

Ukrainian Fiction in English

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a trilogy of English translations of literary works by Ukraine's greatest
man of letters, Ivan Franko (1856 – 1916)**

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Turbulent Times: A Trilogy

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Ivan Franko, Ukraine's greatest man of letters, was born in Halychyna (Galicia), Western Ukraine. A man of prodigious talents and an indefatigable worker, his literary and scholarly output fills more than fifty volumes. He wrote lyrical and philosophical poetry, short stories, novellas, novels, and dramas; articles on Ukrainian, Slavic, and Western European literary criticism, theory and history; studies of Ukrainian linguistics, folklore and ethnography; and treatises on his philosophical, sociological, political and economic views. In recognition of Franko's contributions to Ukrainian literature and culture, and of his championing of universal human rights, he is known as the "Ukrainian Moses" who toiled to lead his people to the promised land of freedom envisaged by the renowned Ukrainian poet Taras Shevchenko.

The Trilogy

The overarching theme of the trilogy *Turbulent Times* is the growth of national and political awareness in Halychyna in the second half of the nineteenth century. The social and economic unrest of the early nineteenth century culminated in the abolition, in 1848, of the oppressive feudal system established in 1772 when Halychyna came under Austrian control.

The societal changes set in motion were slow and torturous. The next few decades saw confusion, resistance, repression, violence, strikes, and conflict over access to and ownership of forests and pastures, compensation of the lords for the loss of forced, unpaid peasant labour, and the termination of absolutist political and legal structures that gave the lords the right to punish, imprison, and put to death recalcitrant peasants.

Serfdom was predicated on violence against the peasants and a callous exploitation of their illiteracy, ignorance, and servility. As the freed serfs took the first steps to national and political consciousness, they became aware of the power of education and knowledge. Literacy meant that information could be disseminated, grievances could be filed, rights could be asserted, and justice could be demanded.

What proved most resistant to change was not the economic, legal, and political inequity, but the psychology of the people and the relations among groups with disparate social histories characterized by potentially explosive intersects between social stratum and ethnicity. At the turn of the twentieth century, fifty years after the end of serfdom, the struggle for emancipation was far from over.

This trilogy paints a vivid and unsettling picture of life in Halychyna from the rural and urban insurrections of the 1840s and the abolition of serfdom in 1848, to the disillusionment of the following decades and the complex struggle for national and democratic reform in the latter part of the 19th century. The events depicted provide a rich and moving account of the social and economic conditions that prompted the first wave of Ukrainian immigration to the United States and Canada. Franko drew the material for his prose from personal observations and experiences, and the backdrop against which the protagonists live out their lives is true to fact; only their specific characteristics and actions are fictitious.

The themes of the short stories in the first volume, *Winds of Change*, are the rising tide of discontent with the evils of serfdom in the early 1800s, the spilling over of the serfs' anger in the 1840s, and the insurrections of urban revolutionaries in 1848. The focus of the novella, *The Raging Tempest*, is the emergence of peasant leaders in the years of uncertainty, confusion, and manor-village hostilities in the 1850s.

The two novellas in *Beacons in the Darkness*, the second volume of the trilogy—one, *Unknown Waters*, set in rural Halychyna, and the other, *Lel and Polel*, in Lviv, the capital of the region—describe the post-1848 emergence of educated, nationally and politically aware young people dedicated to the enlightenment and empowerment of the largely illiterate masses in both the Ukrainian (Eastern) and Polish (Western) parts of Halychyna. These activists became beacons of hope in the struggle for social justice, economic equity, and democratic and national rights in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The setting of the third volume, the novel *Fateful Crossroads*, is Eastern Halychyna in the 1890s. The protagonist, a young lawyer, is a distillation of the characteristics that Franko valued in members of the Ukrainian intelligentsia engaged in national, social and political activism. Committed to arming the peasantry with self-confidence and knowledge, he promotes social justice and democratic institutions, channels the peasants' resentments into positive political activism, and models the use of constructive, legitimate ways to ameliorate their lot in life. The path that he chooses at the fateful crossroads in his life is the one Franko envisaged as turning the tide at the crossroads at which Halychyna found itself at the beginning of the twentieth century.

(Condensed from the introduction to the trilogy by the late Sonia Morris, Editor)

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