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**Rewriting Capitalism: Literature and the Market in Late Tsarist Russia and the Kingdom of Poland** by Beth Holmgren (1998), 240 pages.



In the first part, the author quickly establishes that the entire milieu of the Polish literary world differed profoundly to me that this was not only caused by the political situation in Eastern Europe, but also by the fact that the industrial revolution and the capitalism which accompanied it arrived here decades later, and the Polish society was slower to adapt to the changes. For one, a middle class hardly existed, while it was the backbone of the bourgeois way of life in the West. Thus the merchant or capitalist hero in Polish literature differs from the hard-nosed prototype in Western literature. He never completely loses his "szlachetność" (nobility of character), his "szeroka dusza" (wide soul), his sense of nationalism, or his romanticism. The best known example of such a hero is Wokulski in *Lalka* (The Doll) by Boleslaw Prus, for whom "doing good business is never an end in itself, but a means to a still unclear goal -- whether that be technological progress or a cozy environment for a surrogate family or a base from which to perform good works." The novel and its characters are discussed by Holmgren at length, and the influence of capitalism upon them is analyzed. Incidentally, the author considers *The Doll* to be the best Polish novel, a judgment while well justified may distress enthusiastic admirers of novels by Sienkiewicz, Żeromski, or Reymont. A lesser literary work that became immensely popular, Helena Mniszek's *Trędowata* (The Leper), more typically a romance, is also discussed at some length because the hero Michorowski exhibits qualities of a capitalist in being an effective and successful manager of his property, even though he is a nobleman. This novel is also representative of what we would today call middlebrow literature.

The second part of the book discusses the proliferation of publications made possible by the growth of the marketplace. An entire chapter is devoted to the contributions of the *Tygodnik Ilustrowany* (The Illustrated Weekly), whose contents covered an enormous range of topics, including belles lettres, biographical articles, poetry, history, theater and other arts, reviews of books, current events, and included illustrations. In it important novels such as *The Teutonic Knights*, *The Peasants*, and *Ashes* were serialized. The author points out that despite the somewhat more liberal attitudes of the other occupying powers, especially those of Austro-Hungary, Poland's creative and artistic development flourished in the Russian part, despite heavy tsarist censorship. Newspapers such as *Kurier Codzienny* or *Kurier Warszawski* showed an astounding growth in membership. In addition to periodicals, due credit is given to the commercial publishing firm of Gebethner & Wolff. Thus the marketplace, i.e. capitalism, functioned as a carrier of information and enhancer of cultural and artistic appreciation.

There is much more in this scholarly and excellently researched book than a limited review can cover. Frankly, it requires a close and, on occasion, patient reading by those not too familiar with the period in question: 1880-1914. Certainly reading *The Doll* (available in our library in both languages) will help. But it is good news that Polish literature has been given such a painstaking and sympathetic attention in this country.

**George E. Suboczewski**