

BLACKWELL AND HUNGARY

THOMAS KABDEBO

The Library, St. Patrick's College, Manooth, Co. Kildare, Ireland

How was it that an Englishman, born in Cobridge, Staffordshire, two years before the birth of the nineteenth century became, for a while, an influential western "diplomat" in Hungary? How is it, that even today, the name of Joseph Andrew Blackwell is not only known but respected by every Hungarian historian of the 1848/49 and of the preceding "reform" era? Is his personality, activities, reports and views — all coming to the fore between the third and the fifth decade of the last century — of special interest to us today?

J. A. Blackwell was the son of a wealthy manufacturer of china products who owned kilns in Cobridge, in the heart of 'The Potteries.' His branch of the family — which, according to family tradition had come from Scotland — was Roman Catholic. Joseph Andrew Blackwell was christened in the Catholic Church, attended the Catholic School, had part of his money invested in the Catholic Congregational trust fund and was one of the circle of Catholic intellectuals in Cobridge. When his father Joseph Blackwell died, the family firm was headed by a younger brother called John Blackwell (incidentally not a Catholic, but Church of England) who became the young Joseph's guardian.

Blackwell spent the 1820s travelling around Europe, sightseeing, learning languages, pursuing amateurish studies of geology, natural history, architecture. His favourite book, at that time, was Childe Harold, his hero Byron, his intellectual development influenced by Lamarck's thesis, that allowed for monkeys to be among our ancestors, decades before Darwin's *Origins of the species* was published. Joseph Blackwell did the *grand tour* of Europe, living in expensive hotels, hiring guides, consorting with continental gentlemen and aristocrats on tour, learning good French, fluent Italian and excellent German. Starting out from London in 1819 he traversed France and Germany, sojourned in Austria and in Hungary, and spent a longish time in Italy. In Hungary he met the learned "professor" Fidelis Mayer secretary to Prince Pál Esterházy, the richest magnate in Hungary and one of the greatest landowners in Europe, west of Russia. On his second continental journey, starting in 1822 Blackwell stayed in France, Switzerland and Italy, for a while, but settled in Austria from the winter of 1826 onwards. In Vienna he met his future wife — writing rather mediocre but sincere love poems to her — visited his in-laws, a retired army officer and his wife in Graz, and seemed to have been ready to live a comfortable life of a gentleman abroad, on the

proceeds of the family firm back in Cobridge. However John Blackwell died in 1828 – the boat was rocking – and his firm was dissolved in 1831. His former partners, the Dillons family carried on.

Joseph Blackwell had to live on – as he put it in a letter to a Cobridge friend Francis Emery – “his wits” and “of his pen.” The former included trading with Bohemian clay and, when back in England for a few years in the late thirties, gathering political intelligence for the Radicals. The latter comprised all his literary and journalistic activities, his work as a publisher’s reader for Dunstable and for Murray. We do not know how he acquired the skill but Blackwell was able to tackle Danish and Icelandic manuscripts, wrote reviews in this field and – when he found himself again with time on his hand in 1846 – he compiled and published a “Northern miscellany”. Meanwhile, in London in 1837, he made the acquaintance of the Russian Chargé d’Affaires (tried to sell English china through him to the Imperial Russian Court) and gleaned as much information from him as to be able to write, convincingly, a short article on *Russian territorial aggrandizement*.

Blackwell’s Hungarian connections came to light with a series of articles, entitled Acts of the Hungarian Diet, 1832–1836, in the 1837 issues of the *Athenaeum*. Apart from reporting from these parliamentary sessions held at Pozsony (equals Pressburg, equals Bratislava) in which the Hungarian reformers of the day (liberals as well as tory radicals) fought the conservatives, and through them the Vienna government, Blackwell had forecasted the eventual outcome of these battles. To put it succinctly, Blackwell predicted that, unless the Austrian government gave way on reforms, and eventually allowed self-government in Hungary, a clash was unavoidable. In these articles, as well as in letters Blackwell was to write to Palmerston, the Foreign Secretary, there are pithy quotations from a pamphlet, entitled “A few remarks on our foreign policy”, which Blackwell published in 1836 but no one saw in this century. From the quotations one may surmise that Blackwell advocated a kind of Danubian federation, with Hungary as its natural, geographical as well as political centre, which could be strong enough to check the Russian tide once the Austrian monarchy fell apart.

Sir Robert Gordon was British Ambassador in Vienna until 1846 and a patron of Blackwell. He had read the *Athenaeum* series, liked them, and commissioned Blackwell to report on the next session of the Hungarian Diet. Thus in 1843 Joseph Blackwell became a diplomatic agent on a daily wage of 2 guineas plus expenses, the modern equivalent of perhaps a hundred pounds. His home at the time, was his wife’s family home in Graz, where his young son was growing up, but he was put up in good hotels in Pozsony and Pest for weeks. Vienna police spies knew and reported about it, but so did the Prince Palatine, the King’s Viceroy in Hungary, or the prelates whose company he sought. At weekends he stayed as a guest at the large provincial houses of titled families, such as the Zichy-Ferraris or, occasionally, the Széchenyis. Although Blackwell believed in the vitality and positively interpreted the progressive side of Magyar nationalism, he was well aware of the Croatian claims as well, and foresaw that the two must clash, well before Hungarian politicians were prepared to tackle the ques-

tion. Of the two chief Hungarian protagonists, the aristocratic, ebullient Széchenyi and the lawyer Kossuth, with impoverished petty-noble background, he liked neither; he thought highly of Eötvös, an eminent educator and a writer of seminal novels, of Szalay, a scholar of jurisprudence who conducted diplomatic missions, of Szemere, the future prime minister of Kossuth's independent 1849 ministry and Count K. Batthyány, the future Hungarian Foreign Secretary.

With the departure of Gordon, Blackwell's immediate boss in Vienna and with the change of the person of foreign secretary – Palmerston replaced Gordon's brother in London – Blackwell's task became more difficult.

Palmerston's balance of power theory would not allow any weakening of Austria and Lord Ponsonby, his representative in Vienna, seemed to have interpreted this policy so, that none should be reported. Consequently we have an interesting, well nigh extraordinary situation involving Blackwell. While Ponsonby's reports support the stability of Austria, reports by Blackwell, channelled through Ponsonby, do the opposite. And what is more, Blackwell had managed to find direct channels to Palmerston, thus avoiding Ponsonby's scrutiny. Between the beginning of 1843 and the end of 1849 Blackwell executed four Hungarian missions. In the last one he had a brief to take preliminary steps for peace negotiations between Austria and Hungary. *Alas*, he said in his concluding report to Palmerston, *it was all too late*.

Having lately travelled between London, Vienna, Pressburg (and occasionally) Zagreb, with short spells at his family's home in Graz, Blackwell now settled in London, once more trying to earn his living with his pen. The two more interesting products of this period between 1850 and 1854 were his long, serialised article on the "History of Hungarian war" (written anonymously) and his translation of K. Batthyány's *Hungarian characteristics*, which is still in manuscript in the library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Meanwhile Palmerston, at the behest of parliament published the "Blue Book" on Hungary in 1851, giving a somewhat prejudiced selection of the correspondence on Hungary. Some of the contemporary reviewers picked out Blackwell who had not hidden the truth. Blackwell – whose missions were secret or semi-secret, and was not used to operating in the limelight – was embarrassed, all the more so, as he was hoping for another position under Palmerston. As *Punch* called the Foreign Secretary "Chief Judicious bottle holder" on account of his feeble efforts for Hungary, Blackwell, in private, called himself "deputy bottle-holder".

Blackwell's main ambition in life had been the establishment of a British Consulate in Hungary. It came about only after the Compromise between Austria and Hungary – the early efforts had been foiled by Metternich – when Blackwell was already a consul, alas in Stettin. He held forth, steadfast, until his retirement in 1879, concerned with shipping, commercial affairs, toasting his wife on her namesday and polishing up sections of his memoirs. Apart from his voluminous correspondence and many reports of the Hungarian scene, Blackwell wrote a political *memoir*, subtitled the "Two bees." One B. refers to Blackwell, the other to Batthyány who, for translating his book, had promised a piece of land to Blackwell, once he was able to return from exile.

Blackwell's aspirations to become "a Hungarian gentleman" (something in which, another Englishman, John Paget had succeeded) were short lived as the ex Hungarian foreign secretary died in 1854.

Among English historians only Sproxton devoted more than a passing glance to Blackwell. Since the bulk of his political testimony is in Hungary — Blackwell had left his papers to his Austrianised son: Robert, and through him to the Hungarian Academy — Hungarian scholars have had easier access to it. Starting with Jenő Péterfy the literary historian and Jenő Horváth the diplomatic historian, many studies were written if not on Blackwell, but, with the posthumous help of Blackwell, by Hungarians. After the war it was Éva Haraszti, who took the trouble to compare some of Blackwell's original submissions with the edited versions in the Blue Book, and lately, Blackwell was the subject of a diploma thesis by Ágnes Katona.

Apart from Hungary, the Public Records Office in London yields now the Foreign Office documents, the Vienna State Archives contain certain correspondence of a political and the Potteries' Gladstone Museum of a private nature. Apart from that he frequently featured in the diaries of Hungarian contemporaries.

Blackwell described himself in his Journal, 1822 as "swarthy . . . strong of limbs . . . almost robust". Unfortunately there is no portrait of him although a portrait by him — presumably of his friend Count Zichy-Ferraris — survives in the Academy deposit.

Short Bibliography

Blackwell Papers, Hungarian Academy of Sciences Library, 1820–1881.

The Blue Book on Hungary (Correspondence relating to the affairs of Hungary). London, by order of Parliament, 1851 Foreign Office "Austria" volumes, 1843–1851.

Blackwell letters, Gladstone Pottery Museum, Stoke upon Trent.

C. Sproxton: Palmerston and the Hungarian Revolution, Cambridge, 1919.

Éva Haraszti: Palmerston a magyar szabadságharc ellen, Budapest, 1951.