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**“I LEFT MY PARADISE ALONE:” BRITISH NOTES
ON ORAVIȚA AND ITS NEIGHBOURHOOD****

***Abstract:** 19th century Oravița is reflected in British travellers' books as the centre of the mining activity in the Banat. The accounts focus on the industrial aspects of the mountainous exploitations and on their influence on the fast development of the region. The connection of the town with the other places based on mining activities is emphasised. The routes to the place are precisely presented and special attention is paid to the railway line Baziaș - Oravița (the oldest railway in the territory of contemporary Romania). Oravița is depicted as a border multiethnic place, characterised by peaceful cohabitation. The British travellers pay attention to the architecture of the place, and write enthusiastically about the beauty of the landscape. The cultural activity of the town also draws the attention of the foreign visitors. The hospitality of the inhabitants, the charming atmosphere of the summer theatre, the passionate notes of the gypsy music, and not least the beauty of the young ladies make the English writer Andrew F. Crosse consider Oravița a paradisaical place on Earth, the location where he would prefer to spend his afterlife if he was not accepted in Heaven.*

***Keywords:** Oravița; British travel literature; cultural borders; the image of Romania; the Banat in the 19th Century.*

Introductory Remarks

As it is placed far from the usual routes of the British travellers who cross several countries in a single trip, 19th century Oravița is present in fewer accounts than other cities of the Banat, such as Timișoara, Lugoj, Caransebeș or Băile Herculane. But the foreigners who visit this place are fond of mountains and are interested in the particularities of the area. They therefore offer us detailed accounts. D. T. Ansted and Andrew F. Crosse pay special attention to the particularities of Oravița, writing

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several pages about the town and its surrounding region. There are also references to this place in John Paget's book *Hungary and Transylvania* and in A. A. Paton's *Researches on the Danube and the Adriatic...*; the neighbouring region is shortly depicted in Charles Boner's *Transylvania: Its Products and Its People*. Another important contribution is Baron Inigo Born's book on the Banat, *Travels through the Banat of Temeswar, Transylvania, and Hungary in the Year 1770*, translated into English in 1777 and consulted by the British travellers, who often make references to this work or quote from it.

All these travel books depict Oraviţa as "a very important place"¹ on the map of the Banat, and the centre of the mining activities in the whole province.² For Andrew F. Crosse, Oraviţa is not only "a central place", but "in a way the chief town of the Banat."³

Oraviţa is a town situated in South-Western part of contemporary Romania, in the county of Caraş-Severin. This place based on mining activity also has a remarkable cultural history, as the theatre of the town is one of Romania's oldest theatres, which was built in 1817 after the model of the *Burghtheater* in Vienna, but at a lower scale. One of the oldest pharmacies of present day Romania was opened at Oraviţa in 1793 too.

A place with a multiethnic structure, Oraviţa is presented by the British travellers as an intercultural border, and the peaceful multiethnic cohabitation is frequently observed. The town was placed at the meeting point between the Eastern and Western influences, as it was under Turkish occupation for more than two centuries, and in the first part of the 18th century it was conquered by the Hapsburg Empire. The Austrian influence is frequently praised in the British travellers' notes. Oraviţa is presented as a place of imperial border, situated close to the frontier

¹ D. T. Ansted, *A Short Trip in Hungary and Transylvania in the Spring of 1862*, Ansted, David Thomas. *A Short Trip in Hungary and Transylvania in the spring of 1862*, London: W. H. Allen & Co, 1862, p. 150.

² Baron Inigo Born, *Travels Through the Banat of Temeswar, Transylvania, and Hungary in the Year 1770*, Transl. from German, London: Printed by J. Miller for G. Kearsley, 1777. According to I. Born, Oraviţa is "the chief place of mines in the Banat," p. 27.

³ Andrew F. Crosse, *Round About the Carpathians*, Edinburgh and London: Blackwood, 1878, p. 14.

between the Ottoman and the Hapsburg powers. The region of the Banat was a military frontier in the 18th and 19th centuries, and many peasants of this province served the Austrian army as frontier guards.⁴

Oravița was also a commercial border, because this was the place wherefrom the products of the mining activity were transported to Vienna. The railway Baziaș - Oravița (the oldest railway on the territory of contemporary Romania), constructed in 1854, had a commercial *raison d'être*, as it connected the harbour on the Danube with the Banat's centre of mines. From Baziaș, the products were transported to Vienna on the Danube.

Historical background: The importance of the mining activity in the development of the town

The history of the town is connected to the mines of the region, as Oravița "has long been celebrated as an important mining centre."⁵ The British travellers who refer to the historical background of the town are especially interested in the ancient history of the mines. Ansted writes that the mines were worked by the Turks for a long time, and emphasises the good effects of the 18th century Hapsburg restoration. Under the coordination of the Austrian Government the old mines were drained and a new exploitation started. The new mines built by the Hapsburg authority have played an important role in the development of the town.

John Paget observes that among the coal mines in the territory of the 19th century Hungary, Oravița (spelled Oráwitza p. 17) is the best.⁶ The author of *Hungary and Transylvania* shows that the coal extracted at Oravița is successfully used for the steamboats, and mentions that "the English engineers declare [it] to be in no way inferior to the best Newcastle."⁷ A. A. Paton also praises the rich resources of the region,

⁴ For the representation of the Banat as a military frontier in British travellers's notes, see Marius Crișan, "Ad Aquas Herculi Sacras: The Image of Băile Herculane in the 19th Century British Travel Literature," in *Anuarul Institutului de Cercetări Socio-Umane "Gheorghe Șincai"*, vol. XIII (2010): 22 – 37.

⁵ Ansted, *op. cit.*, p. 154.

⁶ John Paget, *Hungary and Transylvania; with Remarks on Their Condition, Social, Political and Economical*, Philadelphia: Lea & John Murray, 1850, p. 17.

⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 54.

considering “the extensive coal-mines of Oravicza ... a treasure more valuable than all the gold of Schemnitz and Kremnitz.”⁸ The coal is also used on the railways of the region, in the manufacture of pig-iron, in the manufacture of gas and in many other manufactures; it is puddled at Reșița (spelled Reschitza) and sold in the whole country.⁹

According to Ansted, the coal and iron mines are the most productive, but there are also copper and gold exploitations. The mineral oils and paraffin obtained by distillation are the bases of other industries and manufacturers.¹⁰

Ansted is struck by the rapid development of the region. The mining activity has brought great prosperity in a short period: many buildings have been constructed and the British traveller notes that most part of the town is “quite new.” The English professor is impressed that a town whose existence is only alluded in John Paget’s book and incidentally mentioned in Murray’s Handbook could have such a fast development.¹¹ An example of prosperity is the illumination, organised periodically at the end of some important public events.¹²

There is a strong connection between Oravița and Reșița. The iron pig made at the former place is used in the industry of the latter. The travellers speak about a projected railway between the two towns, which would increase the production. Ansted emphasises that these two “establishments are connected and have mutual interests.”¹³

The British travellers observe the connection between Oravița and other mines of the region, such as the mines from Dognecea, Bocșa, Reșița, Moldova Nouă and Anina.

Agricultural conditions

Ansted emphasises the richness of the soil and shows the role of the good Austrian administration, in contrast to the bad management during

⁸ A. A. Paton, *Researches on the Danube and the Adriatic, or Contributions to the Modern History of Hungary and Transylvania, Dalmatia and Croatia, Servia and Bulgaria*, Vol. II, Leipzig: F. A. Brockhaus, 1861, p. 29.

⁹ Ansted, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 156.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 153.

the Turkish occupation: “Having only recently come into the possession of the Christian Powers it partakes more of the peculiarly rude and savage state of the Turkish provinces than other districts of Hungary, and its flatness and marshy character, when uncultivated, rendered it, at one time, dangerous to traverse. Like the parts of the Danube near the Black Sea, or the Campagna near Rome, or like any other large undrained, flat, and uncared-for district, it was avoided as poisonous, and was notorious for its fatal fevers. The very lands, however, which, when neglected, were so poisonous, yield, when cultivated, the most marvellous crops of corn.”¹⁴

As a consequence of the good Hapsburg management, the soil is excellent: it “scarcely needs more than sowing” and there is no need for manure. As the rich black loam is very fertile, there are abundant crops of different plants, such as wheat, maize, barley, or sugar-grass, rye, oats, rice, flax, hemp, rape, and tobacco. Impressed by this variety, Ansted concludes that “there is hardly a crop that grows in Europe that has not been successfully tried in the Banat.” Many foreign investors were interested in the soil of this province (Germans, Greeks, Turks, Servians, Wallachians, French and Italians), and the production of the rich soil has often enriched them.¹⁵

Charles Boner has also heard about the fertility of this “granary of Austria,” as the Banat is called, but he visits this region during a terrible drought, which makes the soil from Baziaș till Timișoara look rather like “the floor of a room than ploughed fields or pasture-land.”¹⁶

Entering the city: routes, means of transportation, stations, roads

The access to Oravița is usually associated with the trip on the Danube and with the railway route Baziaș - Oravița. A. A. Paton is the first British writer who informs his readers that Oravița is going to become “the terminus of the great railway, which a few years later stretched over Central Hungary to Temesvar.”¹⁷

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

¹⁶ Charles Boner, *Transylvania: Its Product and Its People*. London: Longmans, 1865, p. 11.

¹⁷ A. A. Paton, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

Ansted emphasises the fact that Oravița is the end of the line belonging to a branch of the railway from Vienna to the Danube and mentions the authorities' intentions to extend it to Reșița.¹⁸ The train route which starts at Baziaș is the oldest railway constructed on the territory of contemporary Romania. Charles Boner, who took the train from Baziaș to Timișoara in the 1860s, is one the first British writer who writes about this railway.

Ansted offers the British readers a description of the route, referring to some main stations and distances. However, the train trip is not a special experience for the Englishman: "there is nothing to observe with regard to this part of the journey," because "there are no important works, few towns or even villages to be seen near the line, and nothing special in the cultivation of the country. The stations are for the most part small and unimportant, and are often placed in very out-of-the-way spots, apparently far from the towns they supply."¹⁹ A reason for the uninteresting aspect of the line may be the economy made by the South-Eastern State Railway of Austria in the construction of the railway.

The British travellers also complain about the low frequency of the train courses from Baziaș to Oravița. For instance, Andrew F. Crosse cannot wait until the evening to get the train, and takes a carriage. He is struck by the high price which the Romanian coachman requests for a vehicle that offers no comfort to a Western traveller, and the tariff is considerably reduced after a long bargain. The first impact with the Other is remarkable: "Notwithstanding the intense heat of the day, the Wallack, for such he was, wore an enormous sheepskin cloak with the wool outside, as though ready for an Arctic winter. I followed him a few steps to see what he wanted me to look at; the movement was quite enough, he regarded it evidently in the light of ready assent, and in the twinkling of an eye he possessed himself of my portmanteau and other belongings, motioned me to follow him, which I did, and then found that my Heaven-sent friend had a machine for hire. I call it a machine, because it was not like anything on wheels I had seen before: later on I became familiar enough with the carts of the country; they are long-bodied, rough constructions, wonderfully adapted to the uneven roads.

¹⁸ Ansted, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 157.

In this case there were four horses abreast, which sounds imposing, as any four-in-hand must always do.”²⁰

The coach trip takes much longer than the time estimated by the coachman; the bad quality of the vehicle, the driver’s slowness and his pauses at the pubs encountered on the way make the drive hardly supportable for the Englishman. But the less pleasant thing is the high quantity of dust Crosse has to bear, as he travels on the top of the coach. This is why the entrance of the young gentleman in Oravița is a special scene for the people, and especially for the ladies, who are amused at the following scene: “I fancy not many strangers pass this way, for never was a shy Englishman so stared at as this dust-begrimed traveller. I became painfully self-conscious of the generally disreputable appearance of my cart and horses, the driver and myself, when two remarkably pretty girls tripped by, casting upon me well-bred but amused glances. All the womenkind of Oravicza must have turned out at this particular hour, for I had hardly passed the sisters with the arched eyebrows, when I came upon another group of young ladies, who were laughing and talking together. I think they grew merrier as I approached, and I am quite sure I was hotter than I had been all day.”²¹

Crosse’s concern for his reflection in the eyes of the young ladies of Oravița is a leit-motif of his sojourn here, as he often refers to his encounters with the beauties of the town.

If Crosse comes from Baziaș, Baron Born took another route, more than one hundred years before. Born came from Timișoara by coach and passed through several villages with Romanian names. The town is revealed to Baron Born after he passes the hills and reaches “the valley wherein the place is situated.” Oravița is discovered as a mountainous locality and the traveller’s impression is that “the argillaceous slate disappeared under the limestone, which hereabouts covers the surface.”

²² The mountains which bound Oravița are, “as generally in the Banat, gently ascending, and grown over with beech, birch, fir, ash and oak.”²³

Although the access to Oravița is sometimes an adventure, once the British travellers get here, they stay for a longer period (in comparison

²⁰ Crosse, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 9.

²² Born, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 28.

with the other places visited). The travellers participate in several trips in the region, and describe other places such as Sasca, Reşiţa, Lupac, Goruja, Dognecea or Anina.

Housing: hotels, inns, private houses

The British travellers notice that there are several inns in the region, but only two of them are described. The two hotels of Oraviţa are large enough and provide facilities which can satisfy the needs of the Western tourist, such as billiard-rooms or coffee-rooms. Although these saloons are crowded at night, the clients rarely visit them during the day.²⁴

Andrew F. Crosse gives us a detailed account of his experience at the Krone Hotel. The innkeeper receives the guest after repeated pulls at the bell and shows him a room which “a sanitary commissioner would have condemned.” As the coach trip has filled the British guest’s cloths with dust, the he first thing he does is bathing. Crosse is ironically reminded of his aunt’s reflection that “man is but dust!” and thinks that “the dear old lady would have said so in very truth if she had seen me on this occasion.”²⁵

The unsatisfactory conditions of the inns are a leitmotif in 19th century British travel literature. Charles Boner, for instance, writes that a characteristic of the Banat and Transylvania is that the poor conditions of the hotels are counterbalanced by the hospitality of local aristocrats who are always eager to welcome an English visitor.²⁶ Crosse accepts the invitation of an English investor who manages a mine in the region to live at his place for a period.

Architecture and landscapes

The first thing which the travellers notice is that the town consists of one long street which spreads over a few miles and a few side streets. Besides the new aspect of the buildings, which shows the great prosperity of the place, “there is not much to notice in the town itself.”²⁷

Crosse emphasises the picturesque aspect of the town, writing that it “is very prettily situated on rising ground, and the long winding street,

²⁴ Ansted, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

²⁵ Crosse, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

²⁶ See Boner, *op. cit.*, chapter “Hospitality versus Inns,” pp. 74-81.

²⁷ Ansted, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

extending more than two miles, turns with the valley.”²⁸ In spite of the charming view, the young Englishman has the impression that the street is endless.

The night scene is more charming and the relaxed Englishman admires the starlit sky on his leisure stroll back to the inn: “The outline of the mountains was clearly marked in the distance, and in the foreground quaint gable-ends mixed themselves up with the shadows and the trees – a pretty picture, prettier than anything one can see by the light of ‘common day.’”²⁹

Social and national components

As the British travellers observe, a main characteristic of the Banat is the multiethnic structure of the province. A. A. Paton highlights that this region can be considered “a Europe in miniature,” because “in no part of this kingdom (the Hungarian kingdom) are the races more varied.”³⁰ John Paget also notes that “one of the most curious features” of this region “is the motley appearance of its inhabitants, who [...] have preserved their national characteristics quite pure.”³¹ Although “the different races are generally in distinct villages,” there are also many places where people of two or three nations are mixed together, but they rarely intermarry.³² Oravița is the place of a peaceful interethnic cohabitation, and the British writers refer to the Romanians, the Germans, the Hungarians, the Gypsies and the Jews of the place.

The English visitors observe that the inhabitants of this town are mainly Romanians and Germans. The “pleasant little society” of the town consists in the families of the officials and the military stationed here, who “are mostly German by origin.”³³ There are also “very few Magyar inhabitants in this place, which is pretty equally divided between Germans and Wallacks; the lower part of the town belongs to the latter,

²⁸ Crosse, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 13.

³⁰ A. A. Paton, *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

³¹ Paget, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

³² *Ibidem*, p. 55.

³³ Crosse, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

and is known as Roman Oravicza, in distinction to Deutsch Oravicza.” The population of the town in the 1870s is about seven thousand.³⁴

The gypsies occupy the periphery of the town. Andrew F. Crosse notices the presence of this community in the region, and offers his readers a vivid description of their encampment. In his tone we can read the condescending attitude towards this ethnic group, a position frequently found in 19th century British travel literature: “Soon after leaving the town we came upon an encampment of gypsies; their tents looked picturesque enough in the distance, but on nearer approach the illusion was entirely dispelled. In appearance they were little better than savages; children even of ten years of age, lean, mop-headed creatures, were to be seen running about absolutely naked. As Mark Twain said, “they wore nothing but a smile,” but the smile was a grimace to try to extract coppers from the traveller. Two miles farther on we came upon fourteen carts of gypsies, as wild a crew as one could meet all the world over. Some of the men struck me as handsome, but with a single exception the women were terribly unkempt-looking creatures.”³⁵

In a prosperous town with a fast economic development, the commerce has an important place. In this context, the British travellers refer to the Jewish community. The Jewish merchant is always informed about the need of the foreign visitor. An old Jew hears that the young Englishman is looking for a good horse and comes regularly to the place where Crosse is accommodated, sometimes even three times a day, in order to tell him what horses for sell he found. When the Jew sees that his efforts to satisfy the need of the Englishman are useless, he suggests a commission for his activity, but is sharply dismissed by the foreign traveller.

Political life

Crosse refers to the political life of Oravița. He observes the elections are organised in the town. There are two candidates: “one representative of the Wallachian party” and “a director of the States Railway Company.” As several years ago “a serious disturbance” “took place” in the town, the elections are held outside Oravița, in a warehouse adjoining the railway station. The order is kept by a detachment of troops

³⁴ *Ibidem*, p.9.

³⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

and the two parties are divided from each other “by a line of soldiers with fixed bayonets.” The British guest finds it “extremely ridiculous”, as “the whole affair was as tame as possible; no more show of fighting than at a Quakers’ meeting.”³⁶ All the officials of the town voted for the States Railway representative, and the supporters of the Romanian candidate came by train from a certain distance. According to Crosse, “their ardour for their own candidate was drowned in the unlimited beer provided for them by their opponents.”³⁷ In Crosse’s account, we can see that his perspective is influenced by his guest, who probably parts the opponent of the Romanian candidate.

Cultural life and leisure

The town impresses the foreign visitor through its cultural life. Built in 1817 in the Baroque Viennese style, the theatre of Oravița is one of the oldest theatres of South-Eastern Europe. Andrew F. Crosse spends many evenings in the summer theatre, described as “a simple erection, consisting of a stage at the end of a pretty, shady garden.” The seats and tables placed under the lime-trees create a pleasant atmosphere, and “here the happy people of Oravicza enjoy their amusements in the fresh air, drinking coffee and eating ices.” The young Englishman prefers this theatre, where the shows are held in the clear air of the mountains to the crowded English theatres, and in admiring tone he exclaims: “Think of the luxury of fresh air, O ye frequenters of London theatres!”

Crosse is charmed by the atmosphere of the summer theatre at night. The tables are filled with spectators; the light of the lanterns, the greenery and “and many a blue-eyed maiden with looks coquettish yet demure” make the evening unforgettable.³⁸ The Englishman is impressed by the concert of a gypsy band. As it is the first time he hears this kind of music, Crosse expresses his admiration for the musicians and notices that “music is an instinct with these Hungarian gipsies.” Although they play by ear, their interpretation has “a marvellous precision, not surpassed by musicians who have been subject to the most careful training.” Using the violin, the violoncello, and the zither as the main instruments, the gypsy musicians play “compositions of their own”

³⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 70.

³⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 71.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

and can also interpret pieces from Wagner and other composers “with great effect.” The admiration for the gypsy musicians is frequently expressed in the British pages on the Banat and Transylvania. The gypsy airs also make “an indelible impression” on Crosse’s mind: this music seems to him “the thrilling utterance of a people’s history.” The Englishman’s sensibility is stirred by the flawless interpretation and this makes him reflect deeply to the character of this music: “There was the low wail of sorrow, of troubled passionate grief, stirring the heart to restlessness, then the sense of turmoil and defeat; but upon this breaks suddenly a wild burst of exultation, of rapturous joy – a triumph achieved, which hurries you along with it in resistless sympathy.”³⁹

Only after he listens to these airs, does Crosse understand why “the excitable Hungarians can literally become intoxicated with this music”. And it “intoxicates him too,” because nobody can “reason upon it, or explain it, but its strains compel you to sensations of despair and joy, of exultation and excitement, as though under the influence of some potent charm.”⁴⁰

The inhabitants’ leisure is also presented by Ansted, who writes about the interest of the people in saloon games, especially in the billiard-rooms of the hotel and its coffee-rooms, which are frequented especially at night.⁴¹ But Crosse is the one who enthusiastically narrates his experience here. After the concert, the young Englishman cannot help himself participating in the dancing party organised that evening in Oraviţa. This experience is no less exciting than the concert, as he meets at the party some of “the bright eyes” he had encountered on his dusty entrance in the town. He thinks that it is a good moment to make them change their first perception on him, and as “dancing is one of the sins he compounds for,” Crosse cannot help himself inviting the young ladies to dance. It’s the first time when he dances the *czardas*: “it is an epoch in a man’s life, but you must see it, feel it, dance it, and, above all, hear the gypsy music that inspires it”, the English guest writes. His excitement is described in the following lines: “This is the national dance of the Hungarians, favoured by prince and peasant alike. The figures are very varied, and represent the progress of a courtship where the lady is coy,

³⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 12.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁴¹ Ansted, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

and now retreats and now advances; her partner manifests his despair, she yields her hand, and then the couple whirl off together to the most entrancing tones of wild music, such as St. Anthony himself could not have resisted.”⁴²

After this experience, it is not surprising that the time spent at this party with its “charm of unexpectedness,” is “one of the pleasantest evenings” Crosse ever remembers. Oravița is perceived as a paradisaal space: “If unfortunately I should prove not quite good enough to go to heaven, I think it would be very pleasant to stop at Oravicza – supposing, of course, that my friends all stopped there as well.”⁴³

Conclusions

The British travellers’ notes on Oravița combine an objective perspective with the subjective tone of the guest who enjoys and prolongs his sojourn here. The notes on the economic development of the region and the references to the mining activity have real documentary value. But the literary quality of these British pages is also remarkable, and especially Crosse’s account on this town, which has not been discussed so far by literary critics, deserves more attention. I think that his thoughts at the end of the stay at Oravița are the best words to conclude my analysis: “Oravicza was so seductive with its pleasant society; its “land parties,” as they call picnics; its evening dances, enlivened by gipsy music that I remained on and on from want of moral courage to tear myself away. I had thoughts of changing my plans altogether, and of devoting myself to a serious study of the minerals of the Banat, making gay little Oravicza my head-centre. Looking back after the lapse of sober time, I doubt if science would have gained much. Well, well, I made up my mind to go. “The world was all before me,” but I – left my paradise alone. I had no fair Eve “hand in hand” to help my wandering steps.”⁴⁴

New and old at the same time, industrial at day and cultural in the evening, Oravița was one of the towns of the Banat which fascinated the 19th century British travellers, who wrote remarkable pages about a golden age of this place.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p.14.

⁴³ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁴ Crosse, *op. cit.*, p. 10.