

The Grand Old Man of English & American Studies in Hungary László Országh 1907–1984

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In 2007, on the centenary of his birth, students, scholars and friends paid tribute to the outstanding lifework of the eminent scholar, professor, teacher, master and mentor, László Országh, “the great old man” of English Studies and “the father of American Studies” in Hungary. At the University of Debrecen, where he was the founder and chair of the English Department, an “Országh Memorial Day” was organized, commemorations and lectures were given on his oeuvre and life, a small exhibition of books by and about him was displayed, and a walkway on the campus where he often took a turn to his favourite botanic garden was named after him. In Budapest, a bronze relief of the professor was dedicated on the façade of his house. In his birthplace, Szombathely, where he was also buried (Szombathely happens to be the Hungarian town where James Joyce’s Mr. Bloom, alias Rudolph Virag was also born), a conference in his honour was organized and a commemorative tablet was placed on the wall of his former home.

László Országh was a versatile professor, a prolific scholar, a cultural mediator, and an erudite philologist with an active command of five languages, in sum, a kind of polymath. He was the last representative of a scholarly generation whose learning spanned an entire area of Hungarian and international disciplines. He produced outstanding scholarly works in the field of British and American Studies, and was the only scholar in Hungary to hold dual doctorates in different disciplines, both linguistics and literature.

He attended the local Szombathely secondary grammar school, and studied at the Péter Pázmány University in Budapest and at Rollins College in Florida. After graduation he became a secondary schoolteacher and resident tutor at the famous Eötvös Collegium, his alma mater, and taught various courses for several semesters at the English Department of the University of Budapest. In 1946 he was appointed full professor and chair of the English Department in Debrecen.

László Országh inherited a department devastated by the war, and in the politically unfavourable climate of the communist regime he founded and built up his department, which soon became the headquarters of English and American Studies. As head of department he proved to be an excellent organizer

and administrator. To promote the success of the English Department he recruited the most talented teachers, acquired literary classics and reference books for the departmental library, wrote textbooks and compiled readers, and established a scholarly periodical, *Hungarian Studies in English*. He guided several of his students in the field of British and American Studies in addition to directing numerous senior theses and doctoral dissertations. He also established working relationships with English and American universities and research institutions, enabling his colleagues and students to participate in study trips and conferences abroad. He made his department a well-known institution, not only at home but also internationally.

László Országh is known, firstly, as the founder of American Studies in Hungary. As a sophomore college student he recognized relatively early on that concentration on the language, literature, and culture of Britain was insufficient, and suggested expanding the scope of scholarly research to include the culture of the United States. In support of this, he decided to take up research in the United States. His scholarship at Rollins College gave him the opportunity to study American literature and literary history in its “cradle”. The results of his research were presented in his 1931-1932 doctoral dissertation, *The Development of American Literary Historiography*. It was the first publication of his career as an American Studies scholar, and he was the first in Hungary to publish in this field. His efforts are all the more remarkable because he had explored a topic rarely researched at that time even by Americans. Numerous studies, introductions, and essays appeared from his pen, showing that he was preparing to write an extensive work on the history of the American literary culture. *Az amerikai irodalom története* [History of American Literature] (1967) was a synthesis of Országh’s scholarly efforts, the first comprehensive survey in Hungarian of the history of American literature. His other major work, *Bevezetés az amerikanisztikába* [Introduction to American Studies] is one of the landmarks in the history of American Studies in Hungary, contributing to a more systematic study of this discipline.

Thus, László Országh is generally celebrated for having launched American Studies in Hungary. In

his pamphlet-like “A Programme for American Studies in Hungary” (1965), published in *Hungarian Studies in English*, he outlined the most important tasks involved in promoting research in American Studies. In addition to laying out a programme, he turned many elements of his recommendations into reality, and the development of American Studies for the past half-century or so in Hungary has been considerably influenced by his intellectual guidance and perspective.

The role of László Országh’s scholarly activities in English Studies was also outstanding. The opening years of his career were marked by substantial book reviews and minor articles on various literary topics. His explanatory notes and introductions to Shakespeare in the 1948/49 Hungarian edition, papers on English Renaissance drama and dramatists, essays on contemporary English poetry, novel, and individual authors are among his best achievement. The list can be completed with three high-profile volumes: *Az angol regény kezdetei* [The Origins of the English Novel] (1941), *Bevezetés az angol nyelv- és irodalomtudomány bibliográfiájába* [Introduction to the Bibliography of English Studies] (1943), and *Shakespeare* (1944).

László Országh also devoted a significant portion of his scholarly activities to the study of Hungarian-English links. His microphilological essays are remarkable pieces of the history of cultural contacts, including “Hungarian Travellers in England in 1842,” “English Renaissance Dramas on Hungarian Subjects,” “A Hungarian Source of Marlowe,” “Shakespeare in Hungary,” his introductions and notes to thirty-four Shakespearean dramas, etc.

As a linguist and language historian, Országh

is best known for his bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. His dictionaries marked a new era in Anglo-Hungarian lexicography. The metonymic use of “Országh” for “the Hungarian-English and English-Hungarian dictionary” is widespread even outside Hungary, so much so that at one time at the University of London it was thought that “Országh” was the Hungarian word for “dictionary”. He was the editor-in-chief of the seven-volume, 7416-page monolingual dictionary, *A Magyar Nyelv Értelmező Szótára* [The Defining Dictionary of the Hungarian Language], which was assessed by the Hungarian Academy of Arts and Sciences as the greatest achievement of the 20th century in Hungarian lexicography. László Országh was also of great importance in lexicology. His 1977 monograph on English loanwords is a thorough study in the history of English-Hungarian cultural contacts. The more than 1.000 English words surveyed that have passed into Hungarian are “gems of the research into the history of Hungarian words, unsurpassable masterpieces”.

László Országh considered himself to be first and foremost an educator. His personality was that of the ideal teacher in the finest sense. As a teacher he believed in the irrevocable nature and meaning of words. For those of us fortunate enough to have been his students and to have known him more closely, he was, in addition, a helpful, inspiring father-figure, whose Debrecen office and Budapest apartment was a chapel which we often entered awkwardly and full of uncertainties but which we always left appeased, hopeful and recharged.