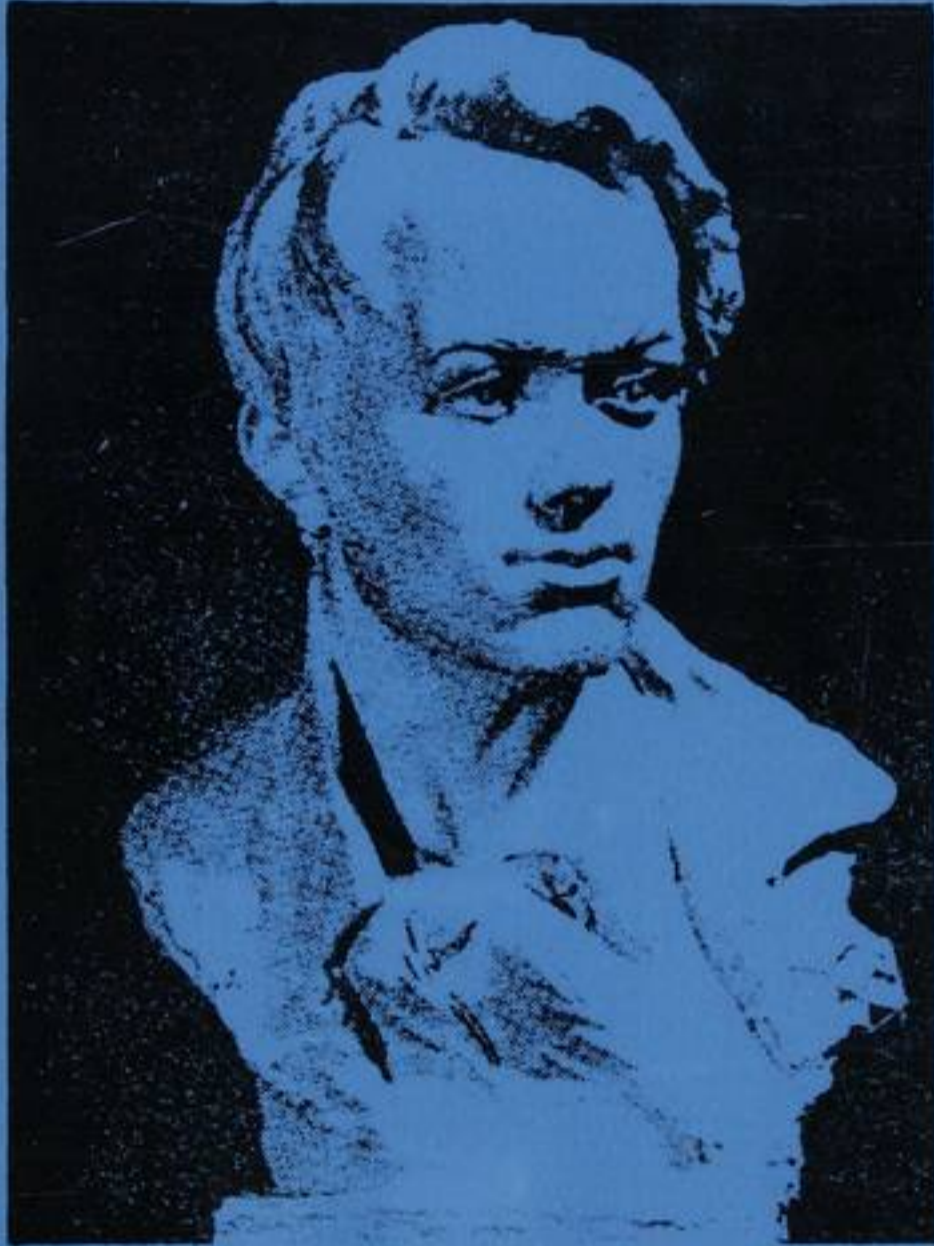


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FIRST CANADIAN EVALUATION OF

TARAS SHEVCHENKO



BY

F. L. TILSON

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(1989) (YKP)*

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SLAVISTICA

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The First Canadian Evaluation
of Taras Shevchenko

BY

F. L. TILSON

(1915)

1990

Ottawa

Montreal

J. B. RUDNYCH

IP 603812



P.V.NOSKO: Shevchenko in jail

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

For the past century the West has met the name of Taras Shevchenko, the foremost poet and spiritual leader of Ukraine.

In Great Britain, it was Professor W. K. Morfill, the founder of Slavic studies at Oxford University, who acquainted the English-speaking world with the poet's life and work. In the 1880s he published articles and translations of Shevchenko and gave an excellent account of his role in Ukrainian literature.

There is no doubt that Morfill's writings were known in Canada and the U. S. A., at least to university circles. However, the first learned appreciation of Shevchenko's life and work appeared in Canada as late as 1915. It was printed in the *University Magazine* in Montreal, published jointly by McGill University, University of Toronto and the Dalhousie "to express an educated opinion upon questions immediately concerning Canada." The "educated opinion" about Shevchenko was expressed by F. L. Tilson in volume 14 for 1915 on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the poet's birth.

During the past year — states Tilson, — loyal Ukrainians have been celebrating the centenary of their greatest national poet, Taras Shevchenko. Many heroes the ancient kingdom of Ukraine had, but none of her heroes of the sword are held in more veneration than the peasant poet, Taras Shevchenko. The story of his rise from a poor serf boy to a place of the highest honour among his people as an artist and poet and the blighting of his genius by the jealous hand of Russia just as it was about to enter upon its most promising period is one that in tragic interest is surpassed by few.

Tilson gives an extensive biography of Shevchenko, illustrating it with excerpts from the poet's works and autobiographical materials. Some verses were translated by Tilson himself, some taken from the English translations by Voynich of 1911.

Shevchenko died . . . — writes Tilson — just a few days before the emancipation of the serfs which he had longed to see.

There follows a critical analysis of the poetry of Shevchenko and of his role as a national poet of Ukraine and universal genius. The author concludes his article with a comparison of Shevchenko and the Scottish poet Robert Burns. He writes:

Shevchenko was in many respects like Robert Burns: both were of the people and both were poets born. As Burns portrayed the life and gave expression to the mind of the Scottish peasant folk, the poet serf of the Dnieper voiced the heart cries of his countrymen for liberty, peace and enlightenment . . . Through him was Ukrainian literature raised to a position of honour among civilized nations, and the national consciousness of Ukraine, the old kingdom of Cossacks was rekindled.

Speaking of the universal values of Shevchenko's works, Tilson states that he was not only a national poet, but also a universal literary genius, contributing to international understanding and cooperation.

J. B. Rudnycky j

TARAS SHEVCHENKO

DURING the past year loyal Ukrainians have been celebrating the centenary of their greatest national poet, Taras Shevchenko. Many heroes the ancient kingdom of the Ukraine had, but none of her heroes of the sword are held in more veneration than the peasant poet, Taras Shevchenko. The story of his rise from a poor serf boy to a place of the highest honour among his people as an artist and poet, and the blighting of his genius by the jealous hand of Russia just as it was about to enter upon its most promising period is one that in tragic interest is surpassed by few.

Born February 25th, 1814, the child of agricultural serfs, his early life was spent in the most abject poverty and servitude. Serfdom of the bitterest kind prevailed in Russia. The serf was absolutely at the mercy of his lord, who could sell his cattle, seize his crop, or eject him at will from his small holdings. He was bought and sold like an ox and sometimes was even exchanged for a dog.

With his parents Shevchenko was the property of a half Russianized, half Polonized German named Engelhardt whose estate lay in the government of Kief near the Dnieper. His home was a wretched hovel with a weather-beaten thatch. Here he lived like other serf children, suffering hunger, cold, and neglect.

Of the grinding toil that sent his mother and father to an early grave he says:

I do not call it heaven,
That little cot in the grove
By the pond on the border of the village.
I saw hell. There was
Hard work. Never was time
Ever given to pray;
There my good mother
Still young, poverty and labour
Brought to the grave.

There father, crying with the
Children, little and naked,
Could not endure this misfortune
And died in servitude;
And we, like little mice,
Were dispersed among the people,
I to school to carry water for the scholars;
My brothers went out to servitude.

Again he gives a glimpse of his forlorn childhood:

A little boy in the village,
Like a twig broken from the branch,
Only one under the fence
Sits in his old rags, absorbed,
It seems to me that it is I;
That is my youth, my boyhood days.

Shevchenko's father early recognized in him the marks of genius, prophesying great things from his ardent nature and unusual cleverness; so the lad was sent to school to the parish clerk, the one educated man of the village. Taras soon learned all that individual could teach him, for the curriculum consisted of little more than the alphabet, a few prayers, and a regular flogging for all the boys every Saturday. The *diak* was a drunken and quarrelsome man and the beatings Taras received awakened in his fiery soul a hatred of all persecution and oppression, a hatred which found ample cause for expression in later years as he viewed his people's sufferings. The *diak* looked upon him as a superior pupil, and made him his apprentice. But his office was evidently not altogether one of emoluments, for, one day, finding the *diak* hopelessly drunk, he took the opportunity to pay off old scores by giving him a sound thrashing, after which he ran away, carrying with him an illustrated book on which he had long laid covetous eyes.

Perhaps it was this book that awakened his latent genius for drawing, for, as he wandered about the neighbourhood working at odd jobs and running away when beaten or half

starved, he was accumulating a store of stolen pencils, paper, and pictures to copy and looking for some one to teach him to draw.

All attempts to train Taras to the ordinary tasks of the serf failed. As a shepherd boy he let his charges stray; as scullion in his master's kitchen and page to his master's son, an army officer in Poland, he was no more successful. The pots and pans were left unscoured while he stepped out of doors to draw, or his gallant young master was left knocking at the street door at midnight, while by the light of a candle his page, all absorbed, pursued his drawing.

Captain Englehardt removing to St. Petersburg determined to turn the persistent bent of Taras to account, and hired him out to a house painter, for whom he worked for several years, living in a garret with other apprentices and doing what drawing he could at night by the light of a candle.

But deliverance was at hand, the reward of his indomitable genius. One fine night as he sat in his dirty house-painter's blouse drawing a statue in the Summer Garden, he heard behind him a voice addressing him in his own tongue, "Whither are you from, countryman?" Startled he turned to see a gentleman, who, when Shevchenko confessed that he was in the habit of coming to the park on clear nights to draw, invited him to call at his studio and bring his pictures.

Shevchenko found his new friend to be none other than a Ruthenian student at the Academy of Art, Soshenko by name, who introduced him at the Academy, where he was given a hearty welcome. Professor Briulov, director of the Academy, took an especial interest in him, because, as he said, he had "not got a serf's face," and through his efforts the means for the purchase of Shevchenko's freedom was provided. When the document granting the emancipation was put into his hands, it seemed to Shevchenko so incredible that he could do nothing but kiss the paper and sob.

Shevchenko was twenty-five when made a free man, and it was not till after his emancipation that he was known to

write, but as Soshenko expressed it, "he then began to waste his time in scribbling verses." He continued to paint and with success enough to pay his way through college and secure his diploma from the Academy of Arts.

Shevchenko's first volume of poems was published in 1840, and another followed in 1842. His fame as a poet spread. Honours and appointments were awaiting him in Kief, and his verses were read with delight by the whole Ukraine. But the popularity of Shevchenko and his verses led the Russian government to regard him as dangerous to Russian authority in the Ukraine, and steps were taken by the police to implicate him in something that would give them cause to arrest him. He was accused of belonging to a society having for its purpose such "revolutionary aims" as "to found schools and publish books for the poor." The real reason was that the extraordinary respect felt by all Ukrainian Slavists both for Shevchenko personally and for his poems kindled the dormant spark of freedom in the breasts of the oppressed serfs and this could not be tolerated. Shevchenko was therefore condemned "in consideration of his robust constitution, to military servitude in Siberia." His poems were not to be circulated, and he was forbidden to draw, paint, or write. He was to be blotted out completely, as dangerous to Russian authority in the Ukraine.

Ten dreary years Shevchenko spent in the fortresses of desolate Asia. The rude soldiery were repulsive to him and the fettering of his genius unbearable. For persisting to paint and write, as a relief from the monotony of his surroundings, he was sent to Novopetrovsk in the Caspian Salt Desert, and the seven years of his detention there are as barren of verse as the desert about him was of verdure, and the misery of his existence unspeakable. From a poem written in his early captivity we catch a glimpse of his utter loneliness, as, in imagination, he stands overlooking his beloved steppe, contrasting it with the wretched wilderness about him:

And there the steppe, and here the steppe,
 (But here not such:)
 Ruddy brown and red,
 With there the blue;
 The green mingled
 With plots and fields,
 And high heaped grave mounds,
 —O the beautiful groves!—
 But here—weeds and scrub-clad sandhills,
 O could I see even a burial mound
 To remind me of days gone by!

Largely through the intercession of Countess Tolstoy he was released in 1857. His friends found him broken down in body and mind. He had lost the power to paint and write, and only recovered the latter a month before he died, when one of his finest poems, "Winter," was written. The verses, as translated by Mrs. E. L. Voynich, are given below.

Thy youth is over; time has brought
 Winter upon thee, hope is grown
 Chill as the north wind; thou art old.
 Sit thou in thy dark house alone;
 With no man converse shalt thou hold,
 With no man take counsel; nought,
 Nought art thou, nought be thy desire,
 Sit still alone by the dead fire
 Till hope shall mock thee, fool, again,
 Blinding thine eyes with frosty gleams,
 Vexing thy soul with dreams, with dreams.
 Like snowflakes in the empty plain
 Sit thou alone, alone and dumb;
 Cry not for Spring, it will not come
 It will not enter at thy door,
 Nor make thy garden green once more,
 Nor cheer with hope thy withered age,
 Nor loose thy spirit from her cage;
 Sit still, sit still, thy life is spent;
 Nought art thou, be with nought content.

Shevchenko died February 26th, 1861, just a few days before the emancipation of the serfs, which he had longed to

see. Shortly after the proclamation was issued, the friends of the dead poet carried his body to the Ukraine and buried it beside the Dnieper, where he had so often wished to find a resting-place in death, since it was denied him in life.

When I am dead, bury me
On a lofty, lonely hillock,
Midst the boundless sea-like steppe,
In my dear Ukraine;
But so that the wide unfolding plains
And the Dnieper and his steep high banks
Are still visible, and that he is heard
As he roars—the Roarer.

As the body passed along on the journey, crowds thronged to pay a tribute of respect, the serfs saying: "He got for us our freedom but himself did not live to see it."

Shevchenko never lost altogether the sense of his humble origin. His early life had been one of bitter servitude, the years of his freedom had been few and he had known very little friendship. No wonder he divided the world into two classes, God's people, who do all the hard work and sing all the lovely songs; and the wicked favoured classes who abuse and prey upon them. Of his ambitions, simple but unrealized, he gives a pathetic list in one of his lyrics: "I asked such little things of God," a hut by the Dnieper, a bit of land to cultivate, a patch of garden ground, two poplar trees of his own, and to die by the Dnieper and be buried "on such a tiny hill."

Pure of soul and kind of heart, Shevchenko's nature overflowed with love for the lowest of men. The poor and ignorant had in him a sturdy champion. The misery of the serfs was always in his mind and their liberation was his greatest passion.

The conditions that moved him to pity and indignation he describes in vivid word pictures:

Darker than the dark earth
The people wander;
The green orchards are dried up,
The white huts have rotted

And have fallen down.
The ponds are overgrown with weeds,
The village looks as if it has been burnt,
The people as if they have gone crazy.
Dumbly they go to their tasks
And lead their children with them.

Everywhere over the Ukraine
The people are yoked by their wily lords,
They die those knightly sons.

Shevchenko's was a chivalrous nature. He loved children and was beloved by them. His high regard for woman is revealed in these lines.

In our Eden on earth
There is nothing more beautiful
Than a young mother
With an infant child.

Shevchenko was in many respects like Robert Burns; both were of the people and both were poets born. As Burns portrayed the life and gave expression to the mind of the Scottish peasant folk, the poet serf of the Dnieper voiced the heart cries of his countrymen for liberty, peace, and enlightenment. Shevchenko was the first Ruthenian to write with the object of making the Ruthenian language great, and to him alone has its greatest strength and beauty been revealed.

Through him was the Ruthenian literature raised to a position of honour among civilized nations, and the national consciousness of the Ukraine, the old kingdom of the Cossacks, was rekindled.

To Shevchenko was due also the resurrection of Ruthenian social life in the numerous societies that have been formed to study his poems and Ukrainian history. His grave near Kaniov by the Dnieper is a place of pilgrimage for the people of the Ukraine. A fitting monument to celebrate the centenary of the great poet is being erected in Kief, but no monument, however grand or enduring, can excel the memorial he himself has left in his imperishable poems.

Shevchenko is not the poet of the serfs of the Dneper country only. He is a prophet of truth and a champion of liberty, whose outlook is universal and whose message is for the world. That he is worthy of the high place accorded him by his people may be judged by the counsel expressed in the following lines which have been accepted by the Ukrainians as their watch-word. The translation is by Mr. Sherbinnin.

Learn from other men, my brethern,
Love to think, love reading.
Hear from strangers' lips the teaching
Yours by far exceeding.
Hold fast to your fathers' wisdom,
And learn from another;
For God's doom awaits the traitor
Who forgets his mother.
Strangers will forsake him likewise,
No good will befall him;
But his kindred and the stranger
An outcast will call him.

F. L. TILSON

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