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FRANTIŠEK CHUDOBA (1878–1941)

Jessie Kocmanová

The story of František Chudoba is that of a man who, originally, wanted to be a painter, whose primary attitude to literature was that of an artist, a creator, a lover of poetry, yet who, by dint of sheer hard work and hard thinking turned himself into a literary scholar and laid the firm foundations of an English Department at Brno which was to become not only the centre of a strong teaching tradition but also a rallying-point for scholarly advanced studies. In the manner of the older tradition, Chudoba at Brno not only lectured on literature but also made himself responsible for the courses in historical grammar, "devoting to both disciplines," as his pupil and successor in the Chair at Brno, Karel Štěpaník, has written of him, "the same conscientious care, although it demanded superhuman efforts".

Born in 1878 near the small Moravian town of Vyškov, František Chudoba, at the outset of his academic career, lectured on Czech language and literature at King's College, London, publishing in 1924 *A Short Survey of Czech Literature*, one of the first of the few works in English devoted to this subject. His interpretation of Czech literature was markedly influenced by the ideas of the great Czech aesthete, philosopher and polemicist, F. X. Šalda. That the influence was by no means one-sided is shown in the correspondence of many years between the two (published in 1945). Šalda found in Chudoba a well-informed scholar with the same wide knowledge of European literature as he himself possessed, and with the same basic attitude to literature and its mission in human life, who could confirm from his specialist position Šalda's own critical perceptions.

The most striking of these perceptions with regard to English literature was the conception that the European or Continental evaluation of English romanticism was nowhere so greatly mistaken as in the uncritical admiration conceded to Byron, and the neglect of other, perhaps greater, figures. As early as 1911 Chudoba published his study *Wordsworth. An attempt at classification*, in which he drew attention to the profoundly thoughtful poetry of Wordsworth and at the same time analysed the deep antithesis between Wordsworth and Byron. It may be that Chudoba weighted the scales too greatly against Byron, especially in this early work, but the

Czech scholar, Vilém Mathesius, in an early review of 1916, considers it an undoubted service of Chudoba that he was the first in Czech critical literature "to point out with such emphasis the difference between the evaluation of the two writers in Britain and on the Continent". (*ČMF* 5.168) It was also Chudoba who pointed out on various occasions that the supposed debt to Byron of the Czech romantic poet, Karel Hynek Mácha, had been exaggerated, that in spite of certain outward similarities, the Czech poet, who most probably never knew the work of Wordsworth, Shelley or Keats, was yet closer to Shelley in the melodiousness of his poetry than to the classicism of Byron's art.

The most compendious of Chudoba's works of literary history and criticism is certainly the two-volume *A Shakespeare Book* (I 1941; II, posthumously, 1943). It may be termed a lifetime's tribute to the poet whom Chudoba considered to be the supreme genius of English literature, and consists of over 1600 pages. The first volume presents a fascinating survey of the known facts about Shakespeare's life and the background of his time, the second volume (not entirely completed by the author, supplemented by editorial passages based on his notes) provides an analysis of the plays and poems, and of Shakespeare's poetic style. There can be no doubt that, along with the distinguished line of Czech translators of Shakespeare, Chudoba's contribution is a pioneering work in Czech anglicistic studies. It is true that Chudoba provides no startling solutions, no novel discoveries — as indeed, cut off from the possibility of direct study of other than printed source material, he scarcely could do. But his masterly summing-up of the immensely wide Shakespearian historical and critical material, including the research of Dover Wilson, Pollard, and others, has presented the Czech public, both scholarly and general, with a unique introduction to the whole field of Shakespeare studies.

František Chudoba died, exhausted by illness and the scholarly and pedagogical efforts of a lifetime, on January 7th, 1941. He lies buried in the family grave in the quiet, well-kept cemetery in the little town of Přerov, only a modest inscription, almost hidden by the greenery covering the grave, recalling the former Professor of the History of English Literature at Brno University. The time of his death could scarcely have been sadder for himself, for his beloved country, and for the studies to which he had devoted himself. But he is by no means forgotten. His scholarly works still provide an enthusiast's guide to the beauties of English literature, particularly to the spirit and melody of its romantic poetry; and the members of the Department of English and American Studies at the Purkyně University of Brno know well to whom they owe the establishment of their place of work and — by no means least — of the well-selected, broadly based and wide-ranging Department Library, which from the very beginnings of the Department was Professor Chudoba's special and personal charge.