

Enikő Bollobás

Hungarian in America – American in Hungary
János Xántus, the 19th Century Naturalist

Two passages may stand side by side to illustrate the appraisal and achievement in the United States of John (János) Xántus, 19th century Hungarian naturalist and traveller of the American West. The first is what Xántus himself wrote to his Hungarian editor, István Prépost, in 1857:

Speaking six languages, playing piano and being a good topographical draftsman, after all efforts I could never bring my existence higher up than to 25 dollars a month. (Intro. *Letters*, 18)

The second passage is from a letter of recommendation written by Spencer Fullerton Baird, Director of the Smithsonian Institution:

Mr. Xántus is the most accomplished and successful explorer in the field of natural history I have ever known or ever heard of, the results of his operations enriching the Smithsonian Museum in a very high degree. (Intro. *Travels*, 15)

Fellow naturalists talk about the “mythical natural of the Xántus tradition” (Harris 191), preserving his name in many ways, among them by naming California birds after him. As such, there exist such birds as the “Xántus murrelet” (*Brachyramphus hypoleucus*), the “Xántus screech owl” (*Megascops a. xantusi*), the “Xántus hummingbird” (*Amazilia xantusii*), and the “Xántus California jay” (*Aphelocoma californica hypoleuca*). Also, there are reptiles, insects and plants bearing his name: the “Xántus lizard” (*Xantusia vigilis*), the chilopoda (*Bothropolys xanti*), the *Clarkia Xantiana*, *Solanum Xanti*, the “Xántus snake” (*Hypsiglena ochrorhynchus*), the “Xántus gecko” (*Phyllodactylus xanti*), the Gunsight Fairyfan (*Clarkia xantiana*), as well as several deep sea fishes, starfishes, land shells, polyps and corals. “The labours of Mr. Xántus”, the 1861 Annual report of the Smithsonian Institution claimed, “will form an extraordinary monument of the ability of a single intelligent and accomplished collector to nearly exhaust the natural history of an extensive region, under difficulties sometimes almost insuperable” (qtd. in Intro. *Travels*, 20). The 1858 and 1859 annual reports gave him similar credit for his scientific achievement (qtd. in Madden 95, 96).

Today Xántus is appreciated as a naturalist and as a Romantic naturalist – traveller, pioneer and explorer – who, as one of the first Hungarians to see the wilderness of the Western

territories and California, left two accounts of his adventures: his *Letters from North America* and *Travels in Southern California*.ⁱ

Xántus was born in Csokonya (Somogy County) in 1825, as the son of Ignác Xántus, solicitor, land agent and steward on the estate of Count István Széchenyi. He became a lawyer and would have remained one, too, if in 1848 he had not joined the revolutionary army of Kossuth. Already at the rank of first lieutenant, he was captured by the Austrians in February 1849, and was imprisoned in Königgrätz. After the war his mother managed to get him released, only to see him arrested again on his way home in Prague. But he could escape to Hamburg and then on to London, where he sailed for America, landing in New York in 1851.

Little is known of his first years in America. During this period between 1851 and 1857 he was most probably employed as an engineering draftsman on the Pacific Railroad of Missouri Survey to California. In his letters not intended for publication he wrote plainly about his miseries, being unable to use his talents in a profitable way. His letter to István Prépost shows his disappointment:

I landed in America without a cent ... and have been in every condition of life. The Americans do not care what a person is, that is, what he does. Poverty is not shameful here; it is a misfortune, and everyone is bound to help himself as best he may. I, for instance, have been a jack of all trades – a newspaper boy, sailor, store clerk, bookseller, pharmacist, piano teacher, railroad cartographer, engineer, and teacher of German, Latin and Spanish. (qtd. in Madden 23)

In 1853-54 he spent some time in New Orleans only to get hit by the yellow fever, then went on to the Hungarian settlements in Southern Iowa, spending some 6 months there (August 1854 to February 1855).ⁱⁱ

He enlisted in the army in September 1855 n “in a moment of utmost despair”, as he put it, as a private under the assumed name of Louis Vesey. He served at Fort Riley, Kansas, constantly in the field on the borders of Kansas Territory, engaged as a topographic draftsman in boundary survey. Often he was put in the command of exploring parties to map Indian territories. Here he met Dr. William Alexander Hammond, an assistant surgeon-general (later Surgeon General of the US Army). This meeting brought about a turning point in his life, since Hammond worked under the direction of Spencer Fullerton Baird, the well-famed ornithologist, who later became Secretary of the Smithsonian Institution. Under the careful guidance of Hammond, a competent scientist, Xántus’s interest in natural sciences developed as he began observing and collecting *naturalia*. His earliest collections were sent to the Philadelphia Academy of Natural Sciences in December 1856, earning him life membership there.

Soon he could use his talents in mapping up the natural history of the great Central Valley of California, the Coastal Range and the Sierra Nevada, as he was transferred to the medical department of the army in Fort Tejon. “Here everybody is a gambler and drunkard”, he complains bitterly. “They sit day and night in whiskey shops, or gambling holes, and instead of

supporting me, they ridicule my sport and throw every obstacle in my way” (Madden 62). Yet his achievement is amazing: in 18-20 months at Fort Tejon, he collected 24 boxes, thus exhausting the biota of the region. He packed and mailed 2,000 birds, 200 mammals, hundreds of birds’ nests and eggs, reptiles, fishes, insects, plants, skulls and skeletons, all stuffed and preserved, all with drawings and notes on the habits and characters of the particular species. His collections were sent to the Smithsonian with the arrangement that all second and third series would be sent on to the Academy of Natural Sciences of Philadelphia and the Hungarian National Museum in Pest, care of Ágoston Kubinyi. Still, he often was in low spirits: “I did not know ... the exact position of the army in this country, and I had not the farthest idea that in the American Army only the officers are considered *men*; and the others something like a *last class negroes*” (qtd. in Madden 94).

In January 1859 he received his discharge from the army, left Fort Tejon for Cape San Lucas (at the tip of Baja California), travelling with 9 tons of baggage. At Cape San Lucas he worked as a tidal observer for the United States Coast Survey from April 1859 until August 1861, and explored the area extending northward about 350 miles, sending back over 60 boxes of *naturalia* to the Smithsonian. Here he suffered from personal isolation; he was impatient of routine and captious toward his superiors, and was quite bored too: “I am quite sick indeed of this place”, he wrote (qtd. in Madden 138-9). For company, he had birds – women. Having a great taste for the latter, it comes as no surprise that Cape San Lucas seems to have a whole village today that is populated by the Xántus great-grandchildren; this was at least the impression of John Steinbeck when he visited the area in 1940 (qtd. in Madden 151).

During these years he kept sending home specimens of *naturalia* for the “John Xántus Collection” of the National Museum of Pest and to Flóris Rómer, Director of the Museum of Győr. Thus paving his way, and knowing that the Amnesty of 1859 allowed him to return freely, he left for Hungary in August 1861. In Pest he was received with great honours: was awarded corresponding membership of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, and was elected Honorary President of the Zoological Garden (then at the planning stage). But since there was no firm position available for him, he again returned to America.

In June 1862 he became Acting Assistant Surgeon General of the Army (though had no medical degree), and then in November 1862 he was named Consul and assigned to duty in Monzanillo, Mexico. Here he explored the Pacific slope of the Sierra Madre; sending 43 boxes to the Smithsonian from March 1863 to March 1864. Here, in order to protect an American mine operator, he recognized a rebel chief. This proved to be a move strongly disapproved of by the State Department, leading to the closure of his Consulate.

In 1864 Xántus finally returned to his homeland. In 1865 he was named Director of the new Zoo, which officially opened in August 1866. In 1869-71 he travelled to Southeast Asia on a mission, the Austro-Hungarian East Asiatic Expedition, for the Hungarian government. He covered Ceylon, Singapore, Siam, Indochina, Malaya, Indonesia, Japan and China. Soon he parted from the expedition, and did much of the trip by himself, returning, as usual, with a rich collection of animals and plants. Until his death in 1894 he was the Curator of the Ethnographical Section of the Hungarian National Museum. He is buried in the Kerepesi

Cemetery, opposite the Mausoleum of Ferenc Deák, the grand architect of the 1867 National Compromise between Austria and Hungary.

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When Xántus landed in New York in 1851, he only had \$7, but his spiritual and intellectual baggage was full. A revolutionary émigré, he was driven by an adventurous spirit to test his principles of freedom and democracy in the New World (in the old, these principles failed, he felt). A field-naturalist, topographer and cartographer (although he was none of these by training, only by ambition, and the future proved him right), he sought for virgin lands to be “taken” by science and industry.

In the American West he found, in the 1850s, a specific blend of European and American cultures, what he could not have found anywhere in Europe: the wilderness, “the basic ingredient of American civilization” (Nash xi). This wilderness was the meeting ground of the “wild” and the “civilized”, or, more precisely, that area was itself created by civilization (Nash xiii) as the meeting of European mind and American landscape. No wonder Xántus proved to be a perfect match for this wilderness.

Xántus was much at home in this American space because he seemed to be himself the embodiment of a happy marriage of these two worlds. He found a space populated with pioneer settlements, crisscrossed by railroads, churched and schooled, and then took an active part in this process both as a draftsman and cartographer. As an engineer, he tamed the wilderness by drawing up maps of possible rail routes and settlements; as a naturalist, he helped understand the land by collecting its flora and fauna.

Xántus was, in many ways, the typical pioneer and frontiersman of Frederick Jackson Turner, working to eliminate the dividing line between civilization and savagery. He was the frontiersman who, as Perry Miller claims in his *Nature's Nation*, is the descendent of the early English colonists trying to tame the wilderness (81-84). For Xántus the West meant a beautiful task, as well as enterprise, the manifestation of what he called the “American enterprising spirit” (*Letters* 151). This is his account of this spirit:

I must not fail to say what I feel so deeply – that the more time we spent in this region and the better we got to know it, the more pleasure we derived from it and the harder it was to depart. All my life an irresistible longing drew me to the land, and I must confess that I have seen few places in my life that offer comparable advantages for successful farming as does this. Needless to say, within a few years this area will be subjected to intensive industrialization. The rich forests, beautiful meadows, the immense quantity of granite, gypsum and coal, but especially the fertile soil, will soon attract the economic forces. Once the axe of the pioneer breaks the deep silence of the forest, it will quickly be followed by the pickaxe and hammer of the miner in the mountains. The saw mill and the forge will compete in the building of

railroads, which will haul the surplus produce and magically transform it into solid gold. ... Nature endowed this land with such generosity that it seems to be saying, “Here you must settle”. (*Letters* 123-4)

It is not clear which specific region he is talking about, but his enthusiasm for the future seems to be more important than facts: the way he visualizes the happy future of this idyllic region in terms of industry, enterprise, land cultivation, where life is about to begin. His pioneer fantasies are projected onto this virgin land, which could be found in America, but not in Europe any more. For the officer serving in the 1948-49 Revolutionary War, his ideals of freedom and democracy were embodied by the revolutionary spirit: the possibility of always starting anew.

Like so many other visitors to the US since the Independence Era, Xántus also saw in the advance of frontier colonization “the power of civilization”; where the pioneer was like “a victorious general after the battle” (*Letters* 33). In this respect, Xántus joins the tradition of 19th century European engineers, naturalists and entrepreneurs, who, as Mary Louise Pratt puts it, travelled “as the advance scouts for European capital”, seeing “in the American landscape a dormant machine waiting to be cranked into activity” (Pratt 19, 20). Like Xántus, British visitors (Joseph Andrews, John Mawe, and Charles Cochrane) also saw American nature as raw material for European industrialization. Charles Cochrane’s enthusiastic words for the enterprising potentials of the American landscape are much similar to those of Xántus.

In that country there is every facility for enterprise, and every prospect of success: man alone is wanting to set the whole machine in motion, which is now inactive but which, with capital and industry, may be rendered productive. (Cochrane I:vii; qtd. in Pratt 20)

Xántus was happy about immigration being at its height in 1854: “Let them come! We have enough land for three times Europe’s population, and work for millions” (*Letters* 59). He was quite aware that America was different from Western Europe in the sense that across the Atlantic exiles and émigrés from Central and Eastern Europe were welcome. They did not have to feel as Adam Mickiewicz did, who saw the Polish exiles as “unbidden guests” in the unfriendly environment of Paris (see Slawek-Wesling 23). America needed the pioneers. However, in a sense he was aware of the dubious role of the white man in the wilderness. He contemplates the fact that the Indians call the pioneer engineers “Land Robbers” (*Letters* 33) – a name evoking the same image as the American landscape painter Thomas Cole’s phrase does in his poem “The Lament of the Forest”, where he writes about the destruction caused by the “human hurricane” of the settlers.

And thus came rushing on
This human hurricane, boundless as swift.
Our sanctuary, this secluded spot,
Which the stern rocks have guarded until now,

Our enemy has marked.

Xántus was of a special breed, whose basic pioneer mentality was altered by his interests as a naturalist and romantic traveller. I think he was a romantic idealist, a product of European revolutions, and as such wanted both to possess and to preserve nature.

He did not share the “pioneer aversion to wilderness”, which, according to Nash, was typical (55). Rarely did, according to Nash, naturalists pause in their labours to admire the scenery (53). But Xántus did. His heated nature passages fall into two categories: those written by the naturalist and those by the romantic explorer. The naturalist delights in the rich vegetation of the landscape, and is enthusiastic about all the species that populate the mountains, valleys and plains, whether of trees, flowers, birds or beasts. And naturally he is happy if he can add new or even unknown specimens to his collections (*Letters* 123, 142-3). The naturalist rejoices in the richness of American wildlife: “Never in my life had I imagined so much wildlife as here. In just one forest I saw antelopes, elk and deer by the tens of thousands”, he wrote, with a distaste for understatement (*Letters* 32). He had no way of knowing that the buffalo-hunt he narrated (*Letters* 144-5) will soon be like tales from another planet for his readers; the swift butchering of seven buffaloes, whose bodies would be left on the scene for wolves and crows, will – for later generations – serve as an emblem of a reckless pioneer attitude: reckless in its vain thirst for blood, in its passion for pointless (because independent of real hunger) hunt. The prairie dogs, the wild cats, the bears and the buffaloes were to him primarily items in his collections, although sometimes he shows signs of worry for their survival; at such times his doubts are overcome by his trust in the wise protection of nature preventing the extinction of these wild animals (see *Letters* 119). In this respect already he was different from other pioneers and frontiersmen, who by definition were “indifferent to permanence”, as Carl Ortwin Sauer’s heavy verdict goes (Sauer 34). Indeed, his other self, that of the romantic traveller, could view nature without frontier interest, could appreciate its majesty and magnificence in itself, as the manifestation of the sublime.

Here [on Chandeleur Island in the Gulf of Mexico] one really sees the grandeur of nature. I could only wish to have one of those who brag of their disbelief in God to come up with me to the tower and observe the extraordinary beauty of the rising sun--to listen to the acclaim of the millions of feathery creatures, the humming of the colibris in their palm nests, the chatter of the parrots, the crowing of the pelicans, flamingos, and myriads of ibis. Here and there a shark chases after his food, while on the shore are great multitudes of shells and snails. One sees coconut, hickory, fan and other palms with their crowns stretching to the sky; the jasmine, banana and sarsaparilla groves with their thousands and thousands of colourful inhabitants ... Let the atheist tell me that all this was self-created, without a guiding spirit.

He was able to see sublimity in the wilderness, to associate God with nature. He did this in the spirit of the American Transcendentalists, Henry David Thoreau among them, who wrote, "Man cannot afford to be a naturalist to look at Nature directly ... He must look through and beyond her" (45). Xántus did indeed look "through and beyond" nature, discerning sparks of divinity there. Often, the two voices – that of the Thoreauvan Transcendentalist and that of the scientist of natural history – seem to be arguing in Xántus, even within one and the same passage. The voice of this naturalist grows stronger as he closes the description of the Chandeleur Island:

Only now do I realize the magnitude of the science of nature, and I must confess that I am truly religious, serene and content, ever since I have studied nature; for every animal, mineral, and plant fills me with wonder of the divine genius. (*Letters* 61-62)

The romantic traveller, "irresistibly drawn" to the landscape, as he puts it in one of his letters (*Letters* 122), might have been his original self: only later, in order to satisfy in a tangible manner his longing for nature, was the naturalist born. Idealism came to be put into practice. His description of the source of the Arkansas River was written in the same vein indeed as any John Muir passage:

We gorged our yearning stomachs with the ice-cold spring water. The wild beauty and majestic magnitude of the mountains amply compensated for our trials and ordeals. As we neared the source, the grandeur of the scene surpassed anything I have seen in my life, perhaps even Niagara. I must admit my inability to describe adequately the feeling of joy that filled my entire being upon gazing at nature's masterpiece.

The steely grip of endless time and the relentless erosion of water chiselled and sculpted such fantastic shapes that it takes no great imagination to see them as great works of art forming a grandiose vista. One is filled with humility and contemplation of the greatness of Creation and the realization of how puny and fleeting is human existence and competence in contrast to nature's eternity. (*Letters* 116)

Like Alexander von Humboldt 50 years earlier, John Xántus also managed to balance the two extremes into which, according to Mary Louise Pratt, European travel writing polarized into: science (with its taste for taxonomic natural history) and sentiment (with its recognition of the sublime in nature). Pratt sees these two extremes as the surfacing, in travelogues, of the Aristotelian principles of instruction and amusement, providing factual knowledge, descriptive appendices of customs, flora and fauna, as well as excitement and exoticism (5).

To write with sentiment about the excitement and exoticism of America, and at the same time to offer factual knowledge, with taxonomies of natural history, was not overly difficult for a Hungarian naturalist. Xántus was not enthusiastic as a naturalist only, but also as a traveller

from Central Europe, amazed at the technological progress and democratic institutions of America, especially at the fusion of the two, such that he found on trains. This is how he wrote for the *Győri Közlöny* in 1862, after returning to America from his first trip home:

For one who travels on American trains for the first time, it will appear very striking that there is but one class in the cars, and no one, by paying more, can barricade his moneyed self in such a place where he will not meet the common glances of the common people. (qtd. in Madden 160)

But Xántus was an enthusiastic spectator of America as a whole. He was amazed at the favourable position of women in society (at least in the circles he saw), their opportunities in everyday life such as being able to travel on ships by themselves (*Letters* 154-5). His democratic conscience is satisfied at seeing the availability of goods for the common people, at the plentiful American meals aboard ships, where sugar and rum are free, coffee is unlimited (see *Letters* 155-6). Like most other visitors from Europe, Xántus too finds it emblematic of American democracy that the president of the United States leads a simple and unpretentious life, and is more available to the citizens than public figures would ever dare to be in Europe. The lack of protocol surprises him most:

The antechamber was filled with people from every walk of life. Every American citizen believes that it is his right to visit the official elected by him to the highest office and, when he goes to Washington, to shake hands with him. One can appear on these occasions dressed in any kind of clothing: even gloves are not required. (*Letters* 161)

Xántus finds it important to emphasize the fast pace of life in America, whether in connection with meals or with teaming city life. Not that he would agree with the fast pace he witnessed in San Francisco – as a lover of nature he most probably valued all that city-dwellers had been missing out – but the American metropolis, dictating an intensive involvement in all spheres of life, bewildered him.

Everybody is busy rushing about to acquire wealth and treasures. It appears to the attentive observer that everyone wants to live for today, as if the last judgement were at hand. On the street everyone runs, carriages and wagons gallop at full speed, and people wolf down their food. The last bite is not chewed before they are on the run again, constantly glancing at their watches. All night long there is music, dancing, whoring, dice and card playing, yet at sunrise the entire community is up and about. (*Letters* 179)

He wrote extensively about Indians, with pride in his own ability to deal with the natives and to communicate with chiefs (see for example *Letters*, 128). In his letters he devoted lengthy

passages to his encounters with Seminole (33-4), Potawatami (35-7), Kickapoo (85-88), Kiowa (113) and Wichita (120-1, 129-38) tribes, describing their various customs, villages, harvests. Often he would add drawings to his narrative, of people as well as objects, and would send many Indian objects (crafts and weapons) home to Pest for the National Museum. He was not unfriendly with the Indians, like most other visitors; yet still, he often wrote ironically about them, and agreed with other settlers about the necessity to transform them (which usually meant conversion first).

He was proud of his fellow émigrés who managed to achieve independence and distinguished positions in America. He had his misgivings about the Hungarian settlements in Iowa, but that was perhaps so for personal reasons rather than because of his disagreement with the ethics of frontier settlements (their dispute over financial matters and their opinion about Xántus's supposed incredibility in his self-glorifying tales even reached Pest: they were printed, together with Xántus's defence supported by his American friends, in a daily newspaper *Jövő* in 1862). But he was very proud of the gold smeltry of three Hungarian entrepreneurs, Vas, Urnay and Haraszthy. He was, in his own words, "amazed at the compact equipment and its extensive, economical and practical operation" (*Letters* 187). "This enterprise", he finishes his lengthy description, "is the most remarkable one on the Pacific Coast, and we Hungarians can be justly proud of Count Vas and his partners, who represent our homeland with so much distinction in one of the greatest nations of the world" (*Letters* 192).

Xántus was of the rare species of the successful re-migrants. Hungarian remigration was a well known phenomenon for two reasons. One, because in the case of political emigration, the reason for emigration could easily disappear with the change of political climate, as it did for Xántus too: with the Amnesty in 1859, political émigrés could return and hold important positions in Hungary. Also, emigration was often only planned for a few years, in which case the Hungarian immigrants did not want to naturalize in America. However, as it often happened, remigration occurred in fewer cases than had been expected: by the time Hungarian politics changed or the immigrants earned enough money to afford the transatlantic trip, they would become too much rooted in American life and did not wish to give up their existence. Most rarely did successful immigrants return. Xántus was one of the very few, and he did so with as full a baggage as he had arrived with 13 years earlier, except that this time American ideas travelled with him across the Atlantic. He took home not only his knowledge of natural history, but also Transcendentalist ideas of the wilderness and the sublime quality of nature. It is for this reason that his own words, written in praise of his compatriots, apply to him most: "Our friends at home may look upon us with gratification, for we have brought honour to our former, beloved country" (*Letters* 160).

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ⁱ Both of these books appeared in Hungary while Xántus was still in America: *Xántus János levelei Éjszakamerikából* (Pest: Lauffer & Stolp, 1857) and *Utazás Kalifornia déli részeiben* (Pest: Lauffer & Stolp, 1860).

ⁱⁱ The Hungarian pioneer colonies of New Buda and New Arad had been in existence since 1850: as colonies of political refugees in Decatur County they had taken out land claims under the Act of 4 September, 1841. Their rights were strengthened by the Act of 11 May, 1858 which gave preference to the Hungarian refugees.