

„Jókai, Maurus (1825–1904), ungar. Romanschriftsteller; Schwarze Diamanten”

Mór Jókai in 19th Century World Literature: Translations, Translators, Publishing Relationships, and Artistic Friendships

International Conference in Commemoration of the 200th Anniversary of Mór Jókai's Birth

The quotation chosen as the title for this discussion is sourced from the entry on Jókai in the 1932 edition of the widely recognized *Knaurs Konversationslexikon A-Z*. In the preface to this volume, Dr. Richard Friedenthal, the editor of the *Konversationslexikon*, published in Berlin, succinctly outlined the ambitious objectives of the handbook as follows:

“The completely transformed worldview of the post-war period necessitates a new formulation of the knowledge of our time. The continuously advancing specialization and division of all fields of study makes a comprehensive reference work an urgent need. (...) The focus on the scope of a single volume is a deliberate limitation; it allowed me to exclude obsolete knowledge and, unencumbered by constricting tradition, to highlight what is most important for people today. My specific aim was to create a work that provides reliable information both for the highly educated and for those in need of education, through concise and sharp wording as well as a clear, well-structured presentation of the rich material.”¹

In the early 1930s, this was the extent of what a well-educated or culture-seeking German reader was expected to know about Mór Jókai: Hungarian, novelist, *Black Diamonds*.

While Jókai's translations gradually disappeared from the global literary market in the 20th century, with new translations appearing only in the countries of the so-called "socialist bloc" in the latter half of the century, the *Knaurs Konversationslexikon A-Z* still regarded Jókai as relevant in 1932. The entry devoted to him was of the same length as those for Dickens, Diderot, Flaubert, Petrarch, or the Hungarian poet Sándor Petőfi. It was longer than that of Camille Flammarion, but one sentence shorter than the entries for Dostoevsky and Zola.

Jókai's oeuvre represents one of the most significant legacies of Hungarian narrative prose. In the second half of the 19th century, it was through the works of Mór Jókai that Hungarian literature emerged as a well-known and respected entity in both European and world literature. From 1850 onward, his works were published almost simultaneously in Hungarian and foreign languages, initially primarily in German translations. Following the release of *Schlachtenbilder und Szenen aus Ungarns Revolution 1848 und 1849 von Sajó*, which was published in German by Gustav Heckenast in Pest and

¹ Dr. Richard Friedenthal, „Vorwort des Herausgebers”, in *Knaurs Konversationslexikon A-Z*, Berlin: Verlag von Th. Knaur Nachf., 1932.

Gregor Wigand in Leipzig, Jókai established himself as a novelist and short story writer whose works were aimed at both the Hungarian and international literary markets.

Tibor Demeter's unparalleled work, *Bibliographia Hungarica: Hungarian Literature in Foreign Languages*, which catalogues translations of Hungarian literary works published between 1800 and 1978, contains "more than 73,000 records," according to the database's imprint.² These 73,000 records encompass translations spanning 178 years of Hungarian literature, and it is particularly notable that 1,008 of these entries pertain to the works of Mór Jókai. While this comparison may not be statistically precise, it is still noteworthy that the number of entries for Zsigmond Kemény is 4, for Mikszáth it is 501, and for Dezső Kosztolányi, 709. The presentation by András Kiséry and Péter Király, titled "Hungarian Literature in Foreign Languages: A Data-Driven Analysis of Tibor Demeter's *Bibliographia Hungarica*," reports on a study that employed cutting-edge digital philological methods to analyze the information contained in Demeter's bibliography.³

Just as the translations of Petőfi represented Hungarian lyric poetry, so the translations of Jókai represented Hungarian fictional prose on the global stage. There is scarcely a more extensively discussed, analyzed, researched, and debated figure in Hungarian literary history than Mór Jókai, whose poetic achievements have been radically reassessed by literary historiography in recent decades. However, it is difficult to find another writer in Hungarian literary history whose work captivated and engaged contemporaries, both Hungarian and international, to such a degree, or who was taken so seriously by the leading artists and public figures of his time. From Isadora Duncan to Henrik Ibsen, many of the most influential figures of his era sought personal contact with him. Gottfried Benn read him with the same interest as Sándor Márai. László Imre has uncovered the story of the curious encounter that not only proved advantageous for Anton Pavlovich Chekhov, but ultimately brought him the literary success and recognition he had long desired in 1882, following his writing of a Jókai imitation.⁴

The reason why, among the numerous German translations, the *Black Diamonds* is included in the glossary is likely that the novel was published by both Philipp Reclam Jr. and Otto Janke, the latter of whom reprinted the volume eight times, thus making it available on the German book market for several decades (until the 1910s).

From Gottfried Benn's correspondence, we know that he must have read this novel on 30 and 31 August 1935 („Ich lese Maurus Jokai“, „Werde den dicken Maurus Jokai lesen, »Schwarze Diamanten.«“).⁵ However, the letters he wrote to Elinor Müller unfortunately do not provide any information on Benn's impressions of Jókai's novel. Nor do they answer many other questions: why

² <https://mek.oszk.hu/02700/02792/>

³ Cf. https://mtabtk.videotorium.hu/recordings/44028/magyar-irodalom-idegen-nyelven-demeter-tibor-bibliographia-hungaricajanak-adatkozpontu-elemzese?fbclid=IwY2xjawJqO0lleHRuA2FlbQIxMAABHv5th4YuLgzXy07pWROJEJbUPiM7hT9-I9kLaSW_3kRcZ5r6AktB94-oK71_aem_the9-kf28u7-jbfcH_AR8Q

⁴ Imre László, „Csehov Jókai-imitációja“, in Jókai & Jókai: Tanulmányok, Hansági Ágnes–Hermann Zoltán ed., Budapest: L'Harmattan, 2013, 13–18.

⁵ Cf. Gottfried Benn, „Briefe an Elinor Büller 1930–1937“, in Briefe V., Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1992, 90–91.

did the poet, known to be a discerning reader, choose this particular book? Had someone recommended it to him? Was it his bedtime reading? The fact that Gottfried Benn did not feel the need to explain the author's identity, meaning that *Maurus Jokai* functions as a metonymy in the letter's text, suggests that Benn, as the writer, assumed the recipient was already familiar with the author's name and the body of works associated with it.

According to the Demeter bibliography, *Black Diamonds* was published twelve times in German between 1871 and 1963. It is assumed that Gottfried Benn read the novel in Eduard Glatz's translation, likely the Reclam reprint published in 1919.

The narrative style, which is characterized by wordplay, puns, a vocabulary that is exceptionally rich in comparison to his contemporaries, and the integration of various linguistic layers, as well as individual word formations and hapax legomena, represents a unique feature of Jókai's fictional prose and is not easily translatable. This is also the reason why many translations often merely convey the plot, while the wordplay—an element that contributes significantly to the value and modernity of Jókai's prose—frequently becomes a loss in translation.

The two-day conference will provide an opportunity to focus on Jókai's translators, publishers, international connections, and artistic friendships, offering insights into the special status he established for himself in the world literature of the second half of the 19th century.

Conference themes:

1. The role of Mór Jókai in European and world literature
2. Translations of Mór Jókai's works
3. Translators of Mór Jókai's works
4. Mór Jókai's international publishing, press and artistic connections
5. Mór Jókai and World Literature: A Perspective from the History of Relations
6. Mór Jókai in the international press

Expected date of the conference: 2-3 October 2025.

Venue: Balatonfüred, Hotel Blaha Lujza