

# Introduction

## The Village Notary

a Hungarian classic resurrected in retranslation

Born in 1813 into a Catholic Hungarian aristocratic family, Baron József Eötvös was educated typically for his class at the Királyi Egyetemi Gimnázium and Pest University, where he studied Law and Philosophy. His paternal ancestors had been high-ranking civil servants, while his mother was of Austrian descent; it was from her, an educated woman, that he inherited a sensitive nature and love of literature.

In 1833 Eötvös entered the civil service, but then interrupted his career to travel in Western Europe in 1836–37. On returning to Hungary he lived on his father's estate at Sály in north-eastern Hungary, devoting himself to literature, before moving back to Buda and parliament in 1840.

He had already published some poetry (including his well-known *Frozen Child* of 1833) and some drama; in 1835 he became a corresponding member of the Hungarian Academy, a full member in 1839, and eventually in 1870 its president.

Eötvös served as Minister for Religion and Education in the Kossuth government, but left Hungary in 1848 and spent the next two years in Munich. Returning to Hungary after the War of Independence was over, he divided his time between public service and writing, serving once again as Minister for Religion and Education under Ferenc Deák. Notable among his political interests were the reform of the prisons, the emancipation of the Jews, the 'nationality question', and the foundation of Kolozsvár University. He wrote no more after 1860, and died in 1871.

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Baron Jozsef's four novels arouse the interest of the reader from several perspectives. The casual reader will find in them entertaining narratives, life's struggles and passions; he that reads more deeply will see judgement passed on society; the reader given to reflection will detect a moral and the facts of life, the teachings of a great heart and a wise brain.

These novels differ widely in terms of subject, and yet clearly belong to a single world of ideas. The first – *The Carthusian* (1841) – is derived

from pure imagination, and shows the influence of its author's time spent abroad; the second – *The Village Notary* (1845) – turns on the great questions of the age, indeed, the author's core political ideals, validated by their trueness to life – yet the book is not outdated, as it depicts the response of the human spirit to the perpetual struggles of life. The third – *Hungary in 1514* (1847) – is a historical novel set in the peasant revolution led by György Dózsa, casting light on the parallel phenomena of two eras: the excesses of passion that lurk in it, however, are to be found in all times. The fourth – *The Sisters* (1857) – brings up questions of education; are those not as relevant today as they were at the time of writing and always will be? Eötvös considered that literature sank to the level of a pleasant pastime if it became detached from the great concerns of the age; the human spirit and life are fundamentally always the same; the same problems, passions, desires and ambitions torment them, though in different guises, just as the human species changes its clothing from age to age.

*The Carthusian* is the work of a youthful writer and has been compared to a first glass of champagne, fizzing under its own power from the bottle as soon as it is opened! It contains, however, the same elements of political disappointment and the conflict between noble and non-noble that feature in *The Village Notary*. By 1845 Eötvös was prominent in the opposition in the upper house of parliament, the centralist faction intent on reform. What he argued about in his political writings is encapsulated in this novel: the woes of the common people, the antiquated legal system, the tyranny of inferior officials, the corruption of electioneering, the verbose ineffectualness of ignorant reformers, the whole futile network of selfishness. That was what Ferenc Deák meant by his famous comment that the fictional Taksony county in which the book is set resembled the horse on the title-page of a veterinary textbook, with every possible disease indicated; the diseases all existed, but there was no horse on earth that had them all at once! There are two large groups in the book, the suffering and the powerful: their conflict produces the action; everyone is a type, representing a category the portrayal of which is all the sharper for being described through its individual member. Eötvös's intention is not merely to entertain but also to instruct, and he values lessons above artistic pleasure. He turns the miracle of St Erzsébet of Hungary around: in his hands, roses become bread.

Eötvös's primary purpose was to expose the unsatisfactory nature of the traditional county administration. Hungary could hardly be consid-

ered a nation when so few of the people derived benefit or protection from the way that affairs were handled. In *The Village Notary* he presented a cross-section of society in which the ruling elite were all too often lazy and self-seeking while the lesser lights, whatever their sterling qualities, were at their mercy and open to abuse. There was a commendable solidarity among the lower orders – “We poor people don’t desert one another,” says an inhabitant of Tiszarét – but if the basic function of law is the regulation of relationships between citizens, Hungarian law was heavily weighted in favour of the nobility – in fact, only they were effectively citizens – a point to which the English reader of the 1850 translation by Otto von Wenckstern was very sensitive.

Small wonder, then, that the influential Hungarian ears on which Eötvös’s socially advanced call for greater equality fell were all too often deaf and unenlightened, and the propaganda element of the book was not well received. His secondary purpose, however, that of entertaining the reader, was much more successful, and in 1865 led to a second, revised edition, in which the amount of discursive material was reduced and the work was more in line with what became the great Hungarian tradition of racy tales. To this day the book is not forgotten in Hungary, and though relatively few will have read it (a classic book is one that people know that they should read but somehow fail to), many will have met with excerpts or at least the option to study it, or will have seen the filmed version. In the West, Otto von Wenckstern’s translation is now a rarity, not unknown in the better sort of library, and is even offered for sale by the internet bookseller *Forgotten Books* – though when I asked them for a copy they were unable to supply one.

*The Village Notary* is thus a *Tendenzroman* or *roman à thèse*, and was seen by many of the Hungarian nobility as an attack on not only the status quo in general but their privileged position in particular. Even the great reformer Kossuth regarded the counties as bastions of the constitution. Power in Hungary lay in the counties, in which the local common nobility – a minority with rights but almost no obligations – wielded power over the non-nobility and peasantry – a majority with obligations but no rights at all. This is illustrated in the book by the theft of notary Tengelyi’s certificate of nobility, which brings with it the loss of his rights and his helpless exposure to the malice of those that wish him ill. In 1845, however, the Romantic period is in full swing and right must triumph; Tengelyi is rescued, but not before we have been shown the state of the prisons and the faults in the legal system. The young lovers too – there had to be a romantic interest! – overcome unjust prejudice

and marry, but the reader must decide for himself to what extent he should sympathise with the outlaw Viola.

*The Village Notary* was first published by the newspaper *Pesti Hírlap* in monthly instalments in 1845 (which earned it the description of ‘an eight-volume leading article’), and the complex plot turns mainly on the lives of the eponymous notary, Jónás Tengelyi, and the outlaw Viola, and on the meshing of the two. Both men are to some extent the authors of their own misfortunes through their uncompromising natures; Tengelyi starts life as the son of a Calvinist pastor, studies law at Heidelberg and begins to practise, but his career is blighted by an adherence to strict principles which leaves him short of the right kind of friends, and he sinks from post to post until he reaches the bottom of the legal profession – a man respected but, outside his immediate family, unloved, and with powerful enemies. Viola is introduced as a fearsome bandit, the terror of the district; previously a capable peasant farmer, he has been outlawed as the result of a hasty act in which, under the severest provocation, he accidentally killed a man; love for his wife and children, however, keeps him near the village even though he can do nothing for them. When Mrs Viola is sick and reduced to utter penury the family is taken in by the Tengelyis. Soon afterwards comes the county election, at which Tengelyi’s enemies cast doubt on his noble status and eligibility to vote; they have caused his ‘dog-skin’ certificate of nobility to be stolen. Viola discovers where it is, but, in retrieving it, once again kills a man and is forced to flee. Tengelyi is falsely accused of this murder and is imprisoned. Viola, now safely far away, learns of this and comes back to return the document but is killed in hot pursuit by a gendarme – in fact, one of those who had robbed Tengelyi – almost before he can do so. On this framework hangs more – the weak *alispán* and his wicked wife and lawyer, the love of his son for Tengelyi’s beautiful daughter, the long purple passage of Viola’s trial, the mystery surrounding the Reverend Vándory, numerous discourses on Eötvös’s views on the medical profession, prison conditions, public education, the office of *szolgabíró*, etc. etc.

In addition to his outspokenness on political subjects, Eötvös’s prose style too raised some hackles. Narrative passages move along very smoothly, and in places there is even a sharp snap that verges on the journalistic. From time to time, however, there are quite lengthy and carefully composed sections of a descriptive or discursive nature, and then Eötvös will break into long, polished, periods, the authorship of which might have pleased Tacitus. Such is the Hungarian or, as some

will have it, Prussian oratorical style. The Hungarian reader is likely to require a deep breath, two attempts, or both to find his way through such a sentence, while the translator is faced with a jig-saw puzzle – but all the pieces will be there! Whether it is advisable – or even possible – to transplant such oratory whole into English depends entirely on the context, but my feeling is that the attempt is always worth making. Such a marked stylistic feature is an important element of the text. Professor Cushing (*Hungarian Prose and Verse*, Athlone Press, 1956) finds this “ponderous and didactic”, while D. Mervyn Jones in *Five Hungarian Writers* (Clarendon Press, 1966, p.185) prefers “often brilliantly written”, but the (frequently ironic) humour that distinguishes much of the work is not missing from these passages.

East European literature has a long tradition of seeking to inform the reader as well as to entertain him. Writing in particular of the Russian novel, the vicomte E.-M. de Vogüé likens the Western reader to one strolling in a shopping street, glancing at the shop windows on the off chance of spotting something of interest, while the East European reader has a more serious purpose in mind. Eötvös is quite explicit about what he is doing: the writer of history compiles facts, from which he deduces principles, while the novelist begins with a principle and devises a narrative to illustrate it. He refrains expressly from descriptions that his reader will not require, and at the same time states repeatedly that he is not writing history.

Antal Szerb describes Eötvös's political conviction as ‘compensatory’: as the scion of an aristocratic, German-speaking family, he benefited from having as tutor József Pruzsinszky, who had been imprisoned for involvement in the ‘Jacobite’ anti-Habsburg Martinovics plot of 1794–5. Pruzsinszky, however, was clearly unreformed, and along with Hungarian and Latin planted liberal ideas in his pupil, resulting in the weakening in him of the family's traditional pro-Austrian stance. Eötvös therefore came to the view that although, as a country conquered by the Turks and then annexed by the Austrians, Hungary had been well served by the independence of the county administrations – almost mini-kingdoms, so independent that in 1848 Ung county felt able to refuse to acknowledge the coronation of Franz Josef I – nevertheless the country would be better off with a strong central government. The county system allowed too much room for inbred incompetence and self-seeking to the 5% of the population that exercised day-to-day political power. Those with vested interests and less liberal attitudes could hardly be expected to support this view.

Despite the acclaim with which its translation met in the English press – one reviewer wrote “I envy anyone that has not read this book, as they have that pleasure in store” – *The Village Notary* was not well received in Hungary. After the War of Independence of 1848–9 many in England had a certain sympathy with the Hungarians’ attempt to cast off the Austrian yoke, and all the more so as Russian intervention had a lot to do with their eventual failure. Much can be found in the book that derives both from Eötvös’s position as a leading figure in the centralist party in parliament, and more precisely from A karthausi and his only play to achieve success on stage *Éljen az egyenlőség! – Up with equality!* – of 1844, some of the characters of which reappear in *The Village Notary*. His essay *Reform* (1846) also echoes the sentiments on which the novel is based.

Political enlightenment is, however, to be found in *The Village Notary* in the person of the *főispán*, the aristocratic representative of the crown in the county, as he comes to Taksony to preside over the three-yearly election. His status makes it hard for him to mingle with *hoi polloi* but his secretary goes out and about and reports back, while he himself insists on talking to the eponymous notary. Their conversation presents a summing-up of Eötvös’s own views – “The nobility have used the county system to build defences around themselves, behind which they’ve been able to shelter for centuries even against the law” – and gives a realistic assessment of why it is so hard to take effective action.

The book holds a balance, therefore, between racy tale and the author’s frequently trenchant commentary on the Hungary of his time. In the English translation of 1850 it is significantly abridged in favour of the racy tale, thus diluting Eötvös’s purpose not a little, and, although contemporary English reviews make no mention of the point, appears to have been made from the 1846 German version by Johann Mailath. The present translation is made from the unabridged Hungarian, and one must hope that while being better informed of Eötvös’s aims the reader of this version will suffer no loss of entertainment.