

Collected Tributes to the Memory of László Országh

Vadon, Lehel ed. *In Memoriam Országh László. Születésének 100. évfordulójára [On the Centenary of His Birth]*. Eger: Eszterházy Károly Főiskola, Amerikanisztika Tanszék, Líceum Kiadó, 2007. 390 pp.

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This uniquely elegant volume was edited and published in memory of László Országh (1907–1984), the eminent scholar, educator, and lexicographer, to mark the centenary of his birth. Its publication was part of the events organized to commemorate the work of Országh at different venues in a highly celebratory spirit. On 25 October 2007, declared the Országh Memorial Day, at the Institute of English and American Studies of the University of Debrecen, where Országh was professor and head of department for years before his retirement in 1968, memorial lectures were delivered by some of his former students and colleagues, well-known representative figures in our profession today. Three books were launched at the same time: the volume reviewed here, *In memoriam Országh László*, edited by Lehel Vadon, *Országh László válogatott írásai* (Selected Writings of László Országh), edited by Zsolt Virágos, and a facsimile edition of *A Concise Dictionary of the English and Hungarian Languages*, the very first of Országh's several dictionaries, by Akadémiai Kiadó in Budapest. The Memorial Day celebrations included the inauguration of the Országh Memorial Lane, a beautiful path shaded by trees between the main building of the University of Debrecen campus and its Botanical Gardens, where Országh used to like to walk. Some days after the above events in Debrecen, respective memorial plaques were placed and unveiled on the wall of the house where Országh lived in Budapest, and on the wall of the house where he was born in Szombathely.

It is hardly an exaggeration to say that Országh became a legendary figure in the academic world already in his lifetime. When they first met him, students felt intimidated if not benumbed by the dignified yet towering presence and awesome knowledge of this man, who united the ardent scholar and the humanist gentleman in one person. As time passed, Országh revealed more of his uncommonly attentive and energetic personality to his students, modifying their first impression to a considerable extent. There are many who still remember that while he remained demanding though never exacting he could be very kind and understanding to his students, and managed to keep this variety of attitudes in a mysteriously stable balance. The superior elegance of the volume in hand reminds the reader of this inimitable originality coupled with rare modesty in Országh. He was ready to share his knowledge and guide others in respect of their professional needs and human interests: in his company a student was enabled to gain access to a world of intellectual treasures, spiritual and moral values as transmitted through the study of the English language, English-speaking literatures and cultures. Remembering him brings this experience back to mind with the reassuring conviction that quality always has its intrinsic importance, which lends one extra strength to confront and resolve the shortcomings and problems encountered in the profession, the society, or life in general.

Lehel Vadon, a student of Hungarian and English at Lajos Kossuth University in the 1960s, the “Országh-era” there, and now professor of American Studies at Eszterházy Károly College, Eger, is the author or editor of numerous studies and books on American literature, an area he chose for his research under the influence of Országh. His recent work, the three-volume *Az amerikai irodalom és irodalomtudomány bibliográfiája Magyarországon 2000-ig* (A Bibliography of American Literature and Literary Scholarship in Hungary to 2000) is not only of a formidable size but also of a remarkable breadth and comprehensiveness. Having appeared in the centenary year, on several levels it functions as a mirror of the legacy of Országh, the founding father of the discipline of American Studies in Hungary. In the context of Vadon’s research activities the present volume is a product well earning the label: a labour of love. The careful selection of the material reflects his appreciation of and admiration for Országh and the heritage he left behind in terms of dictionaries, scholarly publications, textbooks, anthologies and the less visible but penetrating mental transformation of those he taught and worked with. In the editorial work Vadon was assisted by three

outstanding representatives of English and American Studies in Hungary: Zoltán Abádi-Nagy, Miklós Kontra, and Zsolt Virágos, former students, later colleagues and friends of Országh.

The present volume is both celebratory and informative, collecting some of the best earlier published articles about Országh along with studies that were written for the occasion of the centenary. Part one contains writings on Országh's life and career, complete with a bibliography of his works compiled by Vadon, the specific feature of which is that it also includes items published or republished in an unchanged, expanded or amended form after Országh's death in 1984 until today. A highlight of this section of the book is the Hungarian version of the Round Table chaired by Zsolt Virágos with the participation of seven distinguished scholars beside himself at the ESSE Conference that the University of Debrecen hosted in 1997. Enlivened by personal anecdotes and sensitive to professional and human details, the recorded conversation of the participants offers a many-sided picture of Országh's activities in different fields, including his ardent dedication to the cause of introducing American Studies to the Hungarian academic world. The second part of the volume includes individual studies appreciating Országh's work in linguistics, lexicography and literature. János Balázs writes about him as a linguist, while the contribution of Miklós Kontra discusses aspects of Országh's views on the tasks and duties of a lexicographer. The writing by Péter Egri is a comprehensive guide to Országh's literary scholarship, stressing the broad range that his books and essays covered from Shakespeare to the American modernists. Next to these articles, the paradoxical title of Gyula Kodolányi's piece „Egy magyar gentleman – a Kádár-korszakban” (A Hungarian Gentleman in the Kadar era) has become a telling catchphrase since its first appearance to describe the character of Országh in a period which did not tolerate the idea of a gentleman on ideological grounds. Kodolányi emphasizes not only the anachronism of Országh's figure against the era, but also the sense of reality and truthfulness which radiated from him in stark contrast with the lies and double-dealings governing life in those years (143).

Part three of the book includes recollections, obituaries, as well as reviews, paying tribute to Országh's outstanding achievement and profound humanity by quoting personal experiences and feelings. Peter Sherwood, who worked with him on the revisions of the English-Hungarian, Hungarian-English dictionaries included some letters by

Országh in the piece entitled „Ugye ‘Országh’ azt jelenti magyarul, hogy ‘szótár’?: emlékeim Országh Lászlóról, néhány levele kapcsán” (Isn’t ‘Országh’ the Hungarian for ‘Dictionary’?: Memories and Letters of László Országh). Sherwood’s recollections contain the memorable sentence: “I am sad but greatly privileged to have been the addressee of the last letter he wrote, dated Christmas 1983, only a few weeks before his death. It is entirely fitting, and moving, that it should be devoted to another great one-man lexicographer of our time, Eric Partridge” (283). The letter is available for the readers of the volume, a testimony to its author’s intellectual energy and curiosity even at the age of 77, near his death. In one of the obituaries Péter Egri laments the fact that with the death of Országh philology as an undivided discipline comprising linguistics and literature in its original sense, ceased to exist in Hungary. On a more personal note, the obituary mentions the sparkling irony which made Országh so memorable as a human being (213). The humane side is further emphasized by an earlier written review, republished now in Hungarian, in which Csilla Bertha claims that “To pay tribute to such a person should also be a matter of total involvement, not only an intellectual evaluation but also an emotional, moral and aesthetic expression of the admiration” (206). Bertha’s words are precise in grasping the spirit of the approach that Országh deserves, which pervades the work of the editors and contributors in the present volume as well.

After respective interviews with Országh by Ágnes Gergely and Zoltán Szilassy, and Dezső Tandori’s playfully wordy poems inspired by Országh as a master of words, the book concludes with three studies coming out of the lectures their authors gave in Debrecen on the Országh Memorial Day. The first, on Országh’s role as a professor at Debrecen, by Zoltán Abádi Nagy, is a substantially researched, multichaptered article displaying a set of fascinating details, much of it published here for the first time, about the circumstances in which Országh was working during the two periods (1946–50 and 1957–68) when he chaired the English Department of Kossuth Lajos University. It is a miracle, and can be attributed to his uncommonly strong belief in his mission, that Országh built up such a high-quality department with sufficient library facilities despite the fact that he, like many others, was plagued by the senseless demands and often existentially dangerous situations of the communist system. Even then, however, Abádi Nagy writes, merit was noticed and in 1961 the university leadership nominated Országh for the highly prestigious Kossuth Prize (354). It is a shame that eventually, due to

ideological obstacles, he did not get the prize, and his achievement was duly recognized abroad and not in his home country. For his outstanding work in the field of English Studies and its branches he received the title Commander of the Order of the British Empire (C.B.E.) in 1979. Abádi Nagy mentions that since Országh's funeral was a strictly private event without the participation of colleagues and friends, a memorial session was held at the Academy following his death in early 1984. As one of those present I do not remember the contents of the speeches from the distance of so many years, only the solemn atmosphere of this kind of farewell to Országh and, what Abádi Nagy does not write about in the article surveyed here, the moments of his own recital of Országh's favourite poem, "Crossing the Bar" by Tennyson, in a most moving tone.

Closely following, Miklós Kontra's contribution discusses Országh's work in Budapest after education in the English and other Western language departments, including Debrecen, was suspended in 1950 for seven years. Illustrated by copies of letters, the article abounds in telling examples of the problems Országh encountered while editing his monumental, multi-volume enterprise, *A magyar nyelv értelemző szótára* (Explanatory Dictionary of the Hungarian Language). The present book is closed by a piece on the maintenance of Országh's legacy in a variety of ways and forms. The author, Zsolt Virágos, offers an informative account of, for instance, the history of the Országh Prize founded in 1997, and the process during which a highly prestigious Fulbright grant became named after the great man, and has been called the Országh Chair professorship since then. From Virágos's vivid description the reader learns that at the Institute of English and American Studies at the University of Debrecen a seminar room bears Országh's name, and the class sessions and programs held there day-to-day are presided by a photo of Országh, evoking the spirit in which he developed his one-time English Department, the predecessor of the present-day Institute.

On the whole, *In Memoriam Országh László* is characterized by a richness which makes it not only an exceptional collection but a source of inspiration. With the scope of information and depth of human feeling that the writings it includes present and disclose, it can have a definite role in facilitating that Országh's example remain a direct or indirect influence on the value system of teachers, scholars and students for many more years.