

**Robert Nemes. *The Once and Future Budapest*. Dekalb:  
Northern Illinois University Press, 2005.**

Eva Bodnar, University of Alberta

Nemes' book, *The Once and Future Budapest*, is an addition to the historiography of the reform period in Hungarian history. This period corresponded roughly to the beginning of the 1825 Hungarian diet, the so-called first reform diet, and ended with the outbreak of the Revolution in March 1848. During this time, Hungarian nobles, burghers and élite commoners took pains to try to alter the constitution of the country, politically and socially. The transformation was wrought with difficulty, as Hungary was a country still organised in mediaeval fashion. Orders and Estates dominated political life, to the exclusion of the great majority of the population. In terms of society, it was a primarily Magyar nobility, who ruled over a multicultural county of Germans, Slavic peoples of various nationalities, Romanians, and Jews. Nemes investigates how changing these structural aspects of Hungarian life brought forth the twin developments of nationalism and urbanism, in a place that would be the capital, Budapest. He sees that "(f)ew cities grew as fast, and in almost none was nationalism woven so tightly into the urban fabric" (ix), and looks at "...what came before nationalism, why this political movement mobilized so many men and women, and how it shaped the development of Budapest" (ix).

Writing about nationalism in the reform period has a lengthy tradition in Hungarian historiography. One of the innovative aspects of Nemes' approach is his use of the cities of Pest-Buda, as they were then called, to denote how it became a goal of the reform period to make a capital that was 'Magyar' in its

national composition, instead of multicultural. Through the use of population statistics and data on ethnic composition, he denotes the process of Magyarisation at work. Pest-Buda slowly became the national Hungarian capital Budapest, but *when* it happened is a matter of some debate. As late as the disputed census of 1851, census takers counted the ethnic composition of the city as fifty percent German, one third Magyar and the remainder as Jews, Slovaks, Serbs and others (152). Despite the attempts of Hungarian nationalists, and the pressure to assimilate to Magyar culture, the roots of multiculturalism ran deep. Nemes' creative use of the twin cities as a metaphor and laboratory for these ideas allows him to bypass the more traditional biographical approach to the historiography of the reform period.

A second innovative aspect of Nemes' book is his focus on associational culture in the first half of the nineteenth-century. Research on associational formation in central Europe is experiencing somewhat of a boom, primarily in German scholarship. It is seen as a way of understanding civil society in a climate that was supposedly bereft of political organisation at the local level. This work locates the phenomenon for associations at work just as clearly in the Kingdom of Hungary, as it was in German-speaking lands. Nemes is especially good at detailing the symbolic significance of ordinary life. His attention to names of people, street signs, the importance of cultural activity such as balls, and the national significance associated with architecture are highlights of his book. Both the attention to culture and the use of neglected archival material on associations in the reform era link Hungarian writing to western scholarship, which is an important achievement.

The only criticism that I have with the text is that the title does not capture the essence of the book. *The Once and Future Budapest* could just as easily have been referring to the present city as to its counterpart in the nineteenth century. But this is a relatively minor issue. In its writing, Nemes conveys his ideas in his customarily elegant style of writing English, which is on par with that of his former supervisor, István Deák. It is a clear and enjoyable read. | 3