

MORE THAN ONE BEGINNING: THE START OF AUSTRALIAN STUDIES IN HUNGARY

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Abstract

Australian Studies in Hungary has a long and varied history. How long exactly? This paper seeks to contextualise the beginning of this relatively new scholarly field in Hungarian tertiary education. It became clear during the research process, which involved archival research, document analysis and personal interviews, that instead of determining one specific date for the beginning, only the process of the evolution of Australian Studies can be traced, its stages of development and the motivations of its participants. The paper argues for the role personal and professional contacts and scholarships and grants, as well as diplomatic support and political regimes, may play in the launching of a regional study field within a distant culture.

1 Introduction

Tracing the beginning of Australian Studies in Hungarian tertiary institutions is actually not as easy as it seems. Whilst some participants have published recollections (Nile, 1992; Riemer, 1993; Buckrich, 2016), there has been no extensive research conducted into the topic which takes account of all the available documents or oral history of the programmes. One might think it was possible to find a clear date for when it all began, with no Australian Studies before a specific date and some afterwards. But it is not like this at all. After spending considerable time finding and interviewing the parties involved, it has become more and more obvious that the matter is much more complicated than finding one such date. There are, in fact, multiple beginnings. In this paper, I will attempt to trace these elusive dates and pin down these beginnings, to be able to demonstrate the role personal and professional contacts and scholarships and grants, as well as diplomatic support and political regimes, may play in the launching of a regional study field within a distant culture.

2 Initial stages: 1980-1989

1980 was certainly a year that could be singled out as a beginning for Australian Studies in Hungary. Many of the key figures who were later to play important parts in the story were university students at the time (e.g., Dorottya Holló, Ágnes Tóth), while others were only in primary school. In 1980, however, Professor Veronika Kniezsa, already an established scholar of historical dialectology and member of the Department of English Studies at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE), had the opportunity to spend two months in Australia, courtesy of family relations. Whilst Veronika Kniezsa initially travelled to Adelaide, she was soon to find out that she was embarking upon

one of the most interesting adventures of her life. Her host family took her on a round-trip of Australia. Among many sights, Veronika visited Uluru, (known as Ayers Rock at the time), the Great Barrier Reef, Phillip Island, The Sydney Opera House, Brisbane and Canberra. As well as acquiring first-hand experience of these tourist destinations, Veronika also had the chance to meet with academics who encouraged her to include Australian English within her scholarly work. She received materials and advice and made very useful academic connections. Even though she never had the opportunity to return to Australia, this first trip sent her down a new path, and the study and teaching of Australian English and Australian culture became part of her academic life. From this time on, she incorporated Australian content into her linguistics seminars, and nurtured students' growing interest towards this new field of study. There were quite a number of Australian-themed MA theses written under her guidance, such as *Contemporary Australian Society* by László Gyenes (1983), *The English Language in Australia* by Zsuzsanna Molnár (1984), or *Language and Society* by Zsuzsanna Virág (1993). László Gyenes' thesis is quite possibly the first scholarly piece ever written at ELTE (and Hungary) on an Australian topic. It may be argued with considerable confidence that professional interests as well as personal contacts were very important in starting Veronika Kniezsa in the direction of studying a country 20,000 kilometres away from Hungary.

Dorottya Holló has a similar story. She too has family connections in Australia. Combining personal and professional interests, in 1986 she chose to apply for an AEAP (Australian-European Awards Program) scholarship to Australia. Under this programme the Australian Government offered scholarships for postgraduate study for applicants coming from various countries in Europe. She won the scholarship in 1986 and went on to stay in Sydney for a year. She originally planned to live on campus, but her Australian family invited her to move in with them and she became part of their circle, thus learning about her academic subject as well as Australian everyday life.

Dorottya Holló obtained her first degree in English and French Language and Literature in 1983 at ELTE. She became a TMB¹ scholarship holder (TMB stands for Scientific Appraisal Committee, a body which operated under the auspices of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences until 1992) and started teaching at Karl Marx University of Economics while keeping a part-time teaching position at ELTE. It was in 1988 that she defended her doctoral thesis in English linguistics, achieving "summa cum laude" honours. From September 1988, she became a full-time member of the English Department at ELTE. Little did she know that a few years later she was to become the head of the newly formed Australian Studies programme at her university. But let us not get ahead of ourselves. There were a few other "beginnings" as well.

"The road back to Budapest had been a long one." This is how Judith Buckrich, author, historian, scholar, the first person to run an only-Australian content course not only at ELTE, but at any university in Hungary, began her reminiscences (J. Buckrich, unpublished manuscript, 18 April 2018) about her role in the starting of Australian Studies in Hungary. It is not altogether surprising, however, that it was Judith Buckrich, and not someone else, who ended up running the first Australian course in Hungary. She was born and raised in Budapest. In the wake of the revolution of 1956 her family left Hungary just before Christmas in 1957, spent the next months in Vienna and then, in March 1958, when Judy had just turned 8, they boarded a ship bound for Melbourne from Trieste. They arrived in Melbourne in April.

Buckrich's 2016 book, *The political is Personal: a 20th century memoir*, provides further details of her journey of development. Despite being fully assimilated and growing up as an Australian girl, Judy never lost interest in Hungary and returned at the first opportunity in 1971. She was 21 at the time. During her stay of a few weeks in

¹ Tudományos Minősítő Bizottság (Scientific Appraisal Committee)

Budapest she met with family and childhood friends and revelled in streets that were safe at night. She visited her old block of flats, went to galleries and hung out with friends she had met on the journey from Paris to Budapest.

Judy did not return until 1984. By then she was 34, had completed a degree in drama and media studies; she lived on a farm, worked as a part-time teacher and wrote and performed plays in the city every couple of years: a very bohemian life. She spent six months in Europe that year, two of them in Budapest, going to the theatre twice a week and meeting people working in the arts. There was a strong wind of change in the air, people were travelling and working outside Hungary, there was a growing impatience with the old socialist way of life and a longing to be part of the cultural changes sweeping the world at that time. Hungary suddenly appeared as an attractive tourist destination and many travellers visited from all over the world. Judy was a member of the International Theatre Institute (ITI) and the women (e.g., Júlia Gábor) she met at the Budapest office at the time encouraged her to write about Australian theatre. It all suggested that she should return for a longer time.

Later in 1984 she returned to Australia, working in the burgeoning Community Arts sector. She did write about Hungarian Theatre for the magazine of Multicultural Arts Victoria (Buckrich, 1987) and about Australian theatre for the Hungarian Theatre Institute Magazine. She then met a Hungarian man who was completing his Master's degree in Melbourne and the idea of returning to Hungary for a longer time started to become very real.

By July 1987 Judy was back in Budapest. She used the Hungarian Writers' Association Library as her base and was asked to give a talk there by the Association's President, author and translator Árpád Göncz, about Australian literature. The friendship between Judy Buckrich and Árpád Göncz continued even after he became the President of the Republic of Hungary. Judy had no idea at the time that he was going to be such an "important person"; their discussions were always about literature and translation (Buckrich, 2016, p.343).

A chance visit to Venice for a few days gave an opportunity for Judy to meet Bernard Hickey,² who was teaching Commonwealth Studies at Ca' Foscari University³ of Venice. This gave her the idea that perhaps she could also introduce a unit in Australian Studies as an elective at ELTE. Tom Shapcott, then Head of the Literature Board in Australia, had encouraged her to apply for a Literature Board residency in Venice so that she could observe Bernard Hickey teaching and have some proper discussion with him about what she could do in Budapest.

Tom Shapcott himself has a long history of being interested in Hungarian subjects. He published a novel entitled *White Stag of Exile* in 1984 about Károly Pulszky, the first director of the Hungarian National Gallery of Fine Arts, who had been exiled and made his way to Queensland in Australia where, after two years of struggle, he committed suicide in 1899. Pulszky was the son of Ferenc Pulszky, a member of the diet of Hungary from 1840 and one of Lajos Kossuth's 1848 revolutionary associates. Károly's wife was the famous Hungarian actress Emilia Márkus and his daughter Romola married the great dancer of the Ballet Russes in Paris, Vaslav Nijinsky. Shapcott had been researching the Pulszky story since 1980 and had made several trips to Hungary.

White Stag of Exile was translated into Hungarian by Péter Balabán, who also wrote an "Afterword." 8,000 copies of the book were printed in time for the launch at

² Veronika Kniezsa recalled that Bernard Hickey, "the marvelous Professor Bernard Hickey" as Richard Nile refers to him (p.14), was the person who connected her with the Australian Embassy in Budapest, taking her to the Embassy headquarters at Forum Hotel in the late 1980s (personal communication with Veronika Kniezsa, 25 June 2019).

³ Hickey left Ca'Foscari University in 1987 and became Professor of English literature at the University of Lecce, where he taught Australian literature for 20 years. <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A29294> Retrieved 30 June 2019.

the Museum of Fine Arts in October 21, 1988. They sold out in just a few weeks. Shapcott arrived in Hungary for the book launch, which coincided with a special exhibition in the Museum of Fine Arts of works collected by Pulszky during his term as the Museum's first director. Judy met him at the airport and "served as Tom's interpreter and minder" (Buckrich, 2016, p.327). By the time Shapcott left, they had become firm friends.

3 The institutional phase

In June 1988 Árpád Göncz introduced Judy Buckrich to Professor Aladár Sarbu, then head of the English Department at ELTE. It was agreed that she could put a proposal to the university. By this time she had secured the support of the Literature Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, then headed by Tom Shapcott. She also visited the vibrant Australian Embassy which had many Australian and Hungarian employees. Whilst there was no cultural attaché, the Embassy secretary was very supportive and offered the resources of their library. For a while she became a sort of unofficial cultural attaché and met many Australian artists and writers who were travelling to Budapest to perform or take part in conferences and workshops. She was also put in touch with Chris Wallace-Crabbe, who ran an Australian Studies unit at the University of Melbourne and who subsequently helped her with notes and suggestions. Armed with all this assistance she could hardly fail, and despite never having done anything like this before, Judy created a syllabus and the course was offered.

The shape of the unit called *Australian Literature* that she would offer for the first semester of the 1989/1990 academic year was simple. It was an elective course of one session a week for twelve weeks covering various aspects of Australian music, fine arts, theatre, film, literature, social history and political and economic history. About 14 people enrolled (Buckrich, 2016, p.329), the minimum for it to go ahead. Many of them were intrigued by this new area of study, as most of the English language courses offered at the time were on British or North American topics. The author of this article was one of the students of this course and it certainly whetted her appetite for Australian literature. Photocopies of sections of books were distributed so that students had something to take home to read. I especially recall reading Ania Walwicz and Patrick White. None of the books on the syllabus were available in Hungary at the time. Using a photocopier was itself a challenge as in 1989 these machines were not readily available to the public. Judy had to use the photocopiers at the Writers' Association Library, which were kept under lock and key. It was quite an exercise to convince the man in charge of the copy room to allow access to the machines (Buckrich, 2016, p.302).

Judy's other work at this time signalled a growing interest in the new field of Australian Studies. She translated an anthology of contemporary Australian poetry into Hungarian with the poet and translator István Turczi, whom she had also met at the library. She selected the poems from collections sent to her by Tom Shapcott and did very rough translations that István Turczi could turn into poetry. Judy was also working as a copy editor for the English language *Daily News*, and conducted interviews with interesting Hungarians for (Australian) ABC radio programmes which were broadcast nationally on two programmes: *The Europeans* with Julie Copeland and *Books and Writing* with Robert Dessaix. She also sent many articles about the incredible changes happening in Hungary to *The Age Monthly Review*, *Quadrant* and other magazines. There seemed to be much interest back in Australia in reading about the changes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s, with hardly any Australians able to write and talk about what was going on in this part of the world in a way that was easily understood in Australia.

Whilst the first course focusing on Australia took shape in Budapest, developments towards starting Australian Studies elsewhere in Hungary were

underway, too. In 1989/1990 István Komlósi, husband of Ágnes Tóth, language instructor at the Foreign Language Lectorate at the Debrecen University of Agriculture, won an AEAP (Australian-European Awards Program) scholarship and took his whole family with him on a dependents' scholarship programme. Part of their time was spent at Armidale, at the University of New England, where Ágnes met Professor Shirley Walker, who was the first director of the newly formed CALL centre (Centre for Australian Language and Literature) and the idea of starting Australian Studies in Hungary was born.

Professor Walker wrote a letter to the Australian Ambassador in Budapest, Douglas Townsend, informing him of Hungary's interest in launching Australian Studies at Hungarian universities. Townsend also received a letter from Judith Buckrich, "outlining her activities in support of Australian Studies in Budapest/Hungary" (Personal email from Douglas Townsend, 15 May, 2019). Townsend, in turn, wrote letters in support to DFAT (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade) "suggesting funds be sought if necessary from the private sector e.g. TNT, Myer Foundation" (ibid). Luckily, Canberra seemed to be supportive of the idea, and the implementation of the project was entrusted to Richard Nile, first director of the Sir Robert Menzies Centre for Australian Studies Centre (SRMCAS) in London. As the Australian Centre's stated mission was "to promote Australian studies in British and European universities and to act as an Australian cultural base in London providing a forum for the discussion of Australian issues" (Menzies Centre) this was certainly the right place to start the ball rolling.

Richard Nile was first invited to conduct a feasibility study on the possibility of launching Australian Studies in Hungary. After the initial engagement by the Ambassador, careful negotiations followed, and Richard Nile's first visit to Hungary was organised for December 1990. Ágnes Tóth recalls (personal communication, 20 June 2019) that it was exactly on the 6th of December (Santa Claus Day in Hungary) that Richard Nile visited Kossuth Lajos University (Kossuth Lajos Tudományegyetem,⁴ KLTE) in Debrecen, and plans went ahead to establish Australian Studies there as well as at ELTE in Budapest.

These were indeed pioneering times. Despite the efforts of Veronika Kniezsa in Budapest, and the first course run by Judy Buckrich, there were still only very limited resources and no institutional framework of study within which classes could be organised. Richard Nile (1992) recalls in his article *Home and Away with Australian Studies* that there were altogether three volumes in the library at ELTE which dealt with an Australian topic, "two in English, one in Hungarian" (p.14).

These conditions radically changed after 1990. A number of letters exchanged between the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education and the universities involved testify that both parties were more than open to promote this new field of study, "ausztrológia" (austrology), which they saw as a welcome addition to the variety of courses already on offer (KLTE correspondence, June 1991). Richard Nile and the Menzies Centre were to provide methodological support for the launch of this new field. Glenda Sluga, at the time a PhD student at the Menzies Centre, was recruited to travel to Hungary and teach some initial courses both at ELTE in Budapest and KLTE in Debrecen. APTEE (Australian Program of Training for Eastern Europe) funding, combined with sponsorship by Australian companies paid for Glenda Sluga's salary, the Hungarian Ministry of Culture and Education looked after her accommodation (D. Townsend, email communication, 15 May 2019). Richard Nile (1992) describes Glenda Sluga's role in 1991 in the following way: "Her job was to make herself redundant; to raise the level of expertise and confidence, more generally the consciousness of Australia, in her Hungarian colleagues to a point where she is no longer needed" (p.20). According to Nile, hers was "one of the oddest briefs" of any academic (p.20), fostering the conditions for the further survival of the Australian Programme in Hungary, even

⁴ Today the University of Debrecen

in the absence of the initiators. Based in Budapest, Glenda shared her time between ELTE and KLTE, gave lectures and seminars, inspired students and local staff⁵. For example, at ELTE, Gizella Kocztur, formerly specialist in Commonwealth Literatures, was recruited to include Australian authors in her literature courses. Theses written by her students, namely *Bush Ballads and the Australian Legend* by Sándor Pető (1992) and *The early history and culture of Aborigines in Australia* by Mina Charoulla (1994) prove Professor Kocztur's commitment to teaching the new field of Australian studies. In addition, Gizella Kocztur was the appointed examiner for the Australian literature component of Ágnes Tóth's final exam in 1995, the year Tóth gained her doctorate (doc. univ.) and defended her thesis "The Bush Mythology and Women: A study in Australian culture" (Virágos & Pálffy, 2014, p.143). No wonder that, following Professor Kocztur's untimely death in 2014, ELTE acknowledged her contribution to the new field of Australian Studies by stating that she was the first colleague to include subjects of Australian literature in her teaching repertoire (Elhunyt Kocztur Gizella).

In May 1992, ELTE and KLTE hosted an inaugural Australian Studies conference, jointly sponsored by the Australian Embassy and the SRMCAS. The conference consisted of two parts, at two locations: "Mid-May Sojourn" was the name of the first part, hosted by ELTE, where a number of distinguished scholars presented papers (Henry Reynolds, Portia Robinson, Bruce Bennett, Richard White, Chris Wallace-Crabb). KLTE hosted the second part, entitled "Teaching Australian Studies." A great variety of papers were presented and round-table discussions held. At its closure, the conference accepted the so called "Debrecen Declaration", written by, among many others, Bruce Bennett and Chris Wallace-Crabb. The Declaration expressed the wish of all the participants for the Australian Government to support Europeans in their endeavours to study and teach Australian Studies in their respective countries. As Senator Margaret Reynolds, wife of Professor Henry Reynolds, was also in attendance, there was hope that this plea would be heard by the appropriate parties⁶.

The newly established study programmes at ELTE and KLTE were thus strengthened in personnel as well as by financial support. Multiple book donations were organised, and grants were offered for professional development. Dorottya Holló was awarded a visiting fellowship by the SRMCAS and travelled to Australia in 1993/94 to visit a number of institutions (including Griffith University, The University of Melbourne, Macquarie University). Ágnes Tóth also travelled to Australia on various grants on a number of occasions to conduct further study (Nile, 1992, p.19).

There were study opportunities for students, as well. The changes in society brought about by the end of the Cold War did not go unnoticed in Australia either. As markets opened up in Eastern Europe, Australian businesses began to liaise with Diplomatic Missions and Trade Commissions to seek opportunities for commerce. For example, in 1991, an Australian company, Coca-Cola Amatil entered into a joint venture with the Likőripari Vállalat (Liqueur Production Company) in Budapest (History). Interested in playing a part in the local scene and finding a way to promote Australian manufacture, they decided that helping to fund the teaching of Australian Studies in Hungarian universities seemed like a good idea. Thus a co-operation between DFAT, Coca-Cola Amatil and the Australian Studies Centre at the University of London (at the time part of the Institute of Commonwealth Studies) was realised. The "Coca-Cola" scholarship programme was launched, which aimed to fully fund the winner of the best student essay on a chosen Australian topic to study for a full semester at

⁵ Andrew Riemer's book *The Habsburg Cafe* (1993) blames "Byzantine rivalries in Hungarian academic circles" (p.167) as the reason why Australian studies never got off the ground in Szeged. Riemer ran a course in Australian literature in the autumn semester of 1991 "to a group of young people who know very little about that distant land and lack almost all curiosity about it" (p.159)

⁶ As the text of the *Debrecen Declaration* could not be found, I relied on the recollections of Ágnes Tóth here.

Griffith University. The first student, Mónika Gyórfy from Debrecen, travelled in 1993. Tímea Tiboldi, the winner of the second scholarship, recalls landing in Brisbane on her 25th birthday, on July 14, 1994. She was followed by Ágnes Szokolczay and Gyula Tankó in 1997. Tiboldi and Tankó are currently colleagues at ELTE. In 1996 and 1999 respectively, Gyula Tankó with Carl Whitehouse co-edited two volumes of student essay collections: *Breaking ground: Eight student essays on Australian literature*, and *Reflecting on the island continent: A collection of papers in Australian studies*. Eszter Sándor and Éva Zöld were the last ones to travel. As after 1999 economic conditions changed and many Australian business ventures moved East, Coca-Cola Amatil withdrew its sponsorship and the scholarship ceased. To this day, no other sponsor has been found to continue the scholarship programme.

4 Post-millennium

By the early 2000s the Australian Programme had truly become part of Hungarian higher education. Whilst Budapest and Debrecen represent the major concentration of staff and resources, there are colleagues teaching and researching Australian content elsewhere in Hungary, too. Associate Professor Éva Forintos (also an author in the current volume) wrote her PhD on an Australian inspired topic, *Select aspects of Australian-Hungarian language-contact phenomena: A corpus-driven contactlinguistic study*, as well as writing a coursebook (*Australia: A Walkabout*) on Australia. Among other commitments, she continues to teach courses on Australian language at the University of Pannonia in Veszprém. Veszprém and the University of Pannonia also hosted a major EASA⁷ (European Association for Studies of Australia) conference in 2015. This was the second EASA conference organised in Hungary. The first one, hosted by the re-named University of Debrecen (Debreceni Egyetem, DE) in 2005, was organised by Ágnes Tóth and Gabriella Espák. Gabriella Espák, former student of Ágnes Tóth, became interested in Australian Studies quite early on. She gained an AEAP scholarship (following in the footsteps of Dorottya Holló and Ágnes Tóth) and completed a year of study at Curtin University in Perth in 2000-2001. She defended her PhD dissertation (*Federal multicultural policies and the politics of Indigeneity in Canada and Australia between 1988-1992*) in 2003, and currently teaches Australia- and Canada-related subjects at the North American Department of the University of Debrecen. She has supervised a large number of theses as well on different Australian topics (for more detail see the Thesis Supervision section of the website Tóthné dr. Espák Gabriella http://ieas.unideb.hu/admin/file_5561.pdf)

A final word about the author of this article, as my own personal and professional story also runs parallel with the development of Australian Studies in Hungary. I participated in the first Australian course offered by Judy Buckrich in 1989 out of personal interest. A few months after the completion of the course I married an Australian man and moved to Australia for three years. In an attempt to get to know Brisbane and Australia, I enrolled at the University of Queensland (UQ) and took all possible Australian Studies subjects offered at BA and MA level. Whilst my academic career at UQ was cut in half by my return to Hungary in 1993, I could not escape my 'fate'. From 1993 I was employed by the Australian Centre for Education (ACE) in Budapest, which was established by IDP (the International Development Programme of Australian Universities), at first as Director of Studies, and later as Director. In 1994 Dorottya Holló convinced me to teach an elective course at ELTE on my favourite research topic: contemporary Australian women writers. The voluntary job turned serious in 2001, when again at Dorottya Holló's invitation I chose ELTE as

⁷ EASA conferences have been held biannually since 1991. There is a recent attempt to hold conferences annually "to boost networking" (EASA).

my full-time employer. Apart from spending two years in Australia in 2004–2005, I remained loyal to ELTE as the “Australian lecturer,” and over the years I have taught numerous courses on a variety of fields of Australian Studies, ranging from literature through culture to film (for more information see the Course History section of the Australian Studies Programme website). Over 70 students have written their theses on different areas of Australian Studies under my supervision, with six winning the “Outstanding Thesis Award” of the School of English and American Studies (SEAS) of ELTE, granted to students conducting excellent research. Altogether there have been about 120 theses⁸ written about an Australian topic at ELTE so far. One of my first students, Ildikó Dömötör, completed her PhD dissertation (*Gentlewomen in the bush: A historical interpretation of British women’s personal narratives in nineteenth-century Australia*) in 2004 at Monash University, in Melbourne, and currently works as an Associate Professor at the University of Nyíregyháza, Hungary.

There were many other colleagues over the years who taught Australian Studies in Budapest or other parts of the country. Andrew Riemer, Carl Whitehouse, Alanna Sherry, Anette Bremer are just a few names to single out. There were countless academic visitors who enriched us professionally over the years by giving lectures and workshops on important and relevant topics. Their names are well documented on ELTE and DE websites (Australian Studies Programme; Australian Studies Centre). Each course, each visitor added something extra. It is impossible to list everyone.

Today there are almost 2,000 volumes at the SEAS library at ELTE (1,931 to be exact. This figure, provided by SEAS head librarian Nóra Deák, is the sum of books in the Australian collection, and does not include any Australia-related books in linguistics or periodicals). A long way from the three volumes counted by Richard Nile in 1991. The growth in books at the library symbolises the growth in support for the Australian Studies programmes in Hungary. After the period of “beginnings,” the programme has well and truly blossomed and is here to stay for the future. Thanks to the relentless efforts of those early actors, Australian Studies in Hungary has come of age and is ready to face new challenges.

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⁸ I am grateful to Nóra Deák, the chief librarian of SEAS Library for extracting this data from the library catalogue.

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Acknowledgements

A great many people helped me write this article. I am especially indebted to Dr. Judith Buckrich, Dr. Ágnes Tóth, Douglas Townsend, Ambassador to Hungary between 1988–1991, Professor Veronika Kniezsa, Professor Richard Nile, Dr. Tímea Tiboldi, Dr. Gyula Tankó, Dr. Gabriella Espák, Nóra Deák, head of the SEAS Library at ELTE, Professor Glenda Sluga, Judit Forrai and Alanna Sherry, without whom this article could not have taken shape.

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