

## INTRODUCTION

Mór Jókai was the greatest novelist of the romantic tradition in Hungary; even now, more than sixty years after his death, he is one of the country's most widely read authors. His fame and popularity transcend the boundaries of language: no other Hungarian writer's works have been as widely and as frequently translated into as many languages as Jókai's. On one occasion, Zola, the greatest of all naturalist writers, whose approach to the novel was diametrically different, called Jókai 'the Homer of the nineteenth century' even though he had read only a few of Jókai's works, and in very inferior translations.

Various critics have at times attacked Jókai for his lack of realism. But his readers were never deterred. The critics have been forgotten; Jókai was read and is still being read; his novels are filmed again and again, and many of his heroes still live in the popular imagination as unsurpassed examples of noble and ignoble conduct.

During the eight decades of his life (1825-1904) he witnessed and several times actively participated in the historical process by which a backward, long-oppressed Hungary finally embarked on the road to becoming a bourgeois society, trying to cover two hundred years of evolution in one generation. He was twenty-three years old and just reaching his first literary success when the Hungarian revolution flared up in 1848 under Kossuth's leadership. Then came the War of Independence, which

was defeated after a year and a half of heroic struggle. Hungary came to lose even her formal political existence: for eighteen years she remained one among many oppressed, exploited, silently suffering and nearly despairing Habsburg principalities. None the less, by 1867 Vienna was forced to relent. The march of history could not be stopped: feudalism was coming to an end, even in Hungary, and an urban middle class was developing at last. The stubborn, unrelenting resistance of the Hungarian people to Austrian rule continued to be a threat to the Habsburg empire. The Hungarian landed aristocracy were ready for a compromise with the Austrians, and they had a following in the new middle classes who were economically dependent on them. By these, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy was established; a piebald federation united in foreign affairs, defence and finance, but still remaining as two sharply divided and ever antagonistic nations. Although Hungary continued in this semi-colonial state until the break-up of the monarchy in 1918, the development of Hungary, however much it still lagged behind, could none the less follow European trends after 1867.

This great upsurge of the nineteenth century soon brought Hungarian literature in line with the Romantics of Western Europe. The long period of political oppression and the retarded social development of the country prolonged our Romantic era: before 1848, romanticism had offered inspiration, from 1849 to 1867, it brought comfort and from 1867 to the turn of the century it formulated the ideals of the new middle classes. After all, in any country where a middle class is in the process of establishing itself, the purpose of the arts is not realistic social criticism, but the romanticising of middle-class virtues. Romanticism was the literary equivalent and often the expression of liberalism in politics. It was this which made the great English and French romantic poets and novelists so popular in Hungary. Walter Scott, Byron, Dickens, Victor Hugo and Dumas père were the favourite reading of a public that had been growing from a thin crust into a vast class. They served as models to a

fast-growing Hungarian romantic literature, and they were so deeply absorbed into Hungarian popular culture that Walter Scott, Dickens and Victor Hugo have remained to this day at the head of lending-statistics in libraries.

By the time the young Jókai, studying law, painting and literature simultaneously, appeared on the literary scene of the 1840's, there was already a Hungarian literature, mainly poetry, but also novels betraying the influence of Sir Walter Scott and poetic drama modelled on Victor Hugo. Jókai had learnt much from his predecessors, and even more from their models, but his limitless imagination, visual perception, gripping narrative technique and his unusually wide and many-sided intellectual interests soon showed his to be a truly original talent.

His family belonged to the lesser nobility, living in middle-class circumstances (his father was an advocate, too) and he had absorbed at home a liberal, democratic spirit which made him join the revolution, and remain its champion to the end. He was an active revolutionary in 1848, and was in hiding, under an official death sentence, after 1849. Later he became an influential journalist and in the years of the Compromise, a member of parliament. After the Compromise of 1867 he believed, like many others, that the country's progress could proceed from where it had been interrupted in 1849. As he grew older, he became more and more aware of the realities: that feudal abuses had survived, and that the people were miserable and helpless under a surface gloss of national independence and middle-class progress. Disillusion came slowly: it was hard for him to admit disappointment. But a critical tone crept into his novels again and again, though paralleled by an even greater romantic enthusiasm for escaping reality. His stories were becoming more far-fetched and more critical at the same time. In his old age, he began to formulate hopes of a Utopian socialism, though socialism remained incomprehensible, basically, to his fundamentally liberal mind, just as the soul's bitter despair was ever unknown to his Olympian good humour.

By the prime of his life, he had achieved unparalleled contemporary fame in his country, and his renown had spread through the continent. Jókai's novels and tales are always delightful reading: they express man's finest aspirations, and his unforgettable characters—even if they are dramatic exaggerations or psychologically one-sided—symbolize the basic patterns of human behaviour, while his heroes represent all the magnificent qualities which self-respecting men seek to achieve. Such an ideal, guiding example, such an envied and emulated model is Iván Berend, the hero of *The Dark Diamonds*.

Of Jókai's life-work, which exceeds a hundred bound volumes, the best originated in the years after 1867, but before his disillusion had set in during the middle 1870's. In these years, he wrote hardly any historical romances: the memory of 1848, the ever present recent past excited his imagination. He who could conjure up such splendid warrior heroes now created the prototype middle-class hero, sorely needed by the Hungary of the day. Iván Berend of *The Dark Diamonds* (written in 1870) was the most perfect embodiment of the bourgeois ideal. His past was exemplary: he had been a cavalry officer in the revolutionary forces. In the present-time of the novel, he managed his medium-sized capital assets with faultless wisdom; as a natural scientist, he was brilliant and respected; expert in the tricks of the Stock Exchange, but at the same time, able to hold his own with the aristocracy: a reckless duellist, a heroic gambler, and it would be difficult to imagine a more successful lover. Could there be a man who would not wish to be like him?

And the story of this outstanding career, the political, economic and amatory adventures which surround it, the angelic or satanic figures who none the less resemble people, are all set in a romantic, yet scientific, vision of man's relationship with the earth—not the soil, but the geology of the earth's crust. A crisis of nature and a brief phase of Hungary's history in the still oppressed years preceding 1867 come together in the intricate plot. The conclusion brings the reader to a Utopian society,

where the class-war ends in the love-match between the surprisingly humane capitalist and a girl from his mine, who had miraculously retained her purity in the midst of physical dirt and moral corruption.

The hero and many of the incidents were closely modelled on various contemporary men and events, and Hungarian critics have argued much about whose character was most closely portrayed in Iván Berend, and which contemporary scandals were reflected in the plot. But for the reader, this has long since become unimportant; it no longer matters much, even in Hungary, and even less abroad. The work has outstripped by far the sources of the story and its romance has thrilled each new generation. The protagonists are known to thousands of readers, and loved like personal friends; and Iván Berend remains forever an object for envy among men and among women, an object for daydreams.

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