GEORGE CUSHING

EGER – BRITISH CONNECTIONS

In a postscript to my article 'Making History Come Alive' I mentioned the Englishman who, having read **Egri csillagok**, visited Gárdonyi in Eger shortly before his death. He was by no means the first Englishman to go there, indeed there have been connections between Eger and Britain for a very long time. Here I shall recall some of them.

Egri csillagok ends with the withdrawal of the Turkish army, but that did not mean that Eger was saved from further attacks. The Turks still occupied Central Hungary and might return at any moment. The fortress was rebuilt – though not as completely as Gergely Bornemissza had planned – and the garrison was strengthened, but there was still a lack of large guns to repel a new attack. Nevertheless it was 44 years before the Turks made a new and this time decisive attempt to take Eger. It was important for them to succeed, for a new Sultan, Mehmet III, came to the throne in 1595, and he had to prove himself. So he personally organised the campaign of 1596 and monitored its progress; he also invited the English ambassador to accompany him, and the invitation was accepted, apparently without reference to London. The ambassador was Edward Barton, who was then and had made a name for himself for his work in Stamboul, particularly on behalf of the Levant Company, founded in 1581. John Sanderson, of that Company, had arrived in the Turkish capital not long before the Sultan's invitation had arrived, and Barton left him to report to London on events there. Barton supplied accounts of the campaign to him and to Sir Robert Cecil in London; he took with him a retinue of staff and servants to deliver his dispatches.

The very large Turkish army arrived before Eger at the same time of year as in 1552. Here is Barton's account:

'Our arrival in **Agria** happened the twelfth of September. The thirteenth the inhabitants set all their suburbs on fire ... though they

were well defended with a strong wall, yet the defendants being few in number and distrusting their own strength, left the defence of them and retired themselves within the Castle. The sixteenth ... seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth, they (the Turks) intended to undermine the Castle, and the twentieth, put fire thereto, but not succeeding to their mindes ... they gave courage to the defendants to make issue to mutuall damage. The foure and twentieth the assailants having made another breach, valiantly entered the same, but not being seconded with fresh forces, were repelled yet two houres after, in the same day, taking on them better courage, and more valiantly seconded, gave a new assault, when by chance **a woman in the Castle** setting fire upon a Barrell of Powder, and the souldiers of the Castle thinking it was a Mine fired in the Castle, for fear thereof retiring themselves, gave the Turkes courage to enter a small but strong Bastion, builded for the defence of a weake part of the castle, which they valiantly even to the last defended, and even after, with myning and countermyning, continuall assaults and skirmishes on both parts fighting, to the estreme losse of the defendants. The first of October, **an English Trumpetter** escaped out and fled to the Vice-Roy, requiring life and libertie, and declaring the weaknesse of the Castle, was brought before the Grand Signior, to whom likewise he made like relation, according to whose reports, the next day before Saturday, the Second of' October, the Castle was rendered, with compact that all the Souldiers should safely retire whither best they list, and the Inhabitants to remain continuall Inhabitants and owners of their former possessions, the latter of which promises was observed, but the first was broken, because the inhabitants of **Hatvan**, a Castle belonging to the Grand Signior, two dayes journey thence ... assaulted the said souldiers a mile from Agria in their departure, and cut them all to pieces, because Maximilian with the Emperours forces, having a month since taken Hatvan, did most cruelly without eompassion put all the Inhabitants to the sword.'[1]

In another letter addressed to the English Consul at Aleppo (Sandy), Barton describes how the defenders made a sudden attack on the Turks, killing some 2000 Janissaries and causing many in the army to flee to ' the Mountaines of Agria', so that it was by no means an easy siege. It was not until 13 October that Eger was taken. On the 19th the Sultan returned to Stamboul; Edward Barton went with him, but died, aged 35, in January 1597 and was buried there. His

eyewitness account contains a mystery: who was the 'English Trumpeter' who betrayed the weakness of the Castle? Hungarian sources concentrate on the indolence of the commander, Nyáry Pál, who allegedly preferred to sleep at night instead of repairing the damage caused by the heavy Turkish guns.

Eger remained in Turkish hands until 1687 and by all accounts was regarded as a civilised and peaceful place to live. It is worth noting that after its recapture a large number of the Turks who settled there continued to live in the town and gradually became assimilated. Meanwhile the name of Eger turns up in a totally different English narrative, the **Relation of Sydnam Poyntz** 1624–1636. Poyntz was one of the many soldiers who left Britain to seek their fortune overseas during this period. Some went merely to witness the wars against the Turks (e.g. Sir Philip Sidney, the poet and Sir Richard Grenville, better known as a mariner, who was at the siege of Szigetvár in 1566, or Captain John Smith, who fought in Transylvania before his exploits in Virginia). Sydnam Poyntz came from a good but impoverished family and left England to escape the boredom of an apprenticeship. He joined the forces of Count Mansfeld in the Thirty Years' War and was in Hungary in 1626. His **Relation** is his account of his adventures and should be read with a degree of scepticism; like a number of similar memoirs, it is probably exaggerated – it was fashionable to tell of being captured by Turks or, if at sea, of battles with Turkish pirates. Poyntz's story is told in elegant English, but his spelling of foreign names and his geographical knowledge are wildly inaccurate, moreover he sometimes contradicts himself. But he does appear to have visited Eger – and he uses the Hungarian form rather than the more usual German **Erlau**, which suggests that for once he is accurate. He describes how he was captured by Turkish troops after Mansfeld's death in 1626 (at Rakovica, near Sarajevo) and taken to Belgrade, where 'they stripped us of all we had, clothes and all, and shaved our heads and put us into a slavish habit.'[2] He was sold as a slave in the market at Buda. 'My master's name was Bully Basha, a Lieutenant of a Turkish troop of horse and also a great Merchant. Being thus a Captive and a Slave, the first thing I was put to was to fetch and carry wood, then to keep the Kine, after that to manure the Vineyards; in processe of time having got a smack of the language I was put to sell water up and down the Towne every day and night

bringing the money to my master, which water I carried upon a horse in leathar bags on either side the horse one.

Before I had lived a whole year in this Slavery, a disease came upon us in the house, whereof my master died and others, which ministered to me (as I thought) good opportunity to get away, and so early one morning I let myself down by a hayrope ... and took my way to Old Buda, a League distant from Budin where my master lived, and swimmed over Danubius the River on that side Pesta lieth, and so I took my next way towards Hungary and thence up to Novigrad: but Fortune did smile but a little while upon me, for at a town called Eger there met me a party of Turks who were sent as Scouts to watch the Enemy's Army, some of them presently knew me and seized upon me, then tying a double bag of filth and earth and stones having thrust my head through the middle tied it with a fast knot, and so drove me before them to the new Buda, where they delivered me to my master's son, who gave me 300 blows upon the soles of my feet; after this he caused weightier stones to be put upon my legs than before and kept me close till I was recovered.'[3]

Poyntz was sold again to a certain Dervish Pasha, where he became a groom and also attendant to one of his ladies; then he was resold to Joseph Ogga in Belgrade, but ran away, only to be recaptured and sent to the galleys from which he was ransomed. He eventually made his way north, once again passing near Eger on his way to Vienna after six years of captivity. Presumably he did not have very happy memories of his time in Hungary.

The eighteenth century was a time of rebuilding and consolidation in Hungary, and nowhere more so than in Eger, whose splendid baroque architecture and ironwork date from this period. It would be interesting to know how many of the buildings contained stone from the castle, which was deliberately demolished in 1702 to prevent it from being used by rebels (this was the time of the Rákóczy rebellion). Two successive bishops, Barkóczi Ferenc and Esterházy Károly, played a large part in the building programme. It was in 1793 that the geologist Robert Townson (1758–1822) spent five months on a scientific tour of Hungary. He published his **Travels in Hungary** in London in 1797, and this was quickly followed by a French version. Although much of the book is concerned with his mineralogical discoveries, he describes his experiences in the country with a certain degree of impatience. He could be very irritable, as for

example, in Visegrád, where he was kept awake by fleas, and in Eger too where the wine did not come up to his expectations. He arrived there from Gyöngyös and first went to Felsőtárkány, of which he gives a splendidly poetic description naming it 'a pretty, romantic and retired situation, with murmuring streams and mossy banks, and craggy rocks and gloomy woods and verdant groves: a select abode for Fauns and Silens, and Fairies and Druids and Hermits and Lovers; and Botanists. Here the late bishop (Barkóczy), a man of taste, built an elegant villa, where he often used to retire, more for amusement, it is said, than for prayer. The gloomy, bigoted temperament of the present bishop (Esterházy) prevents him from enjoying the beauties of nature, even of the more serious kind. On his coming to the See, like a Visigoth, he attacked this beautiful environment, and has so completely destroyed it, that the place of its existence is no longer known ...'[4]

Townson also describes the hot springs, but soon returns to the theme of the bishop, this time in connection with the wine he is offered. 'The wine of Erlau is justly famed, and, when good, is little inferior to Burgundy. I had long flattered myself with the hope of drinking here a bottle of the best; and immediately on my arrival I ordered some. The waiter told me I should have **bischofliche** wine. This raised still higher my expectation, for I thought he meant wine fit for a bishop to drink; and I eagerly tasted what he brought me, but was surprised to find it as bad as that of Bogdon (Dunabogdány). I scolded the waiter; he looked gloomy, and told me, shrugging up his shoulders, that it was **bischofliche** wine; but the poor man only meant to inform me that it was the bishop's wine, and that he had only the vending of it. I then sent my servant about the town to see if he could not procure me a bottle or two, but it was all in vain, the bishop possessing the exclusive right of retailing wine. So I was, till I had made the acquaintance of dr. D., obliged to drink this vile stuff in a country producing the best; it gave me the colic, which I naturally attribute to the bishop, and I must retaliate the injury.

How **bizarre** is the human character! Will it be credited that the man who exacts his rights with so much severity as to make himself considered by his flock, not as a father and protector, but as a hard, severe, and unjust master ... should have erected a public edifice which would be an honour to a crowned head!

The university, a very fine building, was erected entirely at his expense. It is said to have cost him, including its furniture, 200.000 pounds. The world must not be so uncharitable as to suppose that he has gained this immense sum by the monopoly of wine; nor entertain so high an opinion of his virtues as to think that Heaven, in answer to his prayers, supplied him by miracles with it. No: he is an Esterházy, and his family estate is about ten thousand a year; and the see of Erlau was always considered as one of the richest in the kingdom ...

But to return to the university ... it is a princely building, and has all the requisites for a university. The professors are well accommodated, the lecturing rooms are very good, and the chapel, library, and the hall for the public disputations and for conferring academic honours very elegant. The painted ceilings of the two last are, in my opinion, very fine. That of the library represents the Council of Trent, where the bishop has shown his uncharitable bigotry by bringing down from heaven lightning to strike the heretical writings. On that of the hall, the Sciences are allegorically represented.

They have both an admirable effect, and are far beyond many I have seen of great fame: I think they are superior to any I saw in Italy. The painter was a native of Hungary, and had studied in Vienna: he is since dead. The university is provided with an observatory, and the instruments are from London. A quadrant alone cost fifteen hundred guineas. How common it is for men to be scrupulously exact in the performance of religious trifles and yet to be negligent in the discharge of important moral obligations! Will it be believed that the man who had nearly been prosecuted by the crown for severities shown to his peasants, should have had scruples about the propriety of buying these instruments in England because we are heretics? Yes, I was told that he went so far as to send to Rome to know what he ought to do ...

A museum of natural curiosities was begun to be formed, and many Hungarian birds neatly stuffed were collected; but the negligence of the overseers ... has now nearly reduced the whole into ruins. The Emperor Joseph, who could not like such a man, never seconded the views of the bishop, and this establishment is at present little more than a college for the clergy.

I walked through the episcopal palace; it was poorly furnished and destitute of every mark of social comfort; and chilling gloom and

mournful silence reigned throughout. ... There is nothing in Erlau to detain a stranger, it is in general ill built; almost the only good houses I noticed were those of the canons. Here is a Turkish tower in very good condition. In the town wax is bleached, and not far from it Cordovan leather is prepared: red, yellow and black are made; the first two kinds are chiefly used for women's boots but their colours do not stand.'[5]

Townson is wrong, incidentally, about the Hungarian birth of either Kracker or Sigrist, the painters of the ceilings in the Lyceum. And here too is something of a mystery. Some years later, in 1810, a Russian naval officer, Vladimir Bronyevskij, also visited Eger on his way from Trieste to St. Petersburg. He published his diary there shortly after his return. If certain passages in it are compared with Townson's account, they appear identical – for example this mistake about the painters, the details of the Council of Trent and the remark about the leather for women's shoes. Could Bronyevskij have seen a copy of Townson, either in English or in French?'[6]

In the nineteenth century, with the improvement of communications and the dissemination of guide-books, travel became easier and Central Europe less exotic. It is worth noting, however, that the early editions of Baedeker were totally wrong about Eger: the famous siege was dated 1535 and the building of the Lyceum was attributed to Archbishop Pyrker.'[7] But by that time there were other connections between Eger and Britain. I suspect that very few Hungarian writers (and citizens of Eger too) have had their death recorded so promptly in the English-speaking world as Vitkovics Mihály. In 1830 Sir John Bowring published the first anthology of Hungarian verse in English, entitled **Poetry of the Magyars**. This includes nine poems written by Vitkovics, but that is not all. Bowring's long introduction includes biographical sketches of each poet; that from Vitkovics begins 'While the paper is yet wet which bears these translations from Vitkovics, I receive the intelligence that this interesting poet has ceased to be. He died on the 9th of September 1829.'[8] The poems for translation were not selected by Bowring, but sent to him by Karl Georg Rumy together with a German version from which Bowring made his versions. He did not know Hungarian. The nine poems include **Füredi pásztor dala, Cencihez** and **Megelégedés**. But there is also his version of a Serbian folk poem, entitled **Az elváló leány,** which appears in the

section entitled 'Hungarian Popular Songs', and this is something of a curiosity. Rumy took it from the journal **Hasznos mulatságok**, where it was published anonymously in 1823, and appears to be a good Hungarian folksong – a tribute, incidentally, to Vitkovics's genius for this type of verse. The original, however, is Serbian and Bowring had already translated that, also from German, in his **Serbian Popular Poetry** (London, 1827). Apparently he did not notice the similarity of the two versions. (And here we may note that there is another translation in Hungarian too, by Kölcsey Ferenc, entitled **Rác nyelvből** (1814); it was Vitkovics who supplied him with a Hungarian translation. Vitkovics was in fact a remarkable writer and literary organiser who deserves more credit than he is usually given by either Serbian or Hungarian critics, for he was the man who continued the poetic tradition of Csokonai at a time when that was frowned on, and pointed the way ahead to Petőfi. The folk of Eger should be proud to own him — that he was proud of his birthplace can be seen in numerous poems and other writings.

Perhaps the most detailed description of Eger, and its surroundings to appear in English (outside a guide-book) was published in a volume entitled **Rural and Historical Gleanings from Eastern Europe**, published in London in 1854. The author's name was given as 'Miss A. M. Birkbeck', and in her introduction she declares that she is 'indebted for the materials of which it is composed partly to the kindness of a friend, who, during a long sojourn in Hungary, acquired an accurate knowledge of that land, as well as of its inhabitants.'[9] Miss Birkbeck was the daughter of a well-known barrister who in later years was to become Master of Downing College, Cambridge. But her 'friend' was none other than her husband, Mednyánszky Sándor, who was born in Eger in 1816. He had joined the army at the age of 16, but left it in the early 1840s, only to play a very active role in the 1848 revolution. Among other exploits he organized a guerrilla band, mainly composed of prisoners, in the Bakony, and raised a force of 300 volunteers in Eger. When the war was over, Mednyánszky was sent by Klapka to discuss terms with Haynau, and he signed the agreement. Then he left for London, where he lived for 18 years, marrying Miss Birkbeck there. He afterwards went to live briefly with Kossuth in Turin before returning to Hungary in 1869; there he was deputy for Szigetvár till his death in 1875.

The title of his book is accurate, for it contains a mixture of descriptions, historical tales and stories of 1848, ending with a portrait of Klapka. One of the longest chapters is entitled 'Erlau and its vine culture', and in it Mednyánszky describes his birthplace in glowing terms: 'Nearly midway between Pesth and Tokaj, two miles north of the road running along the southern declivities of the rugged Mátra mountains, a smiling valley opens towards the plains; disclosing the vista of an extensive town with glittering spires and cupolas, crowned by the mighty ruins of a fortress. Gentle hills dotted with countless villas enclose that charming spot, which in its picturesque and sequestered nook looks the very type of rural plenty, content and peace. This is Erlau, the capital of the county of Heves, and one of the prettiest provincial towns of Hungary. It rises in terraces from the banks of a small river, arched over by several massive bridges, each ornamented with statues of saints. The peaked-roofed houses are whitewashed and, though of simple construction, display an air of neatness and prosperity.'[10]

He then goes on to describe the cathedral and 'its noble rival the so-called Lyceum. This gorgeous structure with its gilded cupolas and towering observatory, its painted halls and chapel is truly worthy the residence of the mightiest of the sovereigns of knowledge.'[11] He then relates the famous story of the encounter between Joseph II and Bishop Esterházy, when the monarch asked him how many princes had contributed to its construction and the bishop replied, 'Only three unpretending people, the Bishop of Erlau, Count Esterházy and the Lord Lieutenant of Heves.' He also states firmly that the stones for the building of the Lyceum were taken from the fortress ruins, and declares that in his opinion 'the bastions of the fortress first became genuine bulwarks of civilization and humanity when they were transferred to their present destination.'[12] He praises the elegance of the Turkish minaret and the care with which it is preserved, so that 'the Moslem pilgrims who now and then visit the graves of one or other of their holy men interred in Hungary may rejoice at the sight of the Crescent still shining though from a deserted building, with undimmed splendour above a Christian town.'[13] There follows an extended account of the viticulture of Eger, in which Mednyánszky attributes the hospitality and general good temper of the citizens to their acquaintance with wine-making. 'Incessant occupation in the vineyards has endowed the people of Erlau with a rich vein of good

humour, investing all their sayings and doings with an enviable air of freshness and joyousness. Whether they hasten at early dawn with their implements slung across their shoulders, prepared for a hard day's work, or at nightfall bend their steps homeward in picturesque groups, or in their recreations on Sunday afternoons, they are ever to be heard singing their own lays set to pretty melodies also composed by themselves; for the Hungarians are at home with the Muses, and need not seek their inspiration on Mount Parnassus.'[14]

The author then inserts a tale about the guerrilla leader known as Lelkem and his exploits against the Turks in Gyöngyös and Hatvan, and continues his description of the grape-harvest and the vintage festival. Like Townson, he deplores the bishop's monopoly of wine, and notes that during 1848 this was broken for an all too brief time, to be replaced by Austrian taxes on the wine produced. But his picture of Eger in the middle of the 19th century is an attractive one and shows the affection he had for the town.

These then are some of the connections between Britain and Eger since the famous siege. But to this account too there is a postscript. A few years ago I was looking for new music in a London shop and suddenly caught sight of a picture I recognised: it was the organ in the cathedral at Eger. The piece was entitled **Missa Ungarica pro Organo**, by the British composer Bryan Hesford, and it is dedicated 'to my dear friend Father Sándor Simon, Organist of Eger Cathedral, Hungary'. Written in 1981, it includes well-known melodies like **Mennyből az angyal** and **Pásztorok, pásztorok**, which make it splendid music for Christmas.

Notes

1. Éva Róna, 'Early Travel-books and MSS. on Hungary', Angol Filológiai Tanulmányok III, Budapest, 1938, 44–45.
2. *Relation of Sydnam Poyntz*, ed. A. T. S. Goodrich, Camden Society, London, 1908, 50.
3. *ibid.*,51.
4. Robert Townson, *Travels in Hungary,* London, 1797, 221.
5. *ibid.*, 223.
6. A Hungarian translation of the relevant part of Bronyevsky's diary appears in Haraszti Sándor–Pethő Tibor, *Útikalandok a régi Magyarországon,* Budapest, 1963, 216.
7. Karl Baedeker, *Southern Germany and Austria*, 4th edition, Leipzig, 1880, 314. The errors had disappeared by the 8th edition of 1896.
8. John Bowring, *Poetry of the Magyars,* London, 1830,LXVII.
9. Miss A. M. Birkbeck, *Rural and Historical Gleanings from Eastern Europe,* London,1854,V.
10. *ibid.*, 227–8.
11. *ibid.*, 229.
12. *ibid.*, 230.
13. *ibid.*, 231.
14. *ibid.*, 232.