

In the Footsteps of Father Paisii

The resurgence of Bulgaria is the most fascinating phase of its modern history. Thousands of Bulgarian patriots followed in the footsteps of Father Paisii. Lack of space allows us to mention only some of the most outstanding contributors to the fields of literature, education and political activity, who were dedicated to helping their country in the great struggle for freedom, progress and civilization.

1. **Sophronii, Bishop of Vratsa** (1739 - c. 1816), a most ardent follower of Paisii, was born in Kotel, a small town in the Balkan Mountains. He published the first printed Bulgarian book, called *Kiriakodromion* (Sunday Book) in 1806 (see the book cover). He left his autobiography, *The Life and Sufferings of Sinful Sophronii*, which was the first book to record conditions in Bulgaria at the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th c. as seen and experienced by a native Bulgarian.

2. **Neofit Bozveli** (1783 – 1848) was also born in Kotel. After studying under Stoiko Vladislavov (later Sophronii, Bishop of Vrats) he went to the monastery of Chilendar.

Neofit Bozveli was the most militant ecclesiastic Bulgaria has ever had. His most bitter fight against the Greek patriarchy for an independent Bulgarian church cost him his life. He was banished to one of the monasteries of Mt. Athos, where he died in 1848. He published several books of which the best known is *Mother Bulgaria*, written in biblical style.

3. **Peter Beron** (1793 – 1847), was another illustrious man of Kotel. After his father lost his wealth, he emigrated to Bucharest. While studying in a Greek school in the Rumanian capital Beron was giving private lessons to make a living. Later he moved to Brashov in Transylvania where he became the private tutor to the children of his countryman Anton Ivanovich. The latter paid for the publication of Beron's *Fish Primer*, which came out in 1824. The primer contained encyclopedic material. It was printed in the spoken Bulgarian language and proved to be a great advantage over the old fashioned textbooks written in Church-Slavonic language which was not easily understood by the common people.

4. **Vassil Aprilov** (1789 – 1847), a wealthy Bulgarian merchant of Gabrovo, went to Russia at the age of ten where he associated with Greeks. This made him a passionate Helenophile and a great supporter of the struggle for Greek political independence. After reading a history of Bulgaria in Russian, entitled *Old and New Bulgarians*, written by the young Ukrainian scholar Yuri Venelin, he experienced a complete change of heart, and as he expressed it "was born anew". The greatness of Bulgaria's past made him a fervent nationalist. As a result of this change in feelings Aprilov persuaded some of his well-to-do countrymen to join him in contributing funds for his opening of the first Bulgarian school in his native town of Gabrovo. It opened its doors in 1835.

5. **Neofit Rilski** (1793 – 1881), a monk of Bansko was well versed in the Bulgarian language. In 1835 he published his Bulgarian Grammar in Kraguevats, Serbia, Where his nephews were in the service of Prince Milosh. He was also an outstanding teacher well known in Bulgaria. Aprilov could not have made a better choice when he asked Neofit Rilski to join the teaching staff in the Gabrovo school. Also the British and American Bible Societies commissioned him to translate for them the New Testament into Bulgarian.
6. **Dimitar** (1810 – 1862) and **Konstantin** (1830 – 1862) **Miladinov**, were two brothers born in Struga, Macedonia. As teachers they collected many folk songs which they published in 1861 in Zagreb. The book was entitled *A Collection of Bulgarian Folk Songs*. This important work would not have been published without the help of Joseph Strossmeyer, Bishop of Zagreb. Soon after the publication of their book the Miladinovs mysteriously died in Constantinople prison where they were completely isolated for their dynamic pro-Bulgarian activity.
7. **Georgi Sava Rakovski** (1821 – 1867), fellow citizen of Sophronii, Bozveli and Beron, was an enthusiastic patriot who fought for the freedom of his country with both sword and pen. His best known book, the *Forest Traveller*, described the sufferings and hardships of the Bulgarian people. It greatly appealed to the young people with its call for freedom and they memorized many of its passages. As a political leader he was in close contact with Balkan statesmen, particularly the Serbians. In Belgrade he organized the Bulgarian Legion with the idea of starting a war of liberation together with the Serbians. Rakovski also published several newspapers abroad.
8. **Petko Rachov Slaveikov** (1827 – 1895), a great poet, journalist and a national leader and statesman, was born in Turnovo. He was a living example of a genuine democrat, who considered the interests of the people to be the very essence of his public activity. He greatly helped in the titanic struggle for the Bulgarian national church (which became a reality in 1870). As a poet and journalist he published many books and newspapers which made him widely known throughout the country. His greatest service to the modern Bulgarian literature was his extensive use of the vernacular as a literature language. In the 1860-es, at the invitation of the American Bible Society, Slaveikov became one of the translators and editors of the Bulgarian text of the Bible. Slaveikov's mastery of the language greatly contributed to the excellent Bulgarian version of the Holy Scriptures.
9. **Lyuben Karavelov** (1837 – 1879) left his native Koprivshtitza while still a young man and spent more than twenty years as a political émigré in Russia, Serbia and Rumania. He was a good linguist and wrote in Bulgarian, Russian and Serbian. He completed many poems, short stories and novellettes. *Bulgarians of Old Times* is his best known short story. This great political leader headed the Revolutionary Committee in Bucharest. His ideas were aired in several newspapers he published abroad. In the person of Vassil

Levski (1837 – 1873), a daring freedom fighter and most devoted patriot Bulgaria has ever known, Karavelov had a trusted friend and adviser. Karavelov worked not only for the liberation of Bulgaria but also strongly advocated the idea of a Balkan confederation, recommending Switzerland and the United States of America as models.

10. **Christo Botev** (1848 – 1876) was a flaming patriot of exceptional poetic talents. Although he died very young, critics rate many of his twenty poems as classics in Bulgarian literature. Prof. R.A. Tsanoff said that “Botev was a poet of Marlowe’s intensity, if not of the latter’s sweep and imagination – a genius that might have done wonders had he lived, judging from the handful of lyrics he left behind him”.

Hating tyranny, Botev left his native Kalofer, a town just south of the Balkan Mountains, and went first to Russia and then to Rumania. In the latter country he published newspapers and planned the destruction of the Ottoman Empire. He led a band of Bulgarian patriots in 1876 and died for the freedom of his native land. Thus he put into practice what he preached in his short life.

“Kindle in me, God Almighty, Burning love for human freedom,
Help me fight with dauntless courage the enslavers of my people.
Strengthen my right hand, O Father, When the slaves arise from slumber;
Make me one of Thy bold warriors; Take my life – give others freedom.”

From Botev’s *Prayer*

Translated by R.H.Markham, *Meet Bulgaria*, p.216

11. **Ivan Vazov** (1850 – 1921) is the most popular national poet and author of Bulgaria. He was born in Sopot, which is located at the edge of the world famous Rose Valley. In many respects most of his writings were an echo of the feelings and experiences of his countrymen. Vazov’s masterpiece *Under the Yoke*, portraying life in Bulgaria in 1876, is still the best Bulgarian novel. Published in 1889 it was translated in all the important European and few Asiatic languages.

Vazov was the link between the epoch of the revival and the era of the newly created free nation of Bulgaria. No other Bulgarian poet has so well interpreted the greatness of Bulgarian renaissance. Vazov’s famous *Epic of the Forgotten* paid special tribute to Paisii and other heroic Bulgarians who dedicated and sacrificed their lives for the greatness, freedom, and independence of their own country.

Assen Nicoloff, Cleveland Ohio, May 1962.