

# SIR JOHN CRAMPTON

(Dublin 1805 - Bray 1886)

## *Two Cossacks on Guard*



## *Study of a Log Sleigh*

one inscribed 'St. Petersburg, Feb, 1830' (upper right)  
watercolour with pencil on paper  
12.5 x 9.5 cm (5 x 3¾ in); 8.5 x 15 cm (3⅜ x 5⅞ in) (2)

**T**WO BEARDED COSSACK SOLDIERS LEAN AGAINST a wall on a cobbled street. With their arms hanging limply by their sides they gaze blankly into the street. They are dressed in thick blue coats, tall hats and gloves to protect them from the harsh weather conditions of their region. The watercolour is fairly simple in terms of detail and colour usage, yet *Two Cossacks on Guard* is filled with atmosphere and sentimentality. The *Study of a Log Sleigh* depicts a horse harnessed to a sleigh and a man attending to the loading of logs. The man is dressed in the same type of coat as the Cossack guards, only his hat looks slightly different. Both of these watercolours convey a strong sense that they were painted directly from life.

Cossacks originally formed military communities in the Ukraine and southern Russia. These administrative subdivisions were called a Cossack 'host' or *voisko* in Imperial Russia. A Cossack host consisted of a certain area with Cossack settlements and was usually named after the regions of their dislocation. The Cossacks always had an independent lifestyle, but the expansionist ambitions of the Russian Empire in the eighteenth century threatened this. By the end of the eighteenth century, Cossacks were transformed into a special social elite. They became border guards on national and internal ethnic borders and regularly provided soldiers to fight in numerous conflicts throughout the Empire. In return for these services the government endowed them with vast social autonomy.

Each host had their own leadership, regalia, uniforms and ranks. The uniforms of different hosts had distinctive colourings. The basic

uniforms usually had loose fitting tunics and wide trousers. However, the Caucasian hosts wore *cherkesska* coats with ornamental cartridge loops and coloured *beshmets* (waistcoats): these typify the popular image of the Cossacks. The Caucasian hosts usually wore high fleece caps. Other hosts wore these only in full dress and wore peaked caps for ordinary duties. The Cossacks in the watercolours wear traditional long coats with a sash and belt over their uniforms. The coats are blue, which might mean that the uniforms are blue as well. Astrakhan Cossacks, Don Cossacks and Ural Cossacks wore blue uniforms, and so Sir John Crampton possibly depicted men from one of these hosts.

Crampton was a British diplomat, who was transferred to St. Petersburg on 20<sup>th</sup> September 1828 as an unpaid attaché. He later became a paid attaché at Brussels and Vienna. Crampton was promoted to Secretary of the Legation at Bern in 1844 and was subsequently transferred to Washington D.C. in the same position, where he sparked a diplomatic row and returned to Britain. Crampton was appointed minister-plenipotentiary at Hanover in 1857 and became ambassador at St. Petersburg on 31<sup>st</sup> March 1858, where he stayed for two years. The artist married Victoire (1837-1871), a singer and the daughter of the composer Michael William Balfe (1808-1870). The marriage was brief, for Victoire divorced him after three years. Crampton died at the age of eighty-one, at his seat Bushy Park, near Bray, County Wicklow.

Based on the date and inscription on one of the watercolours, it seems that Crampton painted these during his first period in St. Petersburg, thus reinforcing the idea that they were painted from life.

