

# Reinis and Matīss KAUDZĪTES

Reinis Kaudzīte 1839—1920; Matīss Kaudzīte 1848—1926  
Writers, teachers, public figures, prominent personalities in cultural life



The brothers Reinis and Matīss Kaudzītes have place in the living memory of Latvia for their novel *"Mērnīeku laiki"* [The Times of Land Surveyors], written from 2 September 1876 until 18 March 1879. It unfolds a vast, subtly observed and elaborate picture of the era. This work conveys the essence of Latvian life so truly and fully that it has an irreplaceable significance in the history of Latvian culture and literature. Scientists, literary critics and students would place it first when telling about Latvian literature. Every reader would find characters in it that later appear in different patterns in Latvian novels and short stories. While writing *"Mērnīeku laiki"*, the brothers Kaudzītes set the principle of dividing all people into four groups. In the book, Kaspars, one of the heroes, says: "There are four groups of people. The first is like plants that bloom abundantly, but bear no fruit; they boast of faith, but do no good. The second is like plants that bloom abundantly and bear good fruit; they prove their faith by their deeds. The third is like plants with simple blossoms, but plentiful fruit; they would not boast of their faith, but do well. The fourth has neither faith nor fruit, like plants that neither bloom abundantly nor bear good fruit." This division can be traced in other Latvian authors' works that follow a more complicated model rather than the simple "good-against-evil". The brothers Kaudzītes developed their novel as scenes of country life by following a pre-planned plot. It must be noted that at the time no world-level novel had yet been translated into Latvian, not to speak of having been written. This explains why in this first Latvian novel one can at times feel the presence of a German story line; however, the characters are truly authentic.

Reinis Kaudzīte was born on 12 May 1839 at the *Madari* farmstead in Vecpiebalga. He had never gone to school, but he learned the trade of a spinning-wheel master and earned so much money that he acquired the right to manage, and later to buy, the farmstead of *Kalna Kaibēni* in 1867. In 1868 the parish

They wrote the first Latvian novel *"Mērnīeku laiki"* about the re-surveying of peasants' land and the marking of new borders in the Latvian countryside of Piebalga around 1870.

They were the first Latvian tourists. In the far-off 19th century the two brothers went on foot from their native Piebalga to Central Europe, their only equipment being the traditional canes, suitcases and hats. In 1889 they visited the Eiffel Tower and the World Exposition in Paris; they travelled to Sicily in the south and to Finland in the north; later they reflected their travelling experience in books and in the press. When roaming Europe, Reinis was wearing his traditional Piebalga coat; he explained to the Parisians: "The fashion designers, they don't ever come up with anything new; they just add something to what already exists or take something off!"

They were influential people in Piebalga. Matīss Kaudzīte was the first in Piebalga to wear a suit, and others followed the fashion. Matīss Kaudzīte started planting trees around houses and along roads, and so did landowners in all of central Vidzeme. The brothers were the founders of a savings-and-loan society,

established a school in their house, and Matīss Kaudzīte was taken on as a teacher there, while his brother Reinis was given the job of his assistant. Reinis Kaudzīte, a teacher for seventeen years, constantly improved his education. He learned many foreign languages, read fiction in the original, but later wrote textbooks in Latvian and Russian for schools on catechism, history of religion and geography. The textbooks were reprinted about twenty times, and they were used in the whole of Russia. In later years Reinis Kaudzīte was the parish elder, he founded a fire-fighters' society for Cēsis District and, under the name of R. Vidzemnieks, wrote articles for newspapers. In a number of publications he defended the rights of Latvian peasants and the Latvian language; he also condemned the German clergy for their attempts to lord over the Latvian people. Influenced by Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Reinis Kaudzīte wrote about four hundred aphorisms with a philosophical ethical content. He spent the end of his days together with his housekeeper Karlīne Damroze in Riga, Sigulda and Saulkrasti, and died at his *Kalna Kaibēni* farmstead on 21 August 1920.

Matīss Kaudzīte was born on 18 August 1848 at the *Madari* farmstead in Vecpiebalga. He went to Vecpiebalga Parish School, passed exams to become a tutor, and from 1868 worked as a teacher at *Kalna Kaibēni* Parish School; in 1911 he retired. Vecpiebalga owes much to Matīss Kaudzīte for its growing into a centre of Latvian culture. He participated in the work of the Riga Latvian Society from its foundation, but in Vecpiebalga he founded a Music Society.

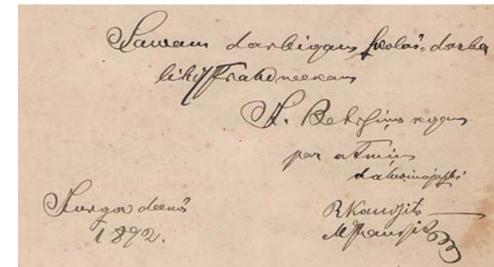
Matīss Kaudzīte wrote several other literary works, though none were as popular as *"Mērnīeku laiki"*. He died on 8 November 1926 at *Kalna Kaibēni*.



Matīss Kaudzīte lived a long, rich and creative life. His literary and publicist heritage is extensive; it includes prose as well as poetry. In the 1920s, after the death of his brother, M. Kaudzīte wrote *"Jaunie Mērnīeku laiki"* [The New Era of Land Surveyors], where he sharply caricatured the Bolshevik government of Latvia in 1919. Soviet literary critics fiercely criticised the work and the book was banned



"A beautiful, slim girl with brown eyes" was Eliza Rātmindere, Matīss's beloved. Both were already friends from the age of eighteen, but Eliza's mother didn't agree to the wedding. Eliza rejected the marriage proposals of seventeen wealthy men provided by her mother, including a land surveyor from Piebalga, Andrejs Pumpurs. Eliza and Matīss married at the age of forty-five and lived happily, although they did not leave any descendants



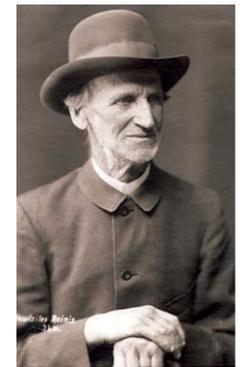
**Literary critics and translators.** Matīss Kaudzīte also worked in literary criticism, rendered and translated the works of H. Heine, G. Merkel, F. Schiller, M. Lermontov and A. Pushkin. M. Kaudzīte also wrote a compilation of memories about the 19th century headlines of Latvian literature and culture *"Atmiņas par tautisko laikmetu"* [Memories of the National Period] now serving as the sole source of information about many personalities of the period. M. Kaudzīte retained his elder brother's opinions in his works, and for this reason many of his works may be regarded as their common creation



Reinis Kaudzīte lived as a bachelor. Reinis, a bachelor in his forties, once decided to marry. However, at the last moment he has apologised to the parents of the chosen bride on the pretext that he "had a nervous disease" and offered a large gift (400 roubles) as moral compensation. Legend tells us that Reinis had seen his wife-to-be putting freshly baked bread on the ground, and this sight horrified him



The second love of Matīss Kaudzīte's life was gardening. Matīss arranged an arboretum in his garden — "the Corner of Memories", where he wrote his famous poem *"Brūklenājs"* [The Cowberry Bush]



Although having no formal education himself, he created textbooks for others. Reinis Kaudzīte (illustration at right) is the author of textbooks in geography and religion, which were used not only in Latvia, but also in Russia



The first realistic Latvian novel. The Kaudzītes brothers were the first in Latvian literature to create artistically expressive characters able to evoke aesthetical and emotional feelings. Not only fellow parishioners of the Kaudzītes have found their Švaukstis and Pietuka Krustiņš, the characters of their novel, nearby. Literary critics claim the novel to be the cornerstone of Latvian realistic literature, because the characters of the novel differ radically from those reflected in earlier prose and dramatic works



"Those spokesmen have power in their hands". The Kaudzītes brothers became the leaders of cultural and social life at Piebalga. The intellectuals of Piebalga convened with the Kaudzīte brothers in so called *Kirpja vakari*, evenings dedicated to discussion and reading and writing to newspapers



*Kalna Kaibēni*: the school where the Kaudzītes brothers lived and worked. There were no trees around the houses at the first half of the 19th century at Piebalga; everything was burnt as firewood or turned into timber. Matīss planted trees near the school and taught the inhabitants of Piebalga to plant trees near their homes. However, towards the end of his life he discovered that trees growing too near the school caused its roof to rot; he therefore cut down the closest trees himself