

# A long

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Geoffrey Sutton

CONCISE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF  
THE ORIGINAL LITERATURE OF  
ESPERANTO

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In 1887, Ludovik Zamenhof, a Jewish eye doctor in his late twenties, working in what is now Poland but was then part of the Russian Empire, was about to get married. As was customary, his wife-to-be brought with her a sizeable dowry. With her agreement, though to the alarm of his new father-in-law, the doctor spent this dowry on printing and publishing a language project on which he had been working since his teenage years. The booklet, after the necessary approval by the tsarist censors, was originally published in Russian, under the name *Mezhdunarodnyj Jezyk* (International Language). By the end of the year it had come out in Polish, German and French as well. The following year saw an English version.

The project developed into what we now know as Esperanto. (This name was originally the author's nom de plume, "the hoping one", but was quickly applied instead to the new language itself.) Zamenhof lived to see his theoretical scheme take wing as a real language, taken up first in Eastern Europe, then in France and Western Europe, and finally worldwide. Within twenty years international congresses held entirely in the language were attracting thousands of participants, a tradition which continues to the present day.

The popular perception of Esperanto today is of a noble failure. It has not succeeded in its founder's aim of becoming a second language for all humankind. It has not managed to neutralize humanity's historical language rivalries and hatreds. Most people, if they think about it at all, do not see it as a serious language, or indeed as a proper language.

From the perspective of sociolinguistics, however, Esperanto can be claimed to constitute a unique and remarkable phenomenon. It is the only case in human history where something that started as a project on paper has somehow been transformed into a language which people can and do speak fluently, in which they socialize, deliver lectures and even raise families. Quite apart from the tens or hundreds of thousands of current users who learned it in adolescence or adulthood, it is estimated that there are somewhere between 200 and 2,000 genuine native speakers, who have spoken the language – normally in a bilingual or trilingual situation – since early childhood, having been brought up in Esperanto-speaking families. (I am personally acquainted with at least ten such cases, including third-generation speakers.) Esperanto has always been associated with wider ideals of peace and brotherhood. Its users have often been able to implement

on a private scale what they wish their governments would do on a national and international scale. On the political stage, Esperanto also has its martyrs, those executed – particularly under Hitler and Stalin, but also under Mao – for their international contacts and support of ideals unacceptable to totalitarian regimes.

The rise of English as an international language, and indeed the continued international use of other "languages of wider contact" such as Spanish, French, Portuguese, Russian, Arabic and Chinese, each in its own sphere of influence, means that the prospects for the general adoption of Esperanto as the preferred language for international contacts are looking pretty dim. Nonetheless, there is and remains a substantial body of speakers (claimed by supporters to be in the millions but more realistically estimated at perhaps 100,000) who not only use the language but who buy and read books written in it, or nowadays do the equivalent online.

One criticism of Esperanto often made is that it has no culture, no literature. Geoffrey Sutton's 728-page encyclopedia goes a good way to refuting such suggestions. It offers individual articles on some 300 authors and their work. Sutton's division of Esperanto's literary history into five main periods seems about right. The first period, which Sutton calls "Primitive Romanticism and the Establishment of Style", was one of naive enthusiasm. Zamenhof himself worked mainly on translating works by famous authors (Molière, Goethe, Schiller, Gogol, Andersen, Shakespeare, and particularly the Old Testament – but not, as Sutton claims, the New) with a view to establishing the literary possibilities of the new language in the face of contemporary scientific theories on the supposed limits to the function and expressiveness of a so-called artificial language. By the time of his death in 1917, his followers had also produced original poetry and prose of some note.

It was between the First and Second World Wars that creative writing in Esperanto really



A poster for the annual congress of  
Sennacieca Asocio Tutmonda, the World  
Non-national Association, 1930

took off. Sutton's second period, "Mature Romanticism and a Literary Flowering" (1921–30), saw the appearance of a generation of poets, notably the Hungarians Kalocsay and Baghy, the Russian Mikhalski, and the Japanese Kenji Ossaka. They exploited the latent possibilities of the language, developing wordplay, word forms and word order in ways that were slightly shocking at the time but are now taken for granted. The third, "Parnassianism and the Coming of Age" (1931–51), built on this, and consolidated Kalocsay's status as the most accomplished Esperanto poet of the early twentieth century.

If Kalocsay appealed to readers inclined to serious literature, the writer who most delighted the general Esperanto-using public was Raymond Schwartz, a bank official from Alsace, born of French-speaking parents but educated in German. He was the master of the Esperanto pun. Despite Zamenhof's wish to avoid homonyms, the distinctive system of agglutinative affixes, producing a word morphology more similar to that of Japanese or Zulu than to that of any European language, means that possible homophones abound, and Schwartz exploited this. So *kolego* "colleague" can be metanalysed as *kol(o)* "neck"

plus the augmentative suffix *-eg-*, allowing such witticisms as unfailingly appeal to a ten-year-old (but also to learners of Esperanto at an elementary stage):

Why is the giraffe never lonely?

Because it always has its *kolego*.

The title itself of Schwartz's verse collection *La stranga butiko* ("The Odd Shop") could be interpreted instead as *Lastranga butiko* ("A shop of the lowest rank"). But punning was only one aspect of Schwartz's linguistic dexterity and skill in light verse. The result today is that if you go online to the Facebook group called Esperanto, the first thing you will see is a Schwartz poem of mockery about the Esperanto movement. Its first stanza reads "Verda stelo sur la brusto / iom palas pro la rusto. / Mi ne estas purigisto; / estas mi esperantisto". (A green star on my lapel, somewhat fading with rust. I'm not a cleaner, I'm an Esperantist.) There are comparatively few full-length novels in the language, but Schwartz was responsible for one of the best of them: *Kiel akvo de l' rivero* (As the Water of the River), a partly autobiographical account of several generations of the same family affected by the two world wars.

Sutton's fourth and fifth periods (Post-Parnassianism and Modernism, 1952–74; Popularization of the Novel, Experimental Poetry, Postmodernism, 1975–) are difficult to separate. They have arguably been dominated by two British writers, the English Marjorie Boulton and the Scottish William Auld. Boulton's writing ranges from heart-wrenchingly honest and moving personal verse, infused by an unusually strong social conscience, to anthologies for advanced learners, via light verse about cats, Chinese food and the problems of everyday life. She has also produced a series of highly regarded college textbooks in English, among them *The Anatomy of Poetry* and *The Anatomy of Prose*. Auld's twenty-five-chapter poem *La Infana Raso* (The Child Race) is regarded by many as the single most outstanding work in Esperanto literature. As Sutton puts it, Auld "sets out his world-view, tackling nothing less than the history of the universe and the condition of mankind in space and time". His vision could perhaps best be described as social progressive atheism. For him, reason is the highest moral point of mankind. When I read *La Infana Raso* as an undergraduate, I was overwhelmed by the breadth and depth of this vision. It has left a lasting imprint on my own view of the world. I am sure it has on many other readers, too. And that is no mean achievement for something written in a language that started as an East European oculist's idealistic project.