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## Book Reviews

ADAM MICKIEWICZ: THE LIFE OF A ROMANTIC. By Roman Koropecykj. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008. ISBN 978 0 8014 4471 5. Pp. xvii + 549. £22.95.

Adam Mickiewicz is Poland's greatest poet, taught in schools as a matter of routine. He bears roughly the same relationship to Polish culture that Pushkin – whom he knew – bears to Russian culture. He was also a great admirer of Byron.

On the first page of this excellent new biography, Roman Koropecykj relates how, in 1968, the Polish communist government, which had hitherto praised Mickiewicz as the country's first patriotic poet, banned a production of his drama *Forefathers' Eve* on the grounds that its anti-Russian sentiments made them nervous. Reading this, I wondered whether, had a group of English Chartists in 1848 proposed a production of *Marino Faliero*, the English government would have banned that. After all, Mickiewicz is, in cliché, 'the Polish Byron', the man who is supposed to have united creativity on the page with activity on the street. But the unreality of the proposition was at once clear: *Faliero* is no patriotic call to action, even though Byron thought Murray would be afraid of its politics, whereas Part III of *Forefathers' Eve* (the part which, I surmise, the communists banned) is one long depiction of the way Russia was attempting to wipe Poland and Polish culture from the face of the earth. Action is the only possibility left when you leave the theatre, and the communists were, from their own perspective, correct to ban it. In other words, Mickiewicz is not 'the Polish Byron', but neither is Byron 'the Polish Mickiewicz': the analogy is false. Byron was all in favour of revolutions abroad, but a revolution at home might cause a fall in the value of his holdings in government funds. He could have gone back home from exile any time he wanted. Mickiewicz had already been exiled from Poland once, before the failed Polish insurrection of 1831 – to the comforts, however, of St Petersburg, Odessa and Moscow. Had he tried to return to Poland post-1831, he would have been at the very least sent to Siberia. Yet, as Koropecykj writes, 'Byron came to share the same space in Mickiewicz's pantheon as Napoleon'. In a letter from 1822 Mickiewicz announces:

I read only Byron, and cast aside books if written in a different spirit, since I don't like lies; if there's a description of happiness, family life, this rouses my indignation as much as the sight of married couples and children; this is my only aversion.

Such a claim puts an interesting, if sad, gloss on his interpretation both of 'lies' and of Byron's version of 'happiness' – this last has indeed very little to do with marriage or children. Byron was a bad husband and an indifferent father; Mickiewicz, as Koropecykj shows, outgrew the adolescent distaste for breeding shown in the letter, married, and had six children, towards whom he was affectionate in the normal way. He became, indeed, 'the Byron of his country, but a moral and Christian Byron' – if that is not too glaring a contradiction in terms. When Mickiewicz translated *The Giaour*, it became accepted as a virtual Polish poem in its own right because he changed the Giaour's deathbed sneers at Christian consolation into a pious acceptance of the same.

Koropecykj gives much space to Mickiewicz's time exiled in Russia, which was, paradoxically, 'more hospitable and invigorating [...] than even Poland itself'. In Russia, liberals were more confidently vocal – at least at the time of Mickiewicz's sojourn. This section of the biography is extremely well-researched, and is especially good on Mickiewicz's relationship with Pushkin. Pushkin, along with most of his non-Polish-speaking friends, sensed Mickiewicz's greatness without being able to appreciate it on the page; the conservative Mickiewicz, who knew Russian and could thus read and appreciate Pushkin (though see below), was

offended by the coarseness of Pushkin's talk at table, or in his cups.

Not only were Mickiewicz's great Crimean Sonnets first published in Russia, but so was *Konrad Wallenrod*, his tale of the medieval Lithuanian who disguises himself as a Teutonic Knight and becomes leader of the order so that he can undermine it from within. It is a long, strange, almost incident-free narrative, in which each of the three main factors – the Teutonic Knights' appetite for action, the slow discovery of the protagonist's identity and the end of his romantic yearnings – has to be subjected to deferrals which can only be ended by his death. Said at the time to be a 'Byronic hero', perhaps from his suicidal gloom, Wallenrod is excluded from that category by his taste for alcohol: all the best Byronic heroes are ascetics. But the poem is and was interpreted as an allegorical account of the alien Mickiewicz's time among the oppressive Russians: it is a marvel Mickiewicz got away with it. It did not at first damage his friendship with Pushkin – he gave Pushkin an inscribed edition of Byron's works, and one of *Egyptian Nights*, while Pushkin's unfinished attempt at caricaturing Mickiewicz the Improviser was not written until after 1831. The Polish Revolt of that year drew from Pushkin his unpleasant and chauvinistic poem *To the Slanderers of Russia*, to which Mickiewicz replied with a new coda to *Forefathers' Eve*, likening Pushkin to a barking dog and himself to a silent snake. Thus 'the Russian Byron' and 'the Polish Byron' finally fell out – as Byronists tend to.

By the time he came to write his great epic/pastoral masterpiece, *Pan Tadeusz*, Mickiewicz had abandoned Byron: he compared 'the poem, "however immodestly," to Walter Scott'. In a way the poem was a collaborative effort by the exiles in Paris, who supplied Mickiewicz with anecdotes and the items of Lithuanian folklore that make *Pan Tadeusz* such a rich cultural repository. And yet it met with a lukewarm initial reception: Mickiewicz's rival Juliusz Słowacki and the younger poet Cyprian Norwid both sneered at it.

One question that always intrigues me is: how do modern Lithuanians feel about *Pan Tadeusz*? It is like having a French national epic set in Belgium. I have asked around, but have received no answer. This book gives me no more information on the point.

Koropecykj is very informative on the lectures on Slavonic culture that Mickiewicz delivered at the Collège de France, which display 'a none too certain grasp of the material'. Looking through them reveals the poet claiming, for example, that Olga is the heroine of *Eugene Onegin*: a bit like claiming Celia as the heroine of *As You Like It*. The students did not leave Mickiewicz's lectures better informed, though they had been in excellent company: George Sand and Chopin often attended. Koropecykj is informative, as well as discreet in his judgements, about Andrzej Towiański's Messianism, the cult which would have had Poland as a redemptive Christ-figure among nations, and which afflicted Mickiewicz in Paris as it did many others. The fact that Mickiewicz aspired to convert the Tsar himself to it alone speaks volumes about the way it turned his brain.

Mickiewicz, having, in *Pan Tadeusz*, rejected the fanciful Byron in favour of the epic Scott, stopped writing poetry completely and attempted to emulate the practical/political Byron – with even less success than Byron had had. The book relates with gloomy, convincing detail his final excursion to Turkey, where he tried to raise a Jewish brigade to fight the Russians. 'Oh, poets!', as someone commented. He died of cholera instead.

Roman Koropecykj's book is by far the best biography of Mickiewicz yet written. It deserves a place on the shelf next to T. J. Binyon's superb *Pushkin: A Biography*, which it complements in many useful ways.

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