

The Image of the Cluj Society as Reflected in the 19th Century British Travel Accounts*

ADRIANA CUPCEA

Introduction

THE CONSOLIDATION of the British imperial power began after the Romantic era. Therefore, the 19th Century witnessed the emerging of the British Empire as the world dominant force of the period. As the British Empire continued to expand, a great number of travellers, explorers, soldiers, diplomats, missionaries and natural historians travelled to its exotic parts.¹ Many of these individuals published accounts of their experiences, probably stimulated by the prospective financial gains and by the existence of a large public for their writings. Indeed, the British audience of the time was interested in narratives about unknown worlds and cultures, and any kind of exotic details concerning them. Transylvania triggered the interest of the British travellers not only because of its geographical location on the limit of the known world, but also because of the peripheral status² of its economy, politics and culture.

This study constitutes a small part of my imagology research about the British travel writings concerning the town of Cluj. I will focus on the subject of Cluj's nobility mainly because the British itineraries often intersected with the Transylvanian aristocratic circles. Therefore, the British travellers' impressions about Transylvania reflected the cultural priorities of its Hungarian inhabitants,³ which represented the intellectual, social, political and economical elite of the province.

The British travellers in Transylvania whose narratives will be analysed in this study are: Lord Paget, reverend J. R. Beard, the writer Charles Boner and Andrew E. Crosse, member of the Chemistry Society in England.

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The town and its people

CAPITAL OF the Great Principality of Transylvania during the Habsburg period and the second city of Hungary after Budapest during the Austro-Hungarian period, Cluj is described in the British travel literature as a territory of cultural interference between West and East. Accordingly, the city of Cluj in the 19th century was more like an intermediary periphery, incorporating both civilized and barbarian characteristics that transformed Cluj into a hybrid space experiencing both modernizing and traditional evolutions.

This duality presented in a Manichean manner (European vs. barbarianism) constitutes the main frame for the British travellers' description of the city. Therefore, the alternation of these characteristics (civilized vs. wilderness) marked the distinctiveness of the place. Consequently, the perceptions of the British travellers vacillated between approval and critique, and sometimes irony.

The arrogant and superior attitude of a civilized European, appealing to the Western values, manifests itself from the entrance in the town. Examining the civil architecture, as an indicator of the living standards and degree of civilization, John Paget compares Cluj's architectural values and principles with that of other famous cities, London or Paris, outlining that "Klausenburg can lay no claim to figure as a European capital, yet it possesses some few houses which would make a respectable appearance in London or Paris."⁴

The nobility had an important place in the British travel writings because all the travellers established connections within this social class. This affiliation influenced their description of the city. But despite this situation, especially in the case of those visiting the city at the beginning of the 19th century, the general impression about the city seemed to express the British description of the local aristocracy.

To support this assumption, Paget suggests a certain incompatibility between the statuses of the local nobles and the presumed abilities and life expectations of a noble, in the European perception. Therefore, one negative aspect noticed by the British travellers is that the nobles were unable to provide their houses' maintenance and to use them entirely despite their beautiful appearance. This idea was explained during a long discussion about the difficult financial situation and mismanaging of finances. Unsatisfied by this situation, the British travellers critically elaborated a list of the biggest mistakes made by local nobility in managing their own fortunes. One of the contradictions they noticed was that in spite of the fact that the nobles owned large domains of twenty, thirty villages, they had debts and cash problems. Their habit of not keeping account of natural income⁵ was also considered by the British travellers as a naïve, but fatal mistakes for the welfare of the nobility. All these, along with the lack of the banks and bankers in the region, and that of a financial legislation, replaced with elementary economical customs, were interpreted by the travellers as incapacity to connect to the Western civilization.

Social life

PAGET MAINTAINED the same intransigent attitude regarding the elite's social events. He notices a hybrid society trying to clutch itself to the standards of the European elite. In fact, the mix of local behaviours, attitudes and customs with Western elements triggered Paget's ironical attitude. One example was the women's clothing. They combined the trends of European fashion with the local custom of overdressing themselves.⁶

An exotic perception can be noticed in the descriptions of the nobility's culinary tastes. The variety of plates and savours delighted the British travellers, never missing from the parties: "a large table crowded with tea-urns, cups and saucers, cakes and sweetmeats, bonbons, ices, a large bottle of rum to take with tea, after the Russian fashion, and I know not what else, of tempting delicacies besides."⁷

These illustrated the taste for oriental luxury which along with the usual scandals after the parties and the custom to order the attendance of gipsy bands, to perform at these soirées,⁸ are elements describing the increasing orientalisation of Cluj's nobility.

On the other hand, Patterson sees the noble society of Cluj as having the features of a Republican aristocracy, considering the distance to Vienna, trying to underline the separatist and exclusive character of the elite. An argument for this is the marriage alliances of local families, like Banfii, Bethlen, Kemeny, Teleki or Wesseleny, which contained in Cluj a closed aristocratic circle.

To justify the aristocracy's preference to reside here, Patterson refers to an expression intensively used at that time by the nobles, *kinces es kulcsos Kolozsvár*. He argues that this is the most pleasant residential city in the two Hungarian countries, and that Transylvania owes its reputation of charm and refinement to the aristocracy residing here.⁹

Paget's acrimonious attitude is different to that of the majority of British travellers in Transylvania. For example, Charles Boner, who also noticed the ladies' tendency to overdress, described the local fashion without any negative comments about it. On the other hand, Boner was surprised by the lack of any ethnotype in the case of Hungarian women and Hungarians, in general. Moreover, in what the Hungarians were concerned, he was also very confused by the combination of certain oriental and English typical features, *fair*, in his expression.¹⁰ The explanation he found for this situation related both to the geographical and human, even biological duality of this place. He considers that the Hungarians are the transition between "the inhabitant of the West and Oriental, but without the Oriental indolence."¹¹

The British travellers' description of Cluj's high society bears similarities with their own culture especially when it comes about occupations and leisure. Consequently, they all could identify in Cluj certain elements such as theatre, library, casino, visits and the worldly soirees, the strolls in the parks, the practice of hunting and of racings specific to a genuine urban European society.

In contrast, the description of the private and daily life in Cluj restricted itself to only mentioning certain practices and customs. The limited attention paid by the British travellers to the European, civilized character of the Cluj's society reveals their obvious interest in local differential, exotic details that could favour some referential operations.¹²

Town and people: ethnic coordinates

THE SAXONS. Looking upon all the society from inside the Hungarian nobility, the travellers concentrate their descriptions on this category, socially and ethnically. However, the empiric exploration of the site leads them to the complete discovery of the ethnic landscape of the city, where, outside of the Hungarians, live Saxons, Szeklers, Vlachs and Gypsies.

The Saxons appear more often, especially in the context of the travellers' interest for the city's history. Together with the Roman historic layer, evident in the city's history, Cluj is presented as one of the seven fortified cities of Transylvania, owing its existence to the Saxons' craftsmanship in erecting urban settlements. The most frequent short descriptions are those of first settlers and the longer ones are defining their society's urban character, their skills, preoccupations and pragmatic, specific to town people, as masons and craftsmen. Boner mentions few of the occupations attended only by them: "soap boilers, bakers, coppersmiths,"¹³ adding that "they were evidently well to do in the world, comfortable citizens, who, if they did not care for luxury, valued at its full a good substantial dwelling, giving evidence its possessor was also a man of substance."¹⁴ Historical explanations accompany the presentation of this ethnic group, which leads to a more profound understanding to the ethnic and confessional realities of Cluj, in the second half of the 19th century. Their massive flee from the city in 1540–1560, when Protestantism was spreading meant, in the British opinion, a final drop of the numbers of German people, assimilated to the Hungarian majority, a phenomenon noticeable also in the city's German character. According to Boner "the departure of the Saxons on religious grounds, tended greatly to diminish the German population. The new anti-Trinitarian doctrines were to them as great abomination as High Mass was to the Puritans. So, selling their land and possessions, and turning their backs on Klausenburg, they left it for ever (1540–1560). A few remained, but these soon amalgamated with the surrounding mass, and in language, customs, and mode of thought, became to all intents and purposes thoroughly Hungarian."¹⁵

The Széklers. With a particular interest in the ethno-confessional history of the site, Patterson approaching Unitarians in Transylvania, argues that at the time of his visit here, there were somewhat less than 50.000 Unitarians..."In Kolozsvár they have a

large new church, on which is to be read their distinctive motto *Soli Deo Gloria*, so often seen on their houses in the country. Here they have also a High School and a College, to which is attached a small library.¹⁶

As it follows from Patterson's text, through the overlap of confession on Székler ethnicity, they are mentioned in the context of the Unitarian College in Cluj. Chalmers argues that most of the attending students come from the Székler Country.¹⁷ Another feature repeated in British travel journals, concerning the Széklers' profile in Cluj, is the feeling of reciprocity on the bases of religion, Patterson considers this a consequence "of the support they have received from their co-religionists in this country."¹⁸

The Vlachs. Concerning the Vlachs the mentions are not abundant. Oriented towards Hungarian noble circles, the British travellers share the vision of the dominant class over the ethnic landscape. The references to this ethnic group are scarce, and most of them only signal their presence. One of the rare cases where the authors allows them some space is in Andrew Chalmers' writings. But also in this case we notice an ethno-psychological profile centred on a negative dimension. The presentations of the Vlachs are the best example for imaginary colonisation and for the superior attitude of the traveller. For the British, the Vlachs are the marginals of this frontier zone. The description of their villages, around Cluj, of "huddled groups of cottages built of wood, mud, or plaster, with heavily thatched roofs and dirty courtyards," reveal the report of a backward world, noticeable through exclusive differentiation. For Chalmers, the physical aspect of the Vlachs around the city is an expression of life in squalor, the image of the primitive and barbarian Vlach being generated from the point of view of the dominant Hungarian class, from the spatial and mental perimeter that the British are confined to watch. Thus, the contrast from the gracious stature of the Hungarians and the crouching Vlachs is astonishing, while the old women are compared to the typical witch portrait of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*.¹⁹

Chalmers also mentions their inferiority as a group and at the same time their absorption of primary information. Such are the references to the language, an *omnium gatherum*, to the lack of a written culture and the low level of education, in spite of their large numbers, 2.5 million. Chalmers' only positive argument is their effort and desire to progress, closing with a premonition, that the Vlachs, as the most numerous inhabitants of Transylvania are probably "The Coming Race" of the region.²⁰

If in the case of the Hungarian nobility we can notice a report to the Other, and in the case of Saxons and Széklers a simple recognition, in the sense of admitting the alterity, in the case of Vlachs, they become an analysis object in the distance, but in the lack of direct contact.

The Gypsies. By far the most exotic, but also decadent element of the city's ethnic landscape are the Gypsies. Placed at the periphery of urban society, the Gypsies be-

come research objects as part of the nature. Boner is captured by the shape of their settlements, formed by sunken huts, dwellings compared with rabbit holes, all these exotic facts, comparable to the gipsy quarter of Granada, Montagna San Miguel.²¹

The lack of direct contact determines them to deduct by gesture and behaviour observation in social relations. Their inclination towards scam, begging,²² and their inconsistency are the main incriminatory features of this ethnic group, to which the travellers give a *paria* status.

Women's status

ONE PRIVILEGED subject of the travel writings was the profile of the women belonging to the local elite. The women were a pleasant surprise for the travellers, considering their diplomatic and natural attitude. If the description of the local society was similar to any other provincial society characterized by a predisposition to scandalmonger, the woman's profile exceeded any cultural and material attributes of the city of Cluj. Described as active, tactful, cultivated and sophisticated presences, they were in the same time "the ornament of any society in which they might be placed."²³

Even if the literary knowledge of the ladies was not exceptional, the British travellers tended to appreciate their education, their familiarity with Byron, Scott or Darwin's²⁴ writings and also their fluency in English. They also appreciated women's natural public attitude, their malleability in the social context in comparison to their English counterparts. Paget, for example, mentions being impressed especially by "the freedom with which political and religious discussions were often carried on before ladies here, and by the interest and share they took in it."²⁵ In Transylvania, I never heard a lady insulted by an apology for speaking in her presence of subjects which interested her husband, her father, or her brother."²⁶

In describing the open, tolerant society of Cluj, unbound by the rules of the English conservatism, the authors underlined the importance of the protestant component, permissive in the field of family law, even in delicate questions for the catholic rhetoric, like the separation of the husband and wife and the custody of the children. "In case of divorce, when the character of the wife is not impeached, all the children are left in the care of the mother till the age of seven, and the girls during their whole lives. Divorces are far from uncommon, among Protestants of Transylvania... They are commonly obtained by the wife against the husband on the plea of ill treatment, inveterate dislike, impossibility of living together, or the employment of threats or force to accomplish the marriage...she retains all her property and rights unimpaired. It is curious that very few cases occur in which they do not marry again quite as well as before."²⁷

These observations concerning ladies' position in society favoured a long reflection on the part of the British travellers about their status in Transylvania. They

insisted on the differences in women's social status in Cluj and their own society underlining the beginning of some kind of civil and political emancipation of the ladies in Transylvania in comparison to their home situation. Therefore, the British authors outlined the noble widow's right to send their representatives in the county meetings in order to support their views and extension of the husband's protection on woman, even after his death. It is also mentioned that the woman belonging to the Transylvanian elite kept their maiden name and the actions in court regarding their property were conducted on her behalf even during the life of her husband.

Overall, the travellers' accounts about the women's situation may be interpreted as a general plea for social liberalization. The pattern of Cluj is for the British authors an evidence of a successful model, a balanced combination of conservatism and liberalism.

Education

EDUCATION WAS another debated subject of the British authors, because it represented a reference point through the negative differentiation in comparison to Western societies. Thus, the boys' entrusting to a guardian clergyman, "who were little than a servant,"²⁸ in order to assure them a high quality education, were elements of an ineffective education system. The result was, in travellers' opinion, the inducement of a sense of superiority over the others in the mind of young boys and their transformation into spoiled offsprings, who were receiving everything from the family, without any effort, from the youngest age until his entrance in a public office, provided of course, by the family.

On the other hand, they noticed that the girls were not possible candidates for public offices. The authors were considering that their education was not a major concern of the society, because they were assigned in this respect to their mothers, who were helped by foreign governesses. A good thing, according to the British, who felt that in that way, the girls were exempt from such errors, arising from the excess of zeal, made in the case of boys' education.

Religious education is one of the most appreciated features of the city. Seen as a cult nation, with values and principles, Chalmers argues that "the Magyar nationality has always regarded education as a sacred duty and the inseparable ally of religion."²⁹ The role of the Catholic Church in the promotion of "mental independence" and "enlightenment,"³⁰ is known, but the Protestant religion and Church are the true enemies of ignorance, the agents of free education, which is the base of intellectual, social and political progress.³¹ Besides, from all the journals we can notice the general idea that the Protestant religion, through its liberal principles, has an active social function, the British, determined also by a spirit of reciprocity, giving it a civilizing role, extended to a domino effect, from the intellectual level, towards social, political and national conscience.

Personalities

THE BRITISH travellers described the local nobility as an enlightened elite, focused on the idea of progress. They also made several portraits of the local nobilities underlining their specific characteristics. One example of human virtue was Count Bethlen János “who possesses a voice of greater depth and sweetness than I ever remember to have heard. His manner is calm, but earnest and persuasive in the highest degree. He is generally accused of being too lazy to take such an active share in public affairs as his talents and eloquence demand of him.”³²

Or for the second half of the 19th century, Baron Eötvös, was described as “one of the most liberal-minded and enlightened thinkers of the day.”³³ The author added a list of local names to these portraits depending on qualities like the eloquence, writing and public affair skills. The best orators, alongside Bethlen János, were Baron Kemény Domokos, Zejk Joseph and Count Teleki Domokos. The nobles’ eloquence was doubled by their writing skills. By approaching social problems in their writings, they created an enlightened and moralist literature. The British travellers considered that these literary manifestations were the results of the Enlightenment influences on different personalities of the local elite.

Among all these writings, the British travellers tended to value those of Baron Eötvös, whose ideas and efforts were focused on the education of all social classes. “With this end aim he worked unceasingly. He held the post of Minister of Cults and Education in the first independent Hungarian Ministry in 1848, but withdrew in consequence of political differences with his colleagues. Again in 1867 he held the same ministry under Count Andrásy, but died in 1870, universally regretted. His best-known literary productions are two novels, *The Carthusian* and *The Village Notary*. The latter highly-interesting, indeed dramatic story, may be recommended to any one who desires to know what really were the sufferings entailed upon the peasantry under the old system of forced labour. It was the *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* of that day, and of the cause he had: the abolition of serfdom.”³⁴

Unfortunately, the Transylvanian School represented by the Romanian Enlightenment scholars did not constitute a point of interest in British travel literature. This omission might be the result of the pre-ordained itineraries of the travellers, itineraries which omitted the Romanian intellectual circles.³⁵

The British authors noticed that nobility’s ideological affinity with the West resulted in their feeling of an intellectual and spiritual superiority. This kind of superiority combined with an ethnical self-pride determined the nobles to consider themselves the “Englishmen of the East,” in Andrew F. Crosse’ remark after a conversation with a baroness.

The consequence of this situation was a form without substance, a result outlined by Crosse and familiar to the members of the local elite. To illustrate this feature of the local nobility, the author describes the discussion with a baroness, who told

him about a young noble, “who went over to England and came back in raptures with everything, and tried to turn everything upside down at home without accommodating his new ideas to the circumstances that were firmly rooted here. You may see him now sit down to dinner with an English dresscoat over his red Hungarian waistcoat. His freaks went far beyond this, and he came to be known as the savage Englishmen.”³⁶

The clergymen

IN WHAT the clergymen of Cluj are concerned, the British travel relations mentioned only the Protestants, since Protestantism was perceived as the depository and supporting force for spreading the enlightened ideas among the secular elite. Former teachers, merchants and landowners, the protestant clergymen are described by the British travellers as contiguous and subordinated to the secular gentry. This situation was mainly the result of the clergymen’s financial dependence on the nobility’s support. The travellers saw a danger to their proper social status in this financial dependency of the clergymen.³⁷ In other cases, the clergymen were suspected of flattery or corruption (this for those with high honours, who were judging ecclesiastical cases). If some British travellers were mainly interested in the financial situation of the ecclesiastical elite, others with theological background focused on the intellectual qualities of the clergy. For example, prominent members of the Unitarian community in Cluj, such as Professor Kovács, director of the *Unitarian College in Cluj* or Kövöry, the honorary president of the same institution, known for their publicist, historical, literary and theological activities, and not last for their translations from English. The Hungarian Scholars constituted models of human virtue and intellectual perfection, a major pole of Cluj’s intellectual life in the British travellers’ opinion.

Academic personalities, people of an extraordinary erudition and enlightened thinking were also mentioned in the British travel descriptions during the second half of the 19th century. One name frequently mentioned is that of the teacher and archaeologist, Finaly, who provides the foreigners with valuable historical information about the local history and the collections of the Museum of Roman pieces in Cluj.

Conclusions

IN CONCLUSION, one can notice the attention given in the British travel writings to the subject of secular aristocracy of Cluj. This was the consequence of an intentional orientation of the travellers toward Protestant aristocratic circles of Cluj and Transylvania in general and therefore by a more intimate knowledge of them.

Although critic in their remarks about the local elite, the observers could not omit the acknowledgement of the Hungarian nobility's membership in the Western world. Religious affinities played an important role in generating this acceptance. The Protestant religion was crucial in this respect. The British travellers even attempted a forced analogy between the Hungarian and the English, as an expression of the gradual formation of the civilized, superior Hungarian stereotype.



Notes

1. Recent works with similar approaches are Mihaela Mehedinți, "Romanians and Northern Europe: Four Nordic Travellers through the Romanian area (17th–19th Centuries)," *Transylvanian Review: Thinking the Future Through the Past*, XX, 2:2 (2011): 445–457; Peter Bugge, "Something in the View Which Makes you Linger: Bohemia and Bohemians in British Travel Writing, 1836–1857," *Central Europe*, 7, 1 (May 2009): 3–29.
2. See Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 162.
3. Carmen Andraș, "The Image of Transylvania in English Literature," *Journal of Dracula Studies*, 1 (1999): 38–47, available at <http://www.blooferland.com/drc/images/6/60/01Andras.rtf>, accessed on June 27, 2005.
4. John Paget, *Hungary and Transylvania with Remarks on their Condition* (London: John Murray Albemarle Street, 1855), 236.
5. *Ibid.*
6. *Ibid.*, 241.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *Ibid.*, 237.
9. Arthur J. Patterson, *The Magyars: their Country and Institutions* (Smith, London: Elder & Co, 1869), 221.
10. Charles Boner, *Transylvania its Products and its People* (London: Longmans, Green, Reader and Dyer, 1865), 439.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mihaela Grancea, *Călători străini prin Principatele Dunărene, Transilvania și Banat (1683–1789). Identitate și alteritate* (Sibiu: Ed. Universității Lucian Blaga, 2000), 149.
13. Charles Boner, 432.
14. *Ibid.*, 431.
15. *Ibid.*, 432.
16. John Patterson, 229.
17. Andrew Chalmers, *Transylvanian Recollections: Sketches of Hungarian Travel and History* (Klausenburg: Smart and Allen, London; John Philips, Manchester; Stein Janos, 1880), 82.
18. John Patterson, 229.
19. Andrew Chalmers, 78.
20. *Ibid.*, 81.
21. Charles Boner, 438.
22. *Ibid.*

23. John Paget, 254.
24. Andrew F. Crosse, *Round About the Carpathians* (London, Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons), 90.
25. John Paget, 54.
26. Ibid., 254.
27. Ibid., 254.
28. Ibid., 252.
29. Andrew Chalmers, 82.
30. Ibid., 82.
31. Ibid., 83.
32. Ibid., 247.
33. Andrew F. Crosse, 299.
34. Ibid., 299.
35. See Carmen Andraş, *România și imaginile ei în literatura de călătorie britanică* (Cluj-Napoca: Editura Dacia, 2003).
36. Andrew F. Crosse, 300.
37. John Paget, 243.

Abstract

The Image of the Cluj Society as Reflected in the 19th Century British Travel Accounts*

The study analyses the perceptions of Cluj's urban society reflected in the 19th Century British Travel. The research is based on coordinates such as the relation between the social expectations and the encountered realities, by the British travellers. Other coordinates of this study are the ratio between the pre-existing mental structures and the discovered realities, the shaping of stereotypes and the ideological influences in this respect. The structure of this study overlaps on issues approached by the British travel accounts in the second half of the 19th Century. The analysis includes topics like: the local elite, the ethnic and social coordinates, the status of women, the education, local personalities, and the clergymen.

Keywords

Cluj, elite, society, perceptions, images, British travel literature, the 19th Century.

