# A Polish tragedy

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Roman Robert Koropeckyj

ADAM MICKIEWICZ
The life of a romantic
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No other poet lived out the Romantic zeitgeist as comprehensively, in deed as well as word, as Adam Mickiewicz, and few were as famous in their day throughout Europe. Yet he and his work are now almost unknown outside his own country, and this is the first biography to appear in English in a hundred years.

Mickiewicz was born in 1799, or on Christmas Eve of 1798 according to the Julian calendar that obtained in what was then part of the Russian Empire, had once been the Grand Duchy of Lithuania and is now Belarus. In this seeming backwater, and later at the nearby Polish University of Vilna (Wilno, Vilnius), he received an enviable education grounded in Greek and Latin, the French and German Enlightenment and the latest emanations of English and German Romanticism. His head full of Rousseau, Schiller, Goethe, Byron, Scott, Moore and even the Baroness Krudener, Mickiewicz went through the motions appropriate to a Romantic youth – an impossible love for a married woman, a doomed one for another lady of better birth and greater means, membership of secret societies inspired by the *Tugendbund*, ritual bonding with his peers, and so on. He and his friends dreamed of great things, perfected themselves and discussed a better world. They were rebels in the moral, not political sense, but the Russian police could not tell the difference. In 1823 they were arrested. Incarceration and interrogation gave Mickiewicz a sense of fulfilment as profound as his unhappy love affairs, while his sentence – exile in Russia – was to launch him into the world.

He reached St Petersburg just after the great floods that inspired Pushkin's *Bronze Horseman*. He made friends with poets and writers who would participate in the Decembrist uprising of 1825. He was soon exiled to Odessa, where he became the lover of, among others, the military governor's mistress, a sister of the future Madame Balzac. He managed to fit in his Greek-Byronic and alpine experiences (storms at sea, spectacular rugged mountains, wild tribesmen) during a trip to the Crimea before being ordered to Moscow, where he met Pushkin. With the patronage of Prince Vyazemsky and the *salonnière* Princess Zinaida Volkonskaya, with whom he formed an *amitié amoureuse*, he published his poetry, which was widely acclaimed. His work also appeared in German translation, while Pushkin embarked on a Russian version of one of his longer poems. His fame followed him back to St Petersburg, where (still an exile under police orders) he awed audiences with his gift for poetical improvisation. Having obtained permission to take the waters in Germany, Mickiewicz left Russia in 1829. In Berlin he attended a lecture by Hegel, in Bonn he met August Wilhelm Schlegel and in Weimar, Goethe. Then he travelled to Venice (*Childe Harold* in hand), Florence and Rome, to join Volkonskaya and meet Bertel Thorvaldsen, Felix Mendelssohn and James Fenimore Cooper, for whom he formed a deep attachment. A French translation of a collection of his poems had appeared in Paris, which provoked comparison to Goethe, Schiller and Byron.

By now Mickiewicz was the hero of his generation in Poland and seen by many as the national poet – not an enviable position given the circumstances. In November 1830, a revolution broke out in Warsaw and turned into a national rising against Russian rule. Mickiewicz's most ardent admirers were in the forefront, his verses on their lips, and Poles travelling abroad rushed home to join the struggle. Mickiewicz did not. He procrastinated in Rome, then went to Paris, and finally to Prussia, where he made a half-hearted attempt to cross the frontier and join the rising. In Rome, he had undergone a spiritual awakening. In Dresden, where he went after the rising had been defeated, he was assailed by intense feelings of guilt and inadequacy, which gave rise to some of his greatest work, including the third part of his verse drama, *Forefathers' Eve*. In Paris, where he joined other Polish political émigrés, he was fêted by Hugo, Alfred de Vigny, Charles Nodier, and Sainte-Beuve, among others.

**Adam Mickiewicz, 1839**

But instead of literature, he occupied himself with the predicament of his nation. Having fallen under the spell of Félicité de Lamennais, he began to see everything that had happened to Poland, and indeed to the world, in religious terms. The fruit of this was *The Book of the Polish Nation*, which represented the Poles as a chosen people destined to redeem the world through their sufferings. This messianic vision bore some resemblance to those framed by Mazzini and Michelet, though it was less assertive, representing a withdrawal from the world and a rejection of modernity. This urge gave rise in 1834 to Mickiewicz's last major work, the mock-epic *Pan Tadeusz*, a piece of bucolic escapism from the realities of exile in Paris. At this point, the life of the Romantic took an unexpected turn. Mickiewicz assented, without much enthusiasm, to a marriage suggested by friends, and in order to keep his family (which would grow to include ten children) took a job as Professor of Latin Literature at the University of Lausanne. His wife became mentally ill and had to be institutionalized, which placed added strain, both financial and psychological, on the poet, and his French friends contrived to have him appointed Professor of Slavonic Literature at the Collège de France.

If Mickiewicz had ceased writing poetry, his creative urge had not deserted him, and he continued to hypnotize listeners with poetical improvisations, which, unfortunately, we know only from accounts. It also pervaded his lectures, which became pieces of highly popular performance art. In 1840, he fell under the influence of a charlatan who founded a sect that combined the cult of Napoleon, Poland's supposed mission and a messianic vision of a great Israel with elements of Christianity. His lectures became blasphemous and overtly political as well as fantastic, and his colleagues had to arrange a sabbatical to pre-empt his being sacked. The remainder of Mickiewicz's life followed a trajectory that was as confused as it was ambitious. He wrote to the Tsar offering to convert him, lectured the Pope on the true meaning of Christianity, told Margaret Fuller that her first step towards liberation should be to lose her virginity (and may have obliged her), founded a legion to fight the Austrians in Italy in 1848, edited a socialist international paper in Paris, and died in Turkey in 1855 while engaged in raising a Jewish legion to liberate Palestine and the world.

Roman Robert Koropeckyj is to be congratulated on this valiant attempt to present Mickiewicz's extraordinary life and poetry to a wider public. While his narrative is somewhat overloaded with detail and lacks pace, it is meticulously researched and judicious, and the result will be welcomed by all those interested in the period. One could argue that the significance of the 1830 rising and the ambiguities of the poet's political stance are not sufficiently explored, and that the cult of Napoleon among Poles of his generation requires greater explanation. And while the level of scholarship deployed is impressive, it is let down by lacklustre translations from the poet's works and above all by the incidence of anachronistic slang and a slightly precious turn of phrase. Mickiewicz, described as "a gentryman", is repeatedly caught up in an "olio", which appears to mean anything from a misunderstanding to a row, and for his wedding, he borrows a "tuxedo", which would have been quite an achievement in 1830s Paris.