THE PICTURE OF ENGLAND AND ENGLISHMEN IN POLISH MEMOIRS DURING THE REIGN OF STANISLAUS AUGUSTUS (1764–1795)

Dariusz Rolnik

England of the second half of the eighteenth century was hardly known in Poland. The English style was on a moderate scale followed by small élites, mainly those interested in systems of government. The king of Poland, Stanislaus Augustus can, though not quite undoubtedly, be counted among them.1 As for economic and social matters things looked similar although here the scope of interests was broader and ranged from English carriages through innovations in agriculture and gardening up to granting rights to common people. Nevertheless, here also the influence on the nobility in the Republic was rather limited. In that respect knowledge was most frequently drawn from the contemporary press or foreign publications.2

Memoirs referring to the times of King Stanislaus Augustus include almost 380 works that fall into three groups. The first comprises memoirs finished before the year 1795. The second is memoirs written by those who survived the fall of Poland and accounted for it. Last but not least, there are works whose authors, born after the year 1780, drew the information about the period from their parents’ or grandparents’ stories. They also perceived England through the lens of other, more recent historical events. The division, though informal, illustrates the changes in Poles’ interest in various questions, including the ones connected with England and Englishmen. A selection was made from among the memoirs, maintaining proportions so that the sample was representative of each group. Only the most suggestive and complete ones were chosen. To elaborate the entire body of material and generate statistics, though productive, remains a task for the future.

1 See Butterwick, Stanisław August a kultura angielska, pp. 235–54.
Unlike with epistolary sources, the material analyzed makes it possible to some extent to show a more stable and “stereotyped” picture of the “distant oversea land,” one probably more firmly fixed in the imagination of the Polish citizens of the second half of eighteenth century. The picture was certainly influenced by both the journalistic debate on reform in the Republic and by current events discussed in political and private correspondence. After all, as opposed to other sources, memoir accounts offer a view of events from a distance much like diaries which, written day by day, acquire a distance through their writers’ reluctance to publish them immediately. Besides, diarists usually undertake to redraft their works after years. Materials of this kind are also referred to in this study. Researchers have given much more attention to the actual influence of English patterns on various spheres of life in Poland so historical works on the questions of stereotyped perception of England and Englishmen in the eighteenth century are relatively few and are principally based on other sources or make use of the memoirs of the second half and the turn of eighteenth century.

The present study serves to supplement this area of research.

Little was written in Polish memoirs about England and Englishmen because, in fact, little was known about them or at least the knowledge was not so common as was that, say, about France. A good example may be drawn from Stanislaus Augustus’ diary of his journey to Pińśk in 1784. It is all the more significant as the diary was written for propaganda purposes. As already mentioned, the king was to some extent fascinated by England and actually tried to promote the adoption of English patterns in various fields. Being entertained by Mateusz Butrymowicz, a man shown in a very good light, the king noticed that one of his sons was named Ryszard. Surprised, the king asked his host how it had come that he had given his son an English name. Butrymowicz answered thoughtlessly, “I took it from a calendar.”

The anecdote shows that in the provinces knowledge about England was slight yet gradually reaching even the most distant corners of the Republic and was adopted quite openly. With the passing of time inter-

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5 See for example Grześkowiak-Krwawicz, “Publicystyka polska lat 1772–1792”; Lorentz, “Stosunki artystyczne polsko-angielskie”; Rostworowski, “Repulikinizm polski, i anglosacki.” For more extensive bibliography see Butterwick, Stanisław August a kultura angielska, pp. 347–73.

4 See for example Bystroń, Dzieje obyczajów, pp. 102–104; Niewiara, Wyobrażenia o narodach, pp. 55–61.