

Nobel Prize in Literature 1965



Mikhail Aleksandrovich Sholokhov

The Nobel Prize in Literature 1965 was awarded to Mikhail Sholokhov *"for the artistic power and integrity with which, in his epic of the Don, he has given expression to a historic phase in the life of the Russian people"*.

This year's Nobel Prize for Literature has, as you all know, been awarded to the Russian writer Mikhail Sholokhov, born in 1905, and now in his sixty-first year. Sholokhov's childhood was spent in the country of the Don Cossacks; and the strong ties that have always bound him to this district grew out of his sympathy for the highly individual temperament of its people and the wildness of its landscape. He saw his native province pass through the various phases of the revolution and the Russian civil war. After he had tried his hand at manual work in Moscow for a while, he soon began to concentrate on writing and produced a series of sketches describing the battles along the Don, a genre that was later to bring him fame. It is striking evidence of the precociousness of the war generation that Sholokhov was only 21 when he set to work on the first parts of the great epic novel, *And Quiet Flows the Don*. Its Russian title is simply, *The Quiet Don*, which

acquires an undeniably ironic undertone in view of the extreme violence of the action in Sholokhov's masterpiece.

It took Sholokhov 14 years to complete the project, a highly exacting one in every way, covering as it does the period including the First World War, the Revolution and the Civil War, and, having as its main theme, the tragic Cossack revolt. The four parts of the epic appeared at relatively long intervals between 1928 and 1940, and were long viewed with some concern by the Soviet critics, whose political affiliation made it difficult for them to accept, wholeheartedly, Sholokhov's quite natural commitment to his theme, that of the Cossacks' revolt against the new central authorities; nor could they easily accept his endeavour to explain and defend objectively the defiant spirit of independence that drove these people to resist every attempt at subjection.

In view of the controversial aspects of his theme there can surely be no doubt that in starting out upon the writing of this novel Sholokhov was taking a daring step, a step which, at that point in his career, also meant the settling of a conflict with his own conscience.

And Quiet Flows the Don is so well known to Swedish readers that an introduction may well seem superfluous. With magnificent realism the book portrays the unique character of the Cossack, the traditional mixture of cavalryman and farmer, with instincts that seem to conflict with one another but which nevertheless allow themselves to be welded together to form a firmly co-ordinated whole. There is no glamorization. The coarse and savage streaks in the Cossack temperament are displayed openly; nothing is hidden or glossed over, but, at the same time, one is aware of an undercurrent of respect for all that is human. Although a convinced Communist, Sholokhov keeps ideological comment out of his book completely and we are compensated for the amount of blood shed in the battles he describes by the full-blooded vigour of his narrative.

The Cossack's son, Gregor, who goes over from the Reds to the Whites and is forced against his will to continue the struggle to its hopeless conclusion is both hero and victim. The conception of honour that he has inherited is put to the sternest of tests, and he is

defeated by a necessity of history which here plays the same role as the classical Nemesis. But our sympathy goes out to him and to the two unforgettable women, Natalja, his wife, and Aksinia, his mistress, who both meet disaster for his sake. When he finally returns to his native village, after digging Aksinia's grave with his sabre out on the steppe, he is a grey-haired man who has lost everything in life but his young son.

Stretching away behind the whole gallery of figures, seen either in their personal relationships or playing their parts as military personnel, lies the mighty landscape of the Ukraine, the steppes in all the changing seasons, the villages with their sweet-smelling pastures and grazing horses, the grass billowing in the wind, the banks of the river and the never-ending murmur of the river itself. Sholokhov never tires of describing the Russian steppes. Sometimes he breaks off the narrative right in the middle of his story to burst out in exultation:

"My beloved steppes under the low sky of the Don country! Ravines winding across the plain with their walls of red earth, a sea of waving feather-grass, marked only by the print of horses' hoofs leaving trail like a myriad birds' nests, and by the graves of the Tartars who in wise silence watch over the buried glory of the Cossacks... I bow low before you, and, as a son, kiss your fresh earth, unspoiled steppe of the Don Cossacks, watered with blood."

It may well be said that Sholokhov is using a well-tried realistic technique, breaking no new ground, a technique that may seem naive in its simplicity if we set it beside that offered us in many a later model in the art of novel-writing. But his subject surely could not have been presented in any other way, and the powerful, evenly-sustained, epic flow of the writing makes *And Quiet Flows the Don* a genuine *roman fleuve* in two senses.

Sholokhov's more recent work, for example, *Podnyataya tselina*, 1932 and 1959 (Virgin Soil Upturned) - a novel describing compulsory collectivization and the introduction of *kolkhozy* - has a vitality that never flags and shows us Sholokhov's fondness for characters that are richly comic but at the same time observed with a sympathetic eye. But, of course, *And Quiet Flows the Don* would, on its own, thoroughly merit the present

award, a distinction which, it is true, has come rather late in the day, but happily not too late to add to the roll of Nobel prize-winners the name of one of the most outstanding writers of our time.

In support of its choice the Swedish Academy speaks of "the artistic power and integrity with which, in his epic of the Don, Sholokhov has given expression to a historic phase in the life of the Russian people".

Sir - this distinction is intended as a tribute of justice and gratitude to you for your important contribution to modern Russian literature, a contribution as well-known in this country as it is all over the world. May I offer you the congratulations of the Swedish Academy, and at the same time, ask you to receive from His Majesty, the King, this year's Nobel Prize in Literature.

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