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The reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz's works in the United States

Introduction

Sienkiewicz's novels and short stories, translated into more than forty languages, earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1905. His international fame, especially in the United States and Canada, can be attributed to the translations of Jeremiah Curtin, who was assisted by his wife Alma Cardell Curtin. Her diary and letters described their work and numerous meetings with Sienkiewicz and other prominent Polish writers as well as their impressions of Poland and its people. Thanks to the materials collected by the Curtins, we can follow the growing popularity of individual novels, among which *Quo Vadis* (1896) received almost unanimous critical praise, reached the top of many bestseller lists, and brought substantial profits to American publishers and translators. The novel was dramatized on stage, filmed, represented in music and theatres, later adapted for radio, recorded on cassettes, and shown on television. Its silver screen adaptations culminated in the 1951 version of *Quo Vadis*, a super-colossal Hollywood production depicting the rise of Christianity and its triumphs over the evils of Nero's Rome, that served as a model for other spectacular epic movies.

Sienkiewicz's books reached millions of American readers, among them prominent statesmen and writers. Theodore Roosevelt, president of the United States, praised them in his correspondence with Curtin, while William Faulkner, in his 1950 Nobel Prize address, quoted Sienkiewicz by saying that "that old half-forgotten Pole had had the answer all the time. To uplift man's heart, the same for all of us."

Translators and Reviewers

Henryk Sienkiewicz (1846–1916) was the first Polish writer to win broad international recognition. His novels *With Fire and Sword*, *The*

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Deluge, *Pan Michael*, *Quo Vadis*, *The Knights of the Cross*, and his short stories were translated into more than forty languages and earned him the Nobel Prize for literature in 1905. They were particularly popular in the United States.

Sienkiewicz's international fame can be partly attributed to the efforts of Jeremiah Curtin (1835–1906), an American ethnographer and folklorist. The author of many books, among them *Myths and Folk Lore of Ireland*, *Indian Creation Myths*, and *Myths and Folk Tales of the Russians*, *Western Slaves*, and *Magyars*, Curtin was the first American who maintained a programmatic interest in Polish literature and who, with praiseworthy initiative and diligence, popularized Sienkiewicz's novels and short stories in the United States and England. He was assisted in his work by his wife, Alma Cardell Curtin². Her diary and letters, deposited in the Milwaukee County Historical Society, register, nearly day by day, many details of Curtin's life, translation methods, and finances, unknown before. More importantly, they describe numerous meetings and conversations between Sienkiewicz and Curtin and give a vivid first-hand view of the working methods and milieu of Sienkiewicz. They also depict Curtin's meetings with other prominent Polish writers, including Bolesław Prus and Waław Sieroszewski, and contain intimate descriptions of Poland and its people at the turn of the 20th century.

We learn from Mrs. Curtin's diary that for 34 years the Curtins had shared deprivation and impecuniosity, work and travel, and finally recognition and success. They traveled to exotic places and tried to interest publishers and American readers in unknown, mostly Slavic writers. Without a permanent place of residence, they moved from hotel to hotel, city to city, country to country, in search of new materials and literary opportunities. Persistent, shrewd, and enterprising, Curtin used effectively his personal connections, exaggerating his linguistic skills or boasting of his literary achievements to gain his ends. In Henryk Sienkiewicz, he found a veritable gold mine.

² I describe the Curtins, their relations with Sienkiewicz, and their frequent trips to Poland in *W pogoni za Sienkiewiczem. Z odnalezionych dzienników Almy Curtin* (Warszawa 1994). For a description of Mrs. Curtin's role in her husband's career, see my article *Alma Cardell Curtin. The Woman Behind Jeremiah Curtin*, "Milwaukee History", XXXVI, 4, 1991, p. 421–434.

The Trilogy

Curtin began to translate *Ogniem i mieczem* in California in November of 1888, when he was collecting materials for descriptions of Indian languages and cultures. On Tuesday, December 17, 1889, the publishing house of Little, Brown and Company in Boston accepted the book for publication. The Curtins devoted the next four years, from 1890 to 1893, to the translation of *Potop* and *Pan Wołodyjowski* (translated as *Pan Michael*). Finally, the project of translating the *Trilogy* came to an end in September of 1893 in London.

The books met with limited interest and positive reviews. Critics pointed out that “the attention of the reader knows no respite” (*Critic*, July 1890), that Zagłoba is “a great character”, while *With Fire and Sword* is a “brilliant war novel” (*Harper Magazine*, May 1892). They compared it to “Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*,” with “a Homeric spirit in its descriptions,” concluding that as a story teller Sienkiewicz rivals Dumas (*Literary News*, July 1890). A reviewer for *Nation* (February 1891) thought that Zagłoba is a character of which any author might be proud, but the book was “unnecessarily loaded with horror.” Reviewing *The Deluge*, critics pointed out that the historical romance is not dead (*Athenaeum*, September 1892), but that “the thread which holds the incidents together is not sufficiently strong” (*Critic*, February 1892), and although the reader “will never doubt that his characters really lived” (*Harper’s Magazine*, June 1892), the novel should have been abridged by the translator (*Spectator*, July 1892). After reading *Pan Michael*, the reviewer for *Dial* (January 1894) observed that “appearances of Sobieski are impressive,” while another reviewer wrote that “the character of Basia is like a flight of a bird” (*Literary World*, December 1893), while still another noted that Zagłoba is “still the same delightful braggart, busybody, and wit,” while Basia is one more proof of Sienkiewicz’s inventive power (*Nation*, September 1894).³

Although Curtin was pleased with the initial sales of the *Trilogy* and the amount of his royalties, which came to about \$1,364, Little, Brown and Company considered the sales sluggish, stating that in the first year

³ For a comprehensive survey and bibliography of reviews of Sienkiewicz’s books in English, see Mieczysław Giergielewicz, *Henryk Sienkiewicz’s American Resonance*, Rome 1966.

after issuing *With Fire and Sword* they sold only 1,922 copies, of *The Deluge* only 1,585 in two years, and of *Pan Michael* 2,434 copies in two years, a situation “most discouraging”⁴. However, they kept publishing Curtin’s translations of Sienkiewicz’s short stories (*Yanko, the Musician and Other Stories*, 1893, and *Lillian Morris and Other Stories*, 1894), as well as *Children of the Soil*, issued in 1895, his rendition of *Rodzina Polanieckich*.

Quo Vadis and its Fame

On Saturday, April 13, 1895, in Bristol, Vermont, Mrs. Curtin wrote in her diary: “Jeremiah and I began the new Polish novel today, it is called *Quo Vadis*.” On September 17, in Kennett Shasta, California, she wrote: “We have translated three numbers of *Quo Vadis*”. Similar entries were recorded in Mexico City, Guadalajara, and Guatemala City throughout 1895 and 1896. On Wednesday, May 26, 1896, Mrs. Curtin wrote to her mother from Nebaj in Guatemala: “Last evening May 25 we sent off last of *Quo Vadis* and very glad we are, now if it reaches Boston, the book will soon come out.”

Even before the publication of *Quo Vadis*, both Curtin and his Boston publisher realized that they had a potential bestseller in their hands and made every effort to release it as quickly as possible. On April 20, 1896, John M. Brown, who considered the book “great” wrote: “My dear Curtin, Hope you can send the conclusion of *Quo Vadis* very soon (...). Mr. McIntyre (...) is anxious that no one else gets in ahead of us on *Quo Vadis*.” On June 1, 1896, Jeremiah Curtin wrote to James McIntyre, head of the publishing department: “I have your letter of May 4 and I am very glad that you like *Quo Vadis* so well. It is really a splendid book, not to be compared with anything written hitherto concerning Nero or the early Christians. I hope you will launch it with all the vim that it deserves. You need not fear to claim too much for it. (...) It is not impossible that Quo

⁴ Michael J. Mikoś, *Sienkiewicz’s Trilogy According to Jeremiah Curtin: Materials from the Milwaukee County Historical Society*, “The Polish Review”, XXXVI, 4, 1991, p. 421–434. It should be mentioned that according to the agreement between Little, Brown and Company and Curtin, deposited in the Milwaukee County Historical Society, Curtin received 10% of the retail sales of the *Trilogy* plus 25 copies of *With the Fire and Sword*, 25 copies of *The Deluge*, and 50 of *Pan Michael*.

Vadis may strike the public taste in such fashion as to be the greatest **selling book** published for a long time.”

Finally, on November 3, 1896, Mrs. Curtin wrote in Cometan, Guatemala: “Jeremiah brought *Quo Vadis* from the mail this morning, told me to shut my eyes and guess what he had, then said it was our book. We were glad, it came at least a week earlier than we expected. J. has spent most of the day looking it over and is well satisfied, says it reads like ‘slipping off a log.’”

Within two months of its publication *Quo Vadis* climbed to the top of many bestseller lists in the United States and it remained there for about one year and a half. The novel sold 600,000 copies in the first 18 months and generated increased interest in Sienkiewicz’s other books. With this publishing success, the Curtins suddenly became affluent. Sienkiewicz as a citizen of Russia, which did not belong to the Berne convention, was not protected by the international copyright law. Consequently, he received no significant royalties from the sale of his books abroad. Most of the substantial profits from translation of his works in the United States went to publishers and translators. The agreement between Little, Brown and Company and Curtin for the translation of *Quo Vadis*, signed on October 19, 1896, deposited in the Milwaukee County Historical Society, stipulated that Curtin would receive 10% of the retail sales and fifty copies of the book. Mrs. Curtin wrote in her diary in August 1897 that John Murray Brown paid Curtin \$6,000 for the period from January to the end of June, and in March 1899 he sent Curtin a payment of \$6,600 for six months’ royalties. *The Donahue Magazine* reported in its September 1898 issues that Curtin received a check for \$24,000 as his share of book sales. It is interesting to note for the sake of comparison that the price of the house purchased by Mrs. Curtin in Bristol, Vermont, was \$1,500⁵.

But just as Sienkiewicz was not protected by international copyright law, Curtin and Little, Brown and Company could not obtain exclusive rights to translate and sell the Polish author’s books. To beat their competitors, the Curtins decided to follow Sienkiewicz and work closely with the author who rarely spent much time in one place and often wrote irregularly. After 1896, they traveled to Poland nearly every year to observe

⁵ Little, Brown and Company, who profited most in this enterprise, refused to answer my inquiry about the financial arrangements relating to the Sienkiewicz books.

the progress of his work, to have quick access to his manuscripts, and to obtain his permission to translate and publish his books.

With the stakes so high, it is not surprising that from 1896 on at least 34 American publishers and 44 translators issued and reissued Sienkiewicz's novels and short stories. By 1915, the sales of the novel exceeded a million and a half copies. Little, Brown and Company itself published a variety of editions, ranging from a deluxe \$12 version to a 25-cent paperbound issue.

American critics were almost unanimous in their praise of *Quo Vadis*. In their reviews, in most cases unsigned and undated, collected by Alma Cardell in a large scrapbook, now held in the John Cudahy Memorial Library in the Milwaukee County Historical Society, they hailed the novel as "one of the greatest books of our day" (*The Bookman*, IV, November 1896), "one of the strongest historical romances that has been written in the last half century" (*Chicago Evening Post*), and "a historical novel of the first order, and in all respects a surpassing work of fiction" (*New York Herald*). They considered it "of intense interest to the whole Christian civilization," because it was "a masterly picture of Roman life at the moment when Christianity ceased to smoulder and began to blaze" (*Chicago Tribune*). The reviewer for *The Boston Beacon* wrote that Sienkiewicz captured "the great social and moral agitation that rent the Roman empire asunder and resulted in the evolution of Christianity."

Critics paid close attention to Sienkiewicz's portrayal of character, especially of Petronius. The reviewer for *The Church Standard* (November 1896) stated that "in Petronius we have as fine a portrait as was ever painted of the Roman gentleman of Nero's court" and "the portrait of Petronius is alone a masterpiece of which the greatest word-painters of any age might be proud." Another reviewer recognized "Nero's demonic cruelties" (*Boston Transcript*) in his persecution of the Christians, the subject most repulsive, but restrained and subdued by Sienkiewicz's artistic skill.

Critics praised *Quo Vadis* as "a magnificent story absorbingly interesting, brilliant in style" (*Providence News*) and a story that "is carried through its many phases of conflict and terror to a climax that enthalls" (*Chicago Record*). Sienkiewicz was described as the great novelist who "has unrolled it all before us as upon a cloud painted with the colors of the sun" (*Philadelphia Record*), whose "every scene has its mass of detail; every line is drawn clearly and adds to the harmony of the whole

picture” (*Chicago Record*) and who shows “in the delineation of character, and in tracing the psychological developments of actual, living breathing human beings, an almost inimitable power” (*Church Standard*, November 1896). “Certain memorable scenes” stated the reviewer for *The Boston Beacon*, “like the feasting at the imperial palace, the contest in the arena, the burning of Rome, the rescue of Lygia, the Christian maiden—these will hold their place in memory with unfading color, and are to be reckoned among the significant triumphs of narrative art.”

Reviewers also praised Jeremiah Curtin for “the diversity of language, rapid flow of thought the picturesque imagery of the description” (*Boston Transcript*, 1896). “How nearly Mr. Curtin’s version may render the original Polish, we have no means of judging;” wrote *The Church Standard* (November 1896), “but his English is so limpid and fluent that one finds it difficult to realize that he is reading a translation”.

Inevitably, however, there were some critical voices. An anonymous reviewer for *The Ave Maria* considered the novel “very remarkable,” but he believed that the climax of the action—“the struggle in the amphitheatre between the Christian giant Ursus and a wild aurochs, or European bison, upon whose horns is bound Lady Lygia—is powerful, but we fear somewhat improbable”. The fact that Lygia is saved from Christian martyrdom to become Vinicius’s wife was in his opinion “at least a very questionable change of blessings”. And although “St. Peter plays an important part, he is vaguely sketched”. The reviewer also thought that “the dreadfully realistic account of the martyrdom of the Christians in the amphitheatre goes too far”. He believed that *Quo Vadis* was as bloody as Shakespeare’s *Titus Andronicus*, but in his opinion “the tragic should cause terror, not horror”. The chief blemish of the book, continued the critic, was that “in describing feasts given by Nero and his courtiers he talks too plainly. Mr. Sienkiewicz is not gross”, and yet “his book, as it stands at present, cannot be read by all classes. These objectionable details could be cut out without injury to action, especially since art has nothing whatever to do with anything which is not pure, despite what half critics and whole fools may say to the contrary.”

Yet in general readers and critics agreed with a reviewer for *The Boston Beacon*, who stated that *Quo Vadis* “is unmistakably a work that all who wish to have an adequate comprehension of the opening of the Christian era will be called upon to read” and with a critic for *The Church Standard* (November 1896), who concluded that “In short, this is a great

novel. We wish it might be read by Christians of all nations and of all churches.”⁶

***Quo Vadis* Dramatized and Filmed**

The popularity of *Quo Vadis* extended beyond the book pages. Dramatizations of the novel were frequently performed on stages of many countries, filmed, represented in music and the arts, later adapted for radio, recorded on cassettes, and shown on television. On July 27, 1897, Mrs. Curtin wrote from Rapperswil in Switzerland to her mother: “Yesterday J. got a letter from Little, Brown telling him that theatre people had applied to them for the right of dramatizing *Quo Vadis*, putting it into a play for the stage. They ask J’s permission for this and Sienkiewicz. J. has written to Sienkiewicz about it. It would of course increase the sale of the book.” On August 2, she wrote in her diary: “We had a very pleasant letter from Sienkiewicz this morning. He is quite willing that his *Quo Vadis* should be dramatized.”⁷

On December 28, 1899, Little, Brown wrote to Curtin that they could not report anything positive concerning dramatization of *Quo Vadis*. They informed him that long time ago, when Curtin had been abroad, they received a letter from Miss Gilder, co-founder of a literary magazine *The Critic* and they signed an agreement to dramatize *Quo Vadis* with her. At the same time, other people appeared who did not apply for any permission, and they began to make preparations to stage the play. Little, Brown were not sure whether they used Curtin’s translations and thought it would be good if Curtin became involved in that matter, but they were afraid not much could be done about it. When in 1900 Sienkiewicz authorized Wilson Barrett to stage *Quo Vadis* in England, the legal matters concerning English versions of the play became even more entangled.

⁶ A survey of critics’ responses to *Quo Vadis* can also be found in James P. Barron’s Ph.D. dissertation entitled *The American Reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz’s ‘Quo Vadis?’*, Chicago, University of Chicago, 2005.

⁷ On July 30, 1897, Sienkiewicz wrote from Zakopane: “Szanowny Panie, (...). Ze-chciej Pan łaskawie przesłać ode mnie ukłony p.p. Little, Brown et Comp. i zapewnić ich, że nie mam nic przeciw przerobieniu *Quo Vadis* na dramat, jakkolwiek sądzę, że ze względu rozległość akcji będzie to rzecz nadzwyczaj trudna.” (Maria Bokszczanin (ed.), *Henryk Sienkiewicz*. Warszawa: PIW, *Listy*. I, 1, 165–166. The original letter is in the Milwaukee County Historical Society).

On December 12, 1899, the dramatic version of *Quo Vadis* received its initial production at McVicker's Theatre in Chicago. It was produced by Fred C. Whitney, a well-known impresario and theatre manager, and dramatized by Stanislaus Stange, who claimed that their permission to stage the play came from Wilson Barrett. The play was presented in six acts and eight scenes, the incidental music was composed by Julian Edwards, and choral numbers and the dances were in accord with the period which *Quo Vadis* covered. The reviewer for *The New York Times* (December 13, 1899) reported that the advance sale of seats broke the record at McVicker's, the play held the interest of the audience from the start, and there were numerous curtain calls. The banquet scene in Nero's palace and the panorama of the burning Rome were "especially realistic and gorgeous in coloring."

On April 9, 1900, Jeannette Gilder published a letter in *The Item*, defending her right to stage the play. She wrote that in December 1897, she signed a contract with Little, Brown, "Sienkiewicz's authorized publisher in this country, and Mr. Jeremiah Curtin, his authorized translator, for dramatic rights in *Quo Vadis* for 'all English-speaking countries'" and that in January 1898, she began work on the dramatization of the novel. In another letter to *The New York Times* (April 11, 1900), she quoted the authorizations from Sienkiewicz and from Little, Brown, the latter stating that "the only dramatization of 'Quo Vadis' authorized by Henryk Sienkiewicz, the author; Jeremiah Curtin, the translator, or by us, the publishers, is the one by Jeannette Gilder. Any other dramatic version of Sienkiewicz's great novel is positively unauthorized."

On April 9, 1900, two plays based on *Quo Vadis* opened in New York for the first time. Jeannette Gilder's version was shown at the Herald Square Theatre and ran until May 5, while Fred Whitney's premiered at the New York Theatre. Gilder's play was divided into five short acts, set upon the stage with new scenery, and offered some spectacular display. The reviewer for *The Bookman* (Vol. XI, 1900, 296) found it faithful to Sienkiewicz's novel. He wrote that dramatization was "in many respects a very excellent piece of work" and "as a play it was well constructed, well staged and well acted". He also remarked that "on the stage, as in the book, we saw all imperial Rome—its legions, its luxury, its baseness—and yet were never for a moment allowed to forget the loves of Vinicius and Lygia and Petronius and Eunice."

But the reviewer for *The New York Times* (April 10, 1900) was critical of the “Two Melodramatic Plays Founded on *Quo Vadis*,” since “neither proved to be much better than an ordinary melodrama.” He wrote that Gilder’s opening scenes had “no merit but their brevity” and the actors “generally whined and droned.” Although Whitney’s play had the acting advantage of its frequent performance in Chicago, “started off buoyantly, and held the large audience attention to the end,” the critic believed that if this version were shortened by two acts, it “could hardly suffer.”

After New York, Fred Whitney took the play to Boston, where it opened on November 12, 1900, and ran for six weeks at the Boston Theatre, and later to London, where it played at Adelphi Theatre. In 1900, *Quo Vadis* was staged at other New York theatres, e.g., Third Avenue Theatre, Grand Opera House, and Eagle Theatre.

On May 13, 1900, in Warsaw, Sienkiewicz signed a document giving Curtin the exclusive right to dramatize all his future works as well as the Trilogy, and to receive one-half of the dramatizations’ net returns.⁸ But Curtin did not dramatize any of Sienkiewicz’s books. In spite of a great popularity of *Quo Vadis* on the American stage, its author received no royalties for it.

Soon after the publication of the book and various stage adaptations, *Quo Vadis* made its debut on the silver screen. The first silent version was produced by the French company Pathé Frères in Paris in 1901. The film, directed by Ferdinand Zecca, ran for 12 minutes. It was followed by an Italian silent epic *Quo Vadis*, adapted and directed by Enrico Guazzoni. The eight-reel film, which ran for 120 minutes, became the first successful feature-length motion picture. Its reception was so favorable that the promoters commissioned Jean Nagues to compose an accompanying score and showed it in Paris, London, and then New York. Released in the United States on April 21, 1913, *Quo Vadis?* premiered like a Broadway play at New York’s prestigious Astor Theatre, where it ran for twenty-two weeks. Admission for the twice-daily show was from 25 cents to \$1.50 (equivalent to over \$30 today). “Reviews were ecstatic,”⁹ quickly reprinted, and advertised in the trade press. “The Astor was packed with appreciative audiences from spring until autumn, and by the middle of the

⁸ The agreement is in the Milwaukee County Historical Society.

⁹ Richard Abel, *Americanizing the Movies and “Movie-Mad Audiences, 1910–1914*, Berkeley 2006, p. 35.

summer twenty-two ‘road-shows’ were exhibiting the picture in stage theatres in all sections of the United States and Canada.”¹⁰ The film earned \$150,000, and became the cinema’s first great financial success. It also contributed to the development of American motion pictures and the cinema as a popular art form. In 1925, another silent *Quo Vadis*, directed by Gabriellino d’Annunzio and Georg Jacoby, was filmed in Italy, but failed to attract popular recognition.

Hollywood Quo Vadis 1951

The American 1951 version of *Quo Vadis* was a ‘super-colossal’ Hollywood production. It was directed by Melvyn LeRoy and featured Robert Taylor, Deborah Kerr, Leo Genn, and Peter Ustinov, 235 speaking parts, with Elizabeth Taylor and Sophia Loren as extras. It cost its producer Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer over \$7 million and was the largest and the most expensive film made up to then. In a glossy magazine entitled *MGM presents Quo Vadis* (Based on the novel by Henryk Sienkiewicz), the studio writers celebrated its project of “great and lasting significance.” They reviewed the history of “the great novel,” written by the author “regarded as Poland’s literary genius,” and its dramatizations on stage and film. They also reported that in order to obtain “talking picture rights” MGM contacted Sienkiewicz’s two living children. To obtain their signatures, MGM engaged a Paris lawyer, who went behind the Iron Curtain and “after great difficulty he located Henryk Sienkiewicz, Jr., living in Oblegorek Kielecki, and the daughter, Mrs. Jadwiga Kornilowicz in Krakow.” His mission was successful, for “He was able to emerge safely with the necessary documents.”

The “most elaborate motion picture ever made” was filmed at the 148-acre Cinecittà Studios outside of Rome. To make it historically accurate, official permission was secured to restore the Appian Way to its appearance 2,000 years ago. Sculptors chiseled 500 pieces of statuary, while 500 skilled carpenters worked for two years building about 100 sets, including

⁹ Benjamin B. Hampton, *History of the American Film Industry from its beginnings to 1931*, New York 1970, p. 107. For another discussion of the film versions of *Quo Vadis*, see Ruth Scodel and Anja Bettenworth, *Whither Quo Vadis?*, Malden, MA, Oxford 2009. On p. 8, Scodel quotes Czesław Miłosz, saying “If we read novels, we have to read Sienkiewicz—and I hate Sienkiewicz,” referring particularly to *Quo Vadis*.

the Circus of Nero, seating 30,000, Nero's Palace, and a bridge holding 5,000 people fleeing the burning city. It took MGM 24 nights to burn "Rome," with 2,000 actors running in and out the flaming buildings. The cast consisted of 30,000 people, 63 lions from seven European circuses, 7 fighting bulls from Portugal, 2 cheetahs from Africa, 450 horses, as well as oxen, cattle, and hogs.

With the release of the film, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer issued campaign books containing publicity and a variety of merchandize offers, e.g., "exclusive QUO VADIS Munsingwear boxer shorts for men and pyjamas decorated with the Roman eagle. Associating the Neronian Rome with luxury and pleasure, the MGM attempted to sell "everything from raincoats, fire insurance, sports, shirts, wallpaper, tablecloths, slippers..." to "the very latest in modern dwellings."¹¹

Sienkiewicz's two main characters, Lygia, a Christian woman, and Ursus, her gigantic defender, belong to the tribe of Lygians, the alleged ancestors of the Poles. Ursus' victory over a cruel tyrant Nero and the godless state, symbolizes Polish people's destined victory over their Prussian and Russian oppressors. LeRoy's film, in the making from the late 1930s to 1951, carried also political overtones, as the MGM publicity made references to the event of World War II and the Cold War. Through its campaign book and accompanying letters, the studio suggested that the movie's message implied the victory of Christianity over the godless tyrannies of Hitler's Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union. As if to confirm this interpretation, censors in Poland and other Eastern European countries banned LeRoy's *Quo Vadis* during the decades of communism.¹²

In spite of vigorous promotion and publicity, the film was greeted with mixed reviews. It was nominated for eight Oscars, but failed to win a single one. The reviewer for *Variety* (November 14, 1951) called it "a box office blockbuster," that had "size, scope, splash, and dash," but "in effect the super-colossal handicapped the realistic values." The critic for *The*

¹⁰ Maria Wyke, *Projecting the Past: Ancient Rome, Cinema, and History*. New York and London 1997, p. 110–112, 146.

¹¹ For a thorough discussion of classics, film, and history with reference to Nero and *Quo Vadis*, see Wyke, op. cit., especially p. 110–146, Monica Silveira Cyrino, *Big Screen Rome*, Malden, MA 2005, p. 7–33, and Martin M. Winkler, *The Roman Empire in American Cinema after 1945*, [in:] Sandra R. Joshel, Margaret Malamud, and Donald T. McGuire, Jr. (eds.), *Imperial Projections: Ancient Rome in Modern Popular Culture*, Baltimore and London 2001, p. 50–62.

Commonweal (November 23, 1951) noticed that “some of the inspiring qualities of Sienkiewicz’s novel manage to come through,” but he thought that the characters “seldom come through as real people” and that “these martyrs deserve more serious cinematic treatment.” The critic for *The New York Times* (November 9, 1951) praised *Quo Vadis* for the magnificence of sets and “such awesome exhibitions as the historic burning of Rome or the slaughter of Christian martyrs.” He lauded the other “visual triumphs and rich imagistic display.” But he also commented on “a staggering combination of cinema brilliance and sheer banality, of visual excitement and verbal boredom, of historical pretentiousness and sex.” In conclusion, he called the film “the monument to its unique and perishable type” and predicted that “it will probably be a vast success.”

He was right. The commercial success of *Quo Vadis*, whose worldwide box office was estimated at \$25 million, inspired Hollywood studios to produce a series of other spectacular historical films, e.g., *Ben Hur*, *Spartacus*, and *The Ten Commandments*. Historians of the cinema recognized the film’s significant impact on the development of historical epic movies. Derek Elley concluded that *Quo Vadis* provided “a very real sense of history on the move, of events in flux, of a watershed approaching,”¹³ while Monica Silveira Cyrino saw in the film “an exciting, visually stunning and historically evocative impression of an especially eventful period in Roman history.”¹⁴ In addition, the production of *Quo Vadis* contributed to the development of innovative techniques, e.g., three-dimensional set designs, long shots, and close-ups, as well as of imaginative cinematic presentations, e.g., spectacular mass events, huge battles, and elaborate costumes. Most importantly, however, following the great success of the book and popularity of its various stage versions, Sienkiewicz’s story depicting a rise of Christianity and its triumph over the evils of Nero’s Rome once more captured the attention of American and world public, this time on a large screen in brilliant Technicolor.

The Knights of the Cross

Following the publishing success of *Quo Vadis*, the competition among American publishers for profits from the sales of *Krzyżacy* (*The*

¹² Elley Derek, *The Epic Film. Myth and History*, London 1984, p. 126.

¹³ Cyrino, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

Knights of the Cross) intensified. Even though the book was published by Gebethner and Wolff in Warsaw in 1900, a New York company of F.R. Fenno issued translated fragments of part 1 already in 1897, then an incomplete version in 1899, and the full text in 1900. Other firms in the United States, Canada, and England also announced the publication of the novel. Little, Brown and Company responded in two ways. They immediately published the portion of the Polish text that had already been translated. On 3 February 1900, they also issued a statement in *Publishers' Weekly* in which they announced that the second half of *The Knights of the Cross* "will be published exclusively by us as soon as the author has completed it, in advance of any other publications." They charged that Fenno had published an incomplete translation of the book without plainly informing the public that it was only a portion of the novel, and stated: "The only authorized translation of *The Knights of the Cross* is that made by Mr. Curtin and published by us. All others are issued without the author's consent and against his express wish, and he has several times designated Mr. Curtin as the translator of his works and recognized us as his authorized publishers."

Several critics condemned unauthorized translations released by Fenno and other publishers (*Current Literature*, March 1900, and *Independent*, March 1900), but reviews of *The Knights of the Cross* were mixed. A reviewer for *Athenaeum* (May 1902), predicted the novel will not increase Sienkiewicz's popularity. He thought that "Youthful readers may find some pleasure in this tale of knightly adventures, but it is too long and too flamboyant." Another critic wrote that although the climax is impressive "the novel was inferior to the *Trilogy*" (*Dial*, September 1900). After reading the first volume, a reviewer for *Literary News* (February 1900) wrote that the novel presented "a powerful portrayal of medieval times, when the growth of Christianity was retarded by crimes and abuses of the Knights of the Cross." The same periodical commented on the completed work (July 1900), stating that "Perhaps no other novelist was more successful in rendering historical atmosphere. The work pulsates with the untamed vigor of conflict and passion." A reviewer for *Outlook* (June 1900) wrote that "The novel surpasses *Quo Vadis* in strength, intensity, and character creation."

The American success of Sienkiewicz should be attributed to the dedication of Jeremiah Curtin and his wife as well as of numerous publishers, translators, and reviewers who made his books available to millions of

readers, among them prominent statesmen and writers. Theodore Roosevelt, a future president of the United States and a faithful reader of Sienkiewicz's novels, wrote to Curtin after finishing his vice presidential campaign on November 19, 1900:

“My dear Mr. Curtin:

Now that the campaign is over I must tell you that during its continuance I was obliged frequently to find solace in reading your wonderful translations of Sienkiewicz's great novels. I do not mean *Quo Vadis* (which I do not care for), but the immortal *Trilogy* and then the history of the struggle between the Poles and the Teutonic Knights. If you ever write to him I wish you would tell him how much comfort he gave a vice presidential candidate in the midst of an exceedingly active campaign, and also tell him that I had a regiment of men in the Spanish war whom I think would have been esteemed very competent fighters even by the associates of Zagłoba and of the Knight of Bogdaniec!

I never received that book on African hunting by the Pole¹⁵. It matters not as I had bought a copy. I only notify you for fear it might have gone astray.

Did I ever tell you how much I liked your *Indian Creation Myths*?

Faithfully yours,
Theodore Roosevelt”

The highest tribute to Sienkiewicz was paid by William Faulkner. In his *Foreword to The Faulkner Reader* (New York, 1954), he wrote:

“My grandfather had a moderate though reasonably diffuse and catholic library; I realize now that I got most of my early education in it. (...) One of these books was by a Pole, Sienkiewicz—a story of the time of King John Sobieski, when the Poles, almost single-handed, kept the Turks from overrunning Central Europe. (...) I did read the foreword in this

¹⁴ Roosevelt's letter is in the Milwaukee County Historical Society. He refers to Józef Potocki's book *Notatki myśliwskie z Afryki*, illustrated by Piotr Stachiewicz, and published by Gebethner and Wolff in Warsaw in 1897. Curtin translated it as *Sport in Somaliland being an account of a hunting trip to that region by count Joseph Potocki*, London 1900. Roosevelt, a prolific author, also wrote an introduction to Curtin's book *The Mongols*, published by Little, Brown and Company.

one, the first one I ever took time to read; I don't know why now. It went something like this:

This book was written at the expense of considerable effort, to uplift men's hearts, and I thought: *What a nice thing to have thought to say.* But no more than that."

It was until suddenly one day Faulkner realized that "that old half-forgotten Pole had had the answer all the time. To uplift man's heart; the same for all of us." And when he delivered his *Address upon Receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature* in Stockholm, on December 10, 1950, Faulkner said that it is the poet's, the writer's duty and "privilege to help man endure by lifting his heart, by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past." (*The Faulkner Reader*, New York 1954, *Foreword*, p. ix–xi).

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The reception of Henryk Sienkiewicz's works in the United States

Summary

This article, based mostly on the unpublished diaries of Alma Curtin and accompanying materials deposited in the archives of the Milwaukee County Historical Society, describes the growing popularity of Sienkiewicz's works in the United States. It emphasizes the role of Jeremiah Curtin, translator of many novels and short stories, in making Sienkiewicz's novels, plays, and films available to the American audiences. Numerous reviews of *Quo Vadis* and other novels, quoted in this article, attest to Sienkiewicz's fame, while Curtin's correspondence with Little, Brown and Company, publisher of his translations, throws light upon the operations of the American publishers.

Keywords: Henryk Sienkiewicz, Curtin, Quo Vadis (novel, play, film), The Trilogy, The Knights of the Cross

Henriko Sienkievičiaus kūrinų recepcija Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose

Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje, kuris daugiausia remiasi nepublikuotais Almos Curtin dienoraščiais ir Milvokio apygardos istorijos draugijos archyvuose saugoma medžiaga, aprašomas didėjantis Sienkievičiaus kūrinų populiarumas Jungtinėse Amerikos Valstijose. Jame pabrėžiamas daugelio romanų ir apsakymų vertėjo Jeremiah Curtino vaidmuo, kuris padėjo Sienkievičiaus romanams, pjesėms ir filmams jų pagrindu tapti prieinamiems amerikiečių auditorijai. Daugybė šiame straipsnyje cituojamų "Quo Vadis" ir kitų romanų recenzijų liudija Sienkiewicziaus šlovę, o Curtino susirašinėjimas su "Little, Brown and Company", jo vertimų leidėja, atskleidžia amerikiečių leidėjų veiklą.

Raktažodžiai: Henrik Sienkievič, Curtin, Quo Vadis (romanas, pjesė, filmas), Trilogija, Kryžiaus riteriai

Odbiór dzieł Henryka Sienkiewicza w Stanach Zjednoczonych

Streszczenie

Powieści i opowiadania Sienkiewicza, przetłumaczone na przeszło czterdzieści języków, przyniosły mu nagrodę Nobla w 1905 roku. Swą międzynarodową sławę, szczególnie w Stanach Zjednoczonych, zawdzięcza on tłumaczeniom Jeremiasza Curtina, wspieranego przez żonę Almę Cardell Curtin. Jej dzienniki i listy rejestrowały ich pracę, częste spotkania z Sienkiewiczem i innymi polskimi pisarzami oraz wrażenia dotyczące pobytów w Polsce i rozmów z Polakami. Dzięki materiałom zebranych przez Curtinów możemy śledzić rosnące zainteresowanie książkami Sienkiewicza, a szczególnie *Quo Vadis* (1896), bowiem powieść o początkach chrześcijaństwa spotkała się z prawie jednomyślną

Artykuły naukowe

pochwałą amerykańskich krytyków oraz okazała się wielkim sukcesem finansowym. Dramaturgiczne wersje powieści były wystawiane na scenach teatralnych, przedstawiane w muzyce i sztuce, filmowane, nagrywane na kasety i pokazywane w telewizji. Ukoronowaniem filmowych adaptacji okazała się hollywoodzka superprodukcja *Quo Vadis* (1951), która zainaugurowała serię spektakularnych filmów historycznych. Wśród milionów czytelników Sienkiewicza znaleźli się także wybitni politycy i pisarze. Prezydent Theodore Roosevelt chwalił książki Sienkiewicza w swej korespondencji z Curtinem, a William Faulkner cytował Sienkiewicza w przemówieniu po otrzymaniu nagrody Nobla w 1950 roku, mówiąc że “ten na wpół zapomniany Polak znał zawsze odpowiedź. Dla pokrzepienia serc, to samo dla nas wszystkich.”

Słowa kluczowe: Henryk Sienkiewicz, Curtin, Quo Vadis (powieść, sztuka teatralna, film), Trylogia, Krzyżacy