Radio Prague interviewed Prof. David Cooper, Director of REEEC, about his research into and translation of the Green Mountain Manuscript (Rukopis zelenohorský) and the Queen's Court Manuscript (Rukopis královédvorský) from the 19th century. The following is a re-posting of the original interview, published on June 8, 2015. The complete article, including an audio recording of the interview, can be found here.

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The Green Mountain Manuscript (Rukopis zelenohorský) and the Queen's Court Manuscript (Rukopis královédvorský) were important texts in the Czech National Revival of the 19th century, helping to underpin burgeoning national consciousness and becoming part of the broader culture.

However, the compendia of Czech legends and folklore turned out to be forgeries. David Cooper of the University of Illinois is currently in Prague doing research into and translating the manuscripts. He discussed them on a visit to our studios last week.

“The Queen's Court Manuscript and the Green Mountain Manuscript are made to look like medieval manuscripts and they contain poetic texts.

“The biggest one is the Queen's Court Manuscript. It has six epic poems that relate historical battles – some of which are historical, some of which are not.

“The Green Mountain Manuscript was just a single poetic text. The first manuscript by its appearance looks like it comes from the 13th century.

“The Green Mountain Manuscript by its appearance looks like it came from around the 9th century, so really quite early.

“It contains an account of the legendary Libuše holding court for a dispute between two brothers over their father's inheritance. This is a story that is also known from Czech chronicles, but this is sort of a unique account of it.”

What was the purpose of these texts?

“This was a moment in European literature when everyone was rediscovering the medieval roots of their literature.

“As they were breaking away from classical models they were looking to their own native traditions for new models, for new ways of advancing their own literature going forward. And to go forward they often looked to the past.

“This is a period when the French rediscovered The Song of Roland, when some years later Beowulf was discovered again, The Song of Cid for Spain, and the Germans had of course discovered the Nibelungen song.

“The Czechs were looking in their manuscript traditions for similar kinds of material and they weren't finding it.

“The feeling was that it certainly had to exist, because every other European nation that had a literature… And the Czechs had a literature already from the 14th century that had begun in this epic tradition, singing historical heroic songs.

“When they didn't find it, they figured either it was burnt during the Hussite Wars, when a lot of Czech manuscripts were burnt, or during the Counter-Reformation in the 17th and 18th centuries, when Czech manuscripts took heavy losses.

“The idea was that they had had it but it was lost. This was an attempt to recreate it. It also has to do with the cultural competition with the German speakers in Bohemia.”

This was during the Czech Nation Revival?

“Yes, this was the second decade of the 19th century [when the texts were produced]. The Czech national movement is just starting to develop some momentum. People are signing on to it. They want to do work to develop Czech nationality and they really need this.

“The feeling is, and the understanding of national literature is at this point, that they need something like this as a base, as a ground in order to go forward.”

When these texts were discovered or disseminated what impact did they have?

“The two manuscripts really had quite different fates. The first one that was discovered was the Queen's Court Manuscript and it was never in question. People accepted it as authentic and it wasn't really until the 1870s that you started to get serious questions about its authenticity.

“The reason you started to get those questions was because of the second manuscript, which was in doubt really right from the very beginning. Ninth century, Czech writing, Czech poetic traditions...
– this was at least three centuries earlier than anything they'd seen before. So it was immediately suspicious.

"Josef Dobrovský, who was one of the spiritual founders of the Czech National Revival, said immediately, 'It's a fake, it comes from my students – they're the only ones who know Old Czech well enough to fake it…'"

So the counterfeiters went too far?

"Yes, essentially they went too far. The thing is that the Czech patriots embraced the second manuscript as well. They defended it against Dobrovský and other sceptics and they held the two manuscripts together as almost kind of sacred texts for the Czech National Revival.

"One of the things I'm interested in is and that I'm looking at is a sort of quasi-religious faith in the manuscripts. To be a Czech patriot in some sense meant to believe in the authenticity of both of the manuscripts."

And the Green Mountain Manuscript entered the broader culture?

"Yes, it did. For example if you go to the National Theatre, on the ceiling of the lobby on the second floor there's a painting of Libuše sitting in court on a golden throne, her father's golden throne. This is a phrase which is repeated – it's sort of a mantra – in the Green Mountain Manuscript. The depiction of Libuše in the National Theatre, which was of course constructed in the late 19th century… this is a moment when the controversy was already starting about the authenticity of the manuscripts."

How was the falsification discovered?

"It happens at a moment when Prague University is undergoing a kind of crisis. It splits into a German faculty and a Czech faculty. The young scholars in the Czech faculty need to establish themselves, need to establish their legitimacy.

"One of them, Jan Gebauer, who's a historical linguist, has been working on the manuscripts for some time, has been a defender of their authenticity, but he's starting to have doubts.

"There are starting to be too many exceptions they have to make in terms of the nature of Old Czech for these manuscripts. It's starting to become clear to him that they don't fit in, that their language doesn't fit into the historical development of Czech.

"It's really Gebauer in the lead, although the organiser of the campaign against the authenticity of the manuscripts was led by the future first president of Czechoslovakia, Tomáš Masaryk."

And Masaryk got a lot of abuse for his stance on the issue.

"Yes, he did. He and Gebauer and the other scholars who were involved in writing these articles, laying out the evidence for the falsification of the manuscripts, were called national traitors.

"These manuscripts had so become part of what it meant to be a Czech patriot and so much a part of Czech national mythology that to call them false was a serious betrayal.

"Gebauer, for example, for at least 10 years had terrible problems getting any of his scholarly work published.

"The journal that had originally published the articles had to step away from it. Masaryk had to find financial support in order to get it published. They were really personae non grata for a while in Czech patriotic circles."

If I understand it right, you believe that these texts, although false, benefited the Czech nation?

"I do, yes. And I think that's the direction that the research is going in on these manuscripts these days."

"It's really since a couple of decades after they were shown to be false that the manuscripts sort of came back into the study of Czech literature, as examples of poetry from the early 19th century. So if you do a study of how Czech poetry developed, the manuscripts are included.

"What weren't included were the people suspected of being their authors. The usual suspects – Vaclav Hanka, Josef Linda – you don't find books written about them. You don't find studies of their other writing, because they've been pushed out.

"So one of the things that's happening is a recognition that this is some of the most influential poetry of the first half of the 19th century.

"It was the most translated work of Czech literature for most of the 19th century into English. The authors deserve some credit for that, rather than exile, essentially."

And you are translating again now?

"I am, yes. The first translation was done…"
interesting contacts in the first half of the 19th century between England and Bohemia.

“There was a Slavist, John Bowring, who published the very first ever anthology of Czech literature in English. He included in that several of the songs from these manuscripts, as well as some other mystifications, literature that pretended to be something that it wasn’t.

“There was another translator, and I’ve never gotten the first name, it’s A. Vratislav. He was a second generation immigrant to England who had studied at Cambridge. He also produced a translation of the entire manuscripts.

“But both of these translations were done in the 1840s and they’ve aged a little bit. Vratislav was fond of rhyme and used rhyme in the epic poems, which really doesn’t belong in epic poems.

“The poems from the manuscripts were sort of programmatically unrhymed. The idea was that rhyme came to Czech culture from German culture, which isn’t true – it came along with Christian culture.

“So the idea was that if you want to get back to authentic, original, Slavic Czech poetry, it’s certainly unrhymed.”

As well as doing these translations, you’re also writing a book about unresolved issues surrounding the manuscripts. What are those unresolved issues?

“One of the main issues still remains authorship. They’ve never found any direct evidence of participation in the creation of the manuscripts.

“There’s primarily indirect evidence. They’ve never found drafts or correspondence. The conspirators were apparently quite careful.”

There’s no smoking gun?

“There’s no smoking gun. But there is a lot of evidence in terms of the types of things that the people who were probably involved wrote elsewhere that connect pretty clearly to the way that the manuscripts were composed.

“Also thinking about the idea of authorship in the Romantic period and the role that forgery plays in that, newer perspectives on this that have also been worked out in the study of English literature in connection with the forgeries of Macpherson, the Ossian poems – this needs to be thought through again in Czech literature.

“Also if we’re going to rehabilitate the authors of these poems [we need] to see forgery as a Romantic form of creativity, rather than a trespass against creativity.”

My impression is that the word mystification [mystifikace] is much more common in Czech than in English. Czechs, it seems to me, have a kind of sympathy with mystification. Would you agree?

“And a lot of Czechs embrace this playful aspect of Czech culture and this idea that we can have fun making things up and not have that be damaging.”

You’re a specialist in literary forgeries. What’s the attraction of that area?

“Partly the taboo of it. And the opportunity to overturn and open up that taboo, to look at why forgery was so long considered to be a kind of literary crime.

“If you go back and look at the medieval period, forgery has a different feel and a different morality about it. Forgery has always been a very common practice and there are periods in which forgery was a celebrated method.

“It was often a necessary method, in order for culture to be able to sort of replicate itself and to advance itself.

“The paradox is that the Romantic period, the early 19th century, both sort of invites forgery, demands forgery, forgeries are prevalent in the period.

“At the same time, it’s this period which creates the idea of the original work and the original authorial genius creating out of nothing.

“That’s not really how creativity works, so forgery is one of the supplements that’s necessary in the period. But when people start to worry about authenticity – which is also a big Romantic value – and originality, forgeries look like the biggest transgression against that.

“One of the paradoxes that I’m exploring is the fact that this Romantic period sort of pushes forward the method of forgery and makes it quite common, but also creates the values that make it illicit.”