read it.

It cannot be ruled out that the chronicler's actions aimed to exact revenge on his strict motherland for the loss of his tongue. That was an appreciable loss for Prokopy: the deceased loved to talk. He somehow contrived to do so using the bit that remained in his mouth. (A tongue, they say, grows back slightly.) Come what may, the story of the theft of the prophecy from the manuscript was discovered only after his death. This is striking evidence that people were not especially interested in the chronicle during Prokopy's time.

If I am to be brief, books brought to the Island have informed us of the following about the past.

On the first day, God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was unseen and unembellished, and the Spirit of God was moving over the waters, enlivening the watery essence. And God said, “Let there be light,” and so there was light.

In the next days, He made the sea, rivers, and heavenly bodies. When filling the world with water, He left islands and lands in order to delineate dry ground before the creation of the sun, that people not deem the sun a god because it had dried the land.

God created fish and birds at the same time for they are akin, with but the difference that fish swim in water and birds in the sky.

And God created man and woman in order that he leave his mother and his father, and cleave to his wife. And God gave all earth’s dry land to them to possess.

Seven days of creation, however, were still not time. Time was revealed at the Fall and the banishment from paradise, and history began together with time because history exists only within time.

At the age of 230, Adam sired his son Seth; all the years of Adam’s life were 930. And children began to be born and from Adam to Noah there were counted ten generations and 1468 years. When Noah turned 600 years old, there was a flood on the earth.

And upon God’s command, Noah struck a semantron and birds and beasts began to gather at the ark he had built, every creature in pairs, except the fish, for water did not frighten them. When all had entered, Noah closed the door to the ark and the windows of the heavens opened. And rain poured down for forty days and forty nights so there was no dry land left and even our island went under water. In the place where clouds now hang there were in those days rolling waves.

In one of the nonbiblical writings, it is said that the devil, wishing to sink the human race, transformed into a mouse and began to gnaw the bottom of the ark. Noah then prayed to God and a lion sneezed, releasing from his nostrils a tomcat and a she-cat, and they strangled the mouse. That is how cats, who are still a rarity in our land, came about.

PARFENY

In Nifont's text we find apocryphal pieces of information that the modern reader will regard as steeped in legend: I have in mind the story of cats. The details, which show the difference between storytelling and Darwin's ponderous prose, are wonderful and all that is wonderful is true in some way.

And there it is: the origin of a species, without being dragged out over hundreds of pages. What can be seen clearly here are cats, and there you have them: flying out of a lion's nostrils, meowing as they flip in the air and land on four paws. Without forgetting their super-objective, they end up next to the mouse in one leap and then *scritch-scratch!* I say *scritch-scratch* because I have in mind that the duel was unusual to the highest degree. Did the cats know who they were up against? That's a good question.

It is true that these pieces of information do not fully correspond with Darwinism but that's more likely a problem with Darwinism. Its founder simply would not have understood the story about cats. It seems to me that he didn't know how to smile.

On a serious note. Given my considerable age, I am often asked about my attitude toward Darwin. What can I say? His ear that caught the rhythms of evolution turned

out not to hear the pulse of metaphor and (more broadly speaking) poetry. Only Charles's inability to hear metaphor can explain his pouncing on the Holy Scripture. Only his insensitivity to poetry prevented him from understanding that he was not contradicting a biblical text. I think the deceased now understands that.

The Lord gave water to us Island residents both to assist and to punish. Since time immemorial water has carried our cargo ships to distant corners of the inhabited world, to the line establishing the limit of sea and earth. But at the time of our spiritual devastation, water rose to a threatening height, drowning people and flooding fields. So said our forefathers. Given that the entire world was flooded with water, one can only be astounded by the degree that humans fell during Noah's time.

And on the fortieth day, Noah opened a window of the ark and sent forth a raven to learn where the water had receded. But the raven alit on dead bodies floating upon the water's surface, began pecking them, and did not return. And then Noah sent a dove. The dove returned, holding an olive branch in its beak, and Noah understood that the water had begun to subside.

Noah died 350 years after the flood; all the years of his life were 950.

KSENIA

The unthinkable longevity of our forefathers might seem to some to be the result of a misunderstanding, perhaps an incorrect transposition from one chronological system to another, a scribe's error, etc. Strictly speaking, there is

no need for these sorts of conjectures. Everything has an explanation.

People were still filled with a paradisiacal timelessness. Standing with one foot in eternity, they were still becoming accustomed to time. Their lifetime shortened as they became more distant from paradise. That said, one should not think that longevity ended with our forefathers. Parfeny and I are now three hundred forty-seven years old and that surprises no one.

Yesterday I answered a survey. In response to the question *What is your age?* I said: “Three hundred forty-seven.”

They didn’t even smile.

I used to feel shy about my age but that stopped after one hundred fifty. Some people simply live longer, for various reasons.

And so, the earth was divided among Noah’s sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth. It should be supposed that we are related to Japheth’s progeny and our island belongs to Japheth’s portion.

It is 3324 years from Noah to Abraham. When the Lord turned His gaze to Sodom and Gomorrah, Abraham asked:

If they find fifty of the righteous in this place, wilt thou really destroy them?

The Lord said:

If I find fifty righteous there, then I will spare all the place.

And Abraham said in reply:

Behold, I have taken upon me to speak to the Lord, I who am but dust and ashes. And wilt thou destroy all the city if there shall lack five of the fifty righteous?

The Lord said:

No, if I find there forty and five, I will not destroy it.

And Abraham spoke further and asked about forty and about thirty and about twenty and about ten. And the Lord promised him He would preserve this place even for the sake of ten righteous but He found not ten there and so He rained brimstone and fire out of heaven on Sodom and Gomorrah and the entire surrounding area.

Historical books describe many other events too, but I have referenced only the primary ones.

In the thirty-ninth year of his reign, Prince Feodor presented himself to the Lord. Upon Feodor's death, his son Konstantin reigned.

