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"A FIGHTER FOR RIGHTEOUS CAUSES ENCOUNTERS
POLITICAL FASHION."

Lehel Vadon, *Upton Sinclair in Hungary*.
Eger: College Press, 1993. 125 pp.

In the United States, Upton Sinclair's (1878—1968) reputation was made with the publication of *The Jungle* (1906), the most powerful of all the muck-raking novels. So consistent and strong was this reputation for exposing evils and demanding reforms, especially of the Chicago stockyards, that sixty years later, in 1967 President Lyndon B. Johnson invited Sinclair to the White House "to witness the signing of the Wholesome Meat Act, which will gradually plug the loopholes left by the first Federal meat inspection law" (*New York Times*). It was Sinclair's writings, especially *The Jungle* which helped bring about enactment of the original meat inspection act! This visit was wholly consistent with Sinclair's reputation in America, for throughout his long career he has been viewed not so much as a novelist—despite winning a Pulitzer Prize in 1942 for *Dragon's Teeth* one of his *Lanny Budd* novels—as a vigorous, crusading journalist bent on exposing the evils and hypocrisy of social, political, educational, and economic institutions.

In Hungary, Sinclair's reception was highly influenced by doctrinaire rather than by aesthetic consideration, as Lehel Vadon has extensively demonstrated in a series of articles (see, for example, "Upton Sinclair

esztétikája a magyar irodalmi kritikában,” *Hevesi Szemle*, 1979) and now most persuasively in *Upton Sinclair in Hungary* (Eger, 1993).

If Sinclair was undervalued as a writer as opposed to as a journalist in America, then clearly he was over-valued as a writer in Hungary. Political fashion hailed him first as a great writer until he fell from favor when he became virtually ignored. Vadon reports that “the change in attitude towards Upton Sinclair between 1949 and 1956 can be seen most strikingly in the *Népszava*. The paper which for fifty years had ceaselessly praised the writer now ... aimed to destroy the writer through a series of crude and malicious allegations.” But this was only the beginning: “for ten years following ... nothing was published on ... Sinclair in any Hungarian newspaper or periodical”! Only with the '56 uprising and the subsequent relaxation of journal censorship, the opening up of the universities, and the decline of propaganda was Sinclair evaluated seriously in Hungary.

Kurt Vonnegut once wittily remarked that one of Hitler’s worst crimes was that “he gave a good name to war.” Similarly, one might say that one of despotic Communism’s worst crimes was that it gave a bad name to socialism. Nowhere is this better illustrated than in the reception of Sinclair in Hungary which is held hostage to official cultural values and taste in literature despite his well-earned socialist credentials. Thus Vadon traces the attacks on the very successful *Lanny Budd* novels, including the foremost bestseller in Hungary, *World’s End* (1940): Hungarian “nazi-sympathizers considered the book to be anti-nazi ... [while] during the fifties because Sinclair had attacked Stalin and his policies both the cycle and its author were pronounced to be anti-soviet and reactionary.” Another similar victim of political fashion was Sinclair’s autobiographies. H. L. Mencken considered Sinclair’s *Autobiography* (1962) which includes a revision of *American Outpost* (1932) his greatest work, yet despite two translations of the earlier work into Hungarian (1938 and 1947) the book of reminiscences went virtually unnoticed with only one highly negative review in *Korunk* (1939).

Notwithstanding such obstacles several Hungarian critics and scholars have offered well-considered views such as Géza Hegedűs on the Lanny Budd novels and László Országh on Sinclair’s oeuvre, besides Zoltán

Fábry, Pál Tábori and a few others. Vadon's volume includes a useful Checklist of Sinclair works translated into Hungarian, notices and reviews, criticism and scholarship. There is also a helpful index to the volume which chronicles the Hungarian reception of the writer once described by his wife as "a brave and skillful fighter in the cause he loved" whose work reflects both his fighting ability and his belief in those causes he fought for. .