

USING FIELD TRIP AS A TEACHING METHOD: A WALKING TOUR OF TIMIȘOARA AS SEEN BY BRITISH WRITERS

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Abstract: *This article proposes a literary walking tour of Timișoara as seen by British authors who visited the city from the beginning of the 17th century to present. The article proposes a synthesis of the authors' perceptions of some of the main attractions of Timișoara: the Bega Canal, the Victory Square, the Liberation Square, the Union Square and the Bastion.*

Keywords: *field trip, image of Romania in British Literature, imagology, literary tour, Timișoara*

1. Introduction

Timișoara is one of the Romanian cities which have left an unforgettable impression on the British writers who have visited our country. In this paper I intend to select some remarkable travel impressions and, based on them, to propose a walking tour of the city which follows the trail of the authors. John Paget, who visited the city in the first part of the 19th century was under the impression that “the capital of the Banat, and the winter residence of the rich Banatians, is one of the prettiest towns I know anywhere” (Paget 1839:162), and similar feelings have often been expressed in the travel notes of his compatriots.

I think that a walking tour based on the British travellers' impressions would increase the students' interest both in the study of literature and in the history and culture of Timișoara. This article proposes an approach which is based on an interactive method of learning, the field trip. There are several studies which consider that in the study of literature, “some external activity should elicit interest in the topic” (Bogle 2005:55).

Teaching and learning in public spaces is an interactive strategy which has drawn the attention of several methodological studies (see Crimmel 2003). Hall Crimmel shows that the field trip can be used both in the exploration of nature and in rediscovering the values of an urban environment. In contemporary approaches to the study of literature and culture, the field trip is perceived as “an obvious point to begin developing a place-based instructional focus”

(Krishnaswami 2002:3). Field studies are also seen as a way of encouraging an interdisciplinary approach to literature and a strategy to develop the students' creative writing abilities. The advantages of using field trip as a method of teaching are also discussed in the volume *Turismul Școlar* by Ancuța Franț (2003).

I suggest a walking tour which starts from the West University of Timișoara and ends at the walls of the fortress. If students cross the road opposite the university, they will see the banks of the Bega Canal, and a short walk along the canal will lead their steps towards the Victory Square (Piața Victoriei).

2. Along the Bega Canal to Victory Square

The Bega Canal was built in the 18th century (between 1728 and 1771) with the aim to link the waters of the region with the Danube River, a connection with economic and strategic purposes. One of the first British travellers who wrote about the role of this canal in the economic development of the area was William Hunter, a Barrister of the Inner Temple, who travelled through France, Turkey and Hungary, to Vienna, in 1792. On his route he visited some areas of contemporary Romania, and wrote his impressions about several cities such as Timișoara, Arad, Deva, Orăștie, etc. Hunter informs his readers that the Bega Canal was begun by order of Maria Theresa, and describes it as “a truly imperial work, for it is not only of essential service to the commercial interests of the inhabitants, but also, by means of pipes and pumps, supplies the whole city with water” (Hunter 1803:45).

In 19th century encyclopaedias, the Bega Canal appears as a defining element in the structure of the city. For instance, Goodrich's *A Pictorial Geography of the World* underlines the fact that Timișoara “owes its commercial activity to a canal, which connects it with the Danube” (Goodrich 1840:730). James John Best also refers to the role of the Bega Canal in the economic development of the city; the scenery of the region and the commercial character of the place make him compare Timișoara with the capital of the Netherlands: “The suburbs are extensive and are intersected by canals in several directions, giving the whole an appearance very much resembling the Hague” (Best 1842: 327). This aspect was perpetuated during the whole century, because Andrew Archibald Paton, who visited the city approximately twenty years later, has a similar impression: “with its straight lines, and boats in the distance, like black dots, its alleys of trees and brick houses, reminds one of Holland. Here is a crowd of canal craft; here are the large magazines of the Banat wheat, and a constant bustle of loading and unloading” (Paton 1861:39).

The development of the new city under Habsburg administration is discussed by B. W. Newton, whose book on the Roman Empire also includes some references to the Banat region. The construction of the canal is presented as part of the Austrian Empire's strategy to transform the region from “a desolate Turkish Pashalic” to a “flourishing and prosperous European province” (Newton 1863:271). Newton writes that the reorganisation of the Banat was a very ample enterprise, and “millions were expended by the cabinet of Vienna in cutting the great

navigable canal that connects Temesvar with the confluence of the Theiss and the Danube” (Newton 1863:271).

The importance of the Bega Canal for the city and the whole province of Banat is also discussed in a translation from German into English. J. G. Kohl shows that the role of Timișoara as the “principal trading place” of the Banat is due to the Bega canal, “the great medium of transport for all the commodities which the rich country yields” (1844:310). He presents the role of the canal in a global context, explaining that it connects the city with other major European places:

Through this canal, its corn and fruit can reach the Danube; and when once there, the corn vessels of the Banat proceed up as far as Raab, and thence to Wieselburg. Raab and Temesvar may be regarded as the two extremities of a line of navigation of which the one end, Raab, lies near a country (Vienna and its environs) where there is a great and constant demand for these blessed fruits of the earth; while the other end (Temesvar) lies in a country that produces them in abundance. Temesvar carries on a more active trade with the former city than with any other (Kohl 1844:310).

3. Victory Square, “the Spacious Sunny Square Overlooked by the Orthodox Cathedral” (Dervla Murphy 1995:84)

The walk along the canal ends when the students cross the bridge which leads them to the cathedral. For the writers who have visited the Victory Square after 1989, this place is associated with the Romanian revolution against Ceaușescu’s regime. Comparing it with Wenceslas Square in Prague, Alan Ogden describes Victory Square as “a long oblong space, with the modern 1923 facade of its theatre and opera house at one end and the imposing 1926 Orthodox cathedral at the other” (Ogden 2000:204). Ogden emphasises the fact that this was the place where the people gathered in 1989 “exasperated by the antics Ceaușescu” and where the military troops opened fire on the protesters (2000:204).

The Orthodox Cathedral is mentioned in several travel memoirs of contemporary writers. Dervla Murphy describes the building as “a 1930s hybrid which not unsuccessfully combines neo-Byzantine and traditional Moldavian influences” (1995:84). For the authors who visit the city after 1989, the references to the cathedral are connected to the accounts of the Romanian revolution that started here. Dervla Murphy is moved by the tragic events on 17 December, when, “in its shadow... many young demonstrators were killed” (1995:84). In the 1990s, she notices that the inhabitants of the city are marked by the tragic events and is impressed by the frequent celebrations for the people who lost their lives in the revolution. The piled wreaths and bouquets, the numerous candles lit for the dead, the horticultural shrine dedicated to the martyrs of the revolution are signs of an “intense public commemoration of the dead” (1995:96). The scene is impressive for the foreign visitors, who “often come to this place and weep”, being aware of the fact that the Romanian revolution started on the stairs of the cathedral (Murphy 1995:84).

Besides these feelings of sorrow, Dervla Murphy is also puzzled by the numerous question marks related to the Romanian revolution of 1989.

In the novel *Kitty and Virgil*, Paul Bailey refers to the role played by Timișoara in the anticommunist movement, and describes the effect which the name of the city had on the demonstrators in Bucharest. Helena Drysdale is also aware of this aspect, and is impressed by the reaction of the dictator Ceaușescu when he hears this word:

I had seen it on TV, his confidence giving way first to confusion as his promises of wage increases had no effect and the chanting ‘Ti-mi-șoa-ra Ti-mi-șoa-ra’ just would not stop, and then to fear as he was hustled away under his small grey astrakhan (Drysdale 1996:61).

The travellers who visit Victory Square are also impressed by its architecture. Alan Ogden writes that some of the buildings, such as the Palace Weiss, Palace Lloyd and Palace Löffler are “fine examples of fin-de-siècle offices and apartments” (Ogden 2000:204), and Dervla Murphy admires “the splendid opera house – an Austro-Hungarian legacy” (1995:84).

The Castle Hunyadi has also drawn the attention of the visitors over the centuries. At the end of the 18th century, the building is depicted as “a square castle with a tower at each angle” whose walls are nine feet thick (Hunter 1803:144). Hunter is aware that this is “the only remaining part of the ancient town, and its existence may be traced very far back in the annals of the country” (1803:144).

Nina Elizabeth Mazuchelli, who visits the city in the second part of the 19th century, notices that the palace, “built in 1443 by John Hunyad” has been “entirely restored” (1881:44), and is used as a prison. The harmony between the style of the medieval castle and the architecture of the square is one of the features which make her consider Timișoara “one of the prettiest, cleanest, and brightest little towns” of the Austro – Hungarian Empire (Mazuchelli 1881:44).

Dervla Murphy informs her readers that Timișoara was the first city in Europe which had electric street lightening (Murphy 1995:83). This fact is also mentioned on a street lamp placed in front of the Hunyadi castle. The travellers who visited it at the end of the 19th century were impressed to notice the technological progress on the streets of the city. Ellen Browning writes that:

for many years past the streets, shops, and many of the private houses have been using the electric light, which is under the charge of an Englishman sent out by the firm known in London as the ‘Brush Company,’ and electric cars are to be seen everywhere in the broad tree-planted streets. (Browning 1897:184)

Alan Ogden’s travel memoirs also include a note on the “old Hapsburg palace, Huniade Castle” (2000:204). He specifies that its construction started in the fourteenth century, and the palace was rebuilt in 1856. He informs his readers that today it houses the Museum of Banat History. The author likes the inner courtyard, which “had been given an attractive coat of yellow

paint” (Ogden 2000:204), but is disappointed with the manner in which the exhibits are displayed. According to Ogden, the Museum of History (as it was organised in the 1990s), “like so many of its ilk in Romania, was poorly laid out, seemingly with the intention of persuading the visitor that Romania has been the cradle of civilization since the first day when man swung down from the trees” (2000:204).

4. Liberation Square

The next objective of the walking tour is Liberation Square. On his way from Victory Square to “the small Liberation Square”, Alan Ogden pays attention to the facades of the “large houses” (2000:204) which connect the two plazas. Although the author of *Romania Revisited...* finds the latter a plaza “of non-descript Austro-Hungarian architecture in the centre of the city” (Ogden 2000:204), some of his predecessors had a more enthusiastic attitude.

During the Turkish occupation, the square was home to a Turkish bazaar, and the travellers who visited the city in that period made some remarks on the Ottoman administration. The first accounts on the Liberation Square are from the first part of the 18th century, when Aubry de la Mortraye visits Timișoara. He observes the large market, organised in Turkish style, but he dislikes the dirty streets and the numerous swamps which surround the city. However, he is impressed by the hospitality of the Turkish authorities, who invite him to stay here for a longer period (de la Mortraye 1980:80).

As Alan Ogden writes, “the Banat was handed over to Prince Eugene of Savoy on 13 October 1716 and the Hapsburgs set about reconstructing it on a massive scale, stamping the architectural authority of Vienna on the two main cities, Timișoara and Arad” (2000:203). The characteristics of the city changed, and Liberation Square was transformed into a typical Habsburg plaza. At the end of the 18th century Hunter discovers a city with wide and regular, well-paved streets, spacious squares and remarkable buildings. He considers that some of the public edifices, such as the town hall and the catholic cathedral “are specimens of architecture beyond what one commonly meets with in Hungary” (Hunter 1803:144). Most writers who visited Timișoara in the 19th century emphasise the progress of the place, the transformation of the city from a town “miserably built, on the Turkish plan with covered markets under long cloisters called Bazars” into a very well organised place (Dallaway 1805:45). John Paget learns that the city “was little better than a heap of huts in 1718, when Prince Eugene besieged the Turks, who then held it, and drove them for ever from this fair possession. At that time, too, the country round was a great swamp, and constantly infested with fevers of the most fatal character” (Paget 1839:163). Paget also argues that besides the military qualities, Prince Eugene had an architectural vision, because he “laid the plan of the present town” (1893:163). The old country hall was the building in Liberation Square that drew the attention of several travellers. Paget considers this plaza one of the “two handsome squares” of the city, and the county-hall one of its “very fine buildings” (Paget 1839:162-163). When Andrew Paton visits Timișoara, he is very

curious to see marks from the Ottoman period, but the only witnesses of that period he finds are a gravestone and the Arabic name of a suburb: “Mahala” (1861:38).

Another building of this square which drew the attention of British travellers is the Military Casino. The officer Eustace Clare Grenville Murray is invited by the Austrian authorities to participate in the grand ball at the casino. Although the officer is in great hurry, as he has to fulfil a war mission, he cannot deny this invitation: as soon as the authorities identified his identity during the passport control at the entrance in the city, he was warmly welcome to this event.

The officer is delighted to make acquaintance with “a very agreeable and curious society”, as “half the nobility of the Banat were assembled” (Murray 1855:208) at this fashionable event. Murray performs several popular dances before the nobility of the Banat, “as a delicate hint to the British Government as to his qualifications for high employment” (1855:208). He also has an interesting conversation with an Austrian officer related to the political situation in the region (Murray 1855:208).

Coming back to contemporary Liberation Square, the students will notice the tram station here. It will remind them of the book *Transylvania and Beyond*: Dervla Murphy mentions the packed tram which brought her to the city centre and which, probably, to the very same place. The author mentions that “Timișoara was among the first cities in the world to run trams; in 1864 the horse-drawn version appeared” (Murphy 1995:83).

5. Union Square

From Liberation Square, the students continue their walking tour to Union Square, which is probably the plaza that impressed its British visitors most. Caroline Juler writes that this open place is as large as a football stadium (Juler 2010:160).

Alan Ogden is also very enthusiastic about Union Square. Although he visits it on a rainy day, he is delighted to discover “a superb Habsburg cobbled open space, constructed between 1720 and 1760, with wonderful facades of eighteenth century elegant townhouses” (2000:203). He mentions the contribution of Count Andrew Hamilton, who was president and commander-in-chief in the Banat between 1734 and 1738, to the construction of this plaza. Like Caroline Juler, Ogden is also impressed by the width of the square, and notes that in spite of the dimensions of the large Roman Catholic Cathedral, it does not dominate the place. He also offers historical details about this church, specifying that its construction took sixteen years, and the first attempt to erect it “ended with the building sunk without trace in the marshy ground!” (2000:203).

Another building that draws Ogden’s attention is the palace of the Serbian Orthodox bishop, which is depicted as a peculiar building, with “Moorish window and pepper-potted towers” (Ogden 2000:203), which are compared to Islamic minarets. He is also intrigued by the design of the Scont Bank, “an extraordinary Art Nouveau building of bulbous, protruding facades” (2000:203). Ogden writes that “it looks like an elephant has been plastered into the

walls, which are studded with electric blue enamels like small light bulbs. The windows on the first floor have identical surrounds with similar motifs, this time like giant blue pearls” (2000:204).

In the first part of the 19th century, Paget visits this square and is impressed by its buildings “remarkable for their size and appearance” (Paget 1839:163). Paton is also stunned by the “great square” of Timișoara, dominated both by the Catholic dome and by the Orthodox cathedral. He writes a remarkable description of the Baroque Palace:

The palace of the government” is “so overdone with ornamental consoles, vases, wreaths, and arabesques of the eighteenth century, that it looks like a château in the vista of one of Boucher’s landscapes; and every time I pass its portals, with grinning satirs forming the key-stone of the arch, I fancy a fine gentleman with a clouded cane, bloom-coloured coat, satin breeches, and *ails de pigeon*, would be more fitting the *genius loci*, than the Pandours of the imperial commissioner, with their waxed moustachios and frogged hussar jacket” (Paton 1861:38-39).

The only traveller who is less enthusiastic about this square is Fraser. Disappointed that he could not find satisfactory accommodation in the city, he has the impression that “the chief square had little stir in it”, although he arrives here on a market day (Fraser 1838:119).

The enthusiasm of the British travellers who visited Union Square can be synthesised in a quotation from Andrew A. Paton, who considers this square a typical European place: “... if a stranger were to have his eyes bandaged, he would suppose that he had been carried back towards the centre of Europe, instead of being nearer the Turkish frontier” (Paton 1861:38).

6. The Bastion

The next objective of the literary tour is the Bastion. The defensive walls of the city are important marks in Timișoara’s history. Nineteenth century works in English that refer to Timișoara present the fortress as one of the main features of the city. In Goodrich’ *A Pictorial Geography of the World*, “Temeswar” is introduced as “one of the strongest fortresses in the empire” (Goodrich 1840:730).

The travellers who visited the city in the last decade of the 18th century are impressed by the strategic position of the city. Dallaway has the impression that “excepting a convent and church, the whole town is a fortress and the streets little more than a range of low barracks” (Dallaway 1805:45). Hunter, who visits the city in the same period, has a different opinion and finds the barracks for the soldiers “convenient and spacious”, while for the defence of the fortress a garrison of 14000 men is necessary (Hunter 1803:145). John Jackson also observes that “the capital of the Banat” is a “strong fortification”, and a careful passport control is done before any foreigner is allowed to enter it (which, in his case took no less than two hours) (Jackson

1799:272). However, this inconvenience is compensated by the attention which the General Commandant shows him on hearing that he is an Englishman.

The impressions of the travellers who visited the city in the 19th century are very similar. At the beginning of the century, Edward Daniel Clarke considers Timișoara as one of the strongest fortifications of the empire (1838:80). This aspect is also mentioned by Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, who writes that this city is the only fortified place he visited in the region (2004:127). After some notes about the main events in the history of the fortress, John Mac Donald Kinneir – another traveller who visited the citadel in the same period – refers to its rich arsenal (2004:592).

John Paget specifies that Prince Eugene commenced the fortifications which surround the city, and considers that:

the defences are very good, for there are all manner of angles and ditches, and forts, and bastions, and great guns, and little guns; so that wherever a man goes, he has the pleasant impression that half-a-dozen muzzles are pointing directly his way, and to an uninitiated son of peace that would appear just the impression a good fortification ought to convey. (Paget 1839:163)

James John Best also observes that “Temesvar is a fortified place and its works appear to be very strong” (Best 1842:327). The only one who has a different impression is James Baille Fraser, who considers that “Temiswar — is a miserable, half-neglected fortress, surrounded by ditches and swamps, now dry; but which in winter must be full of water, and in autumn full of pestilence” (Fraser 1838:119). If Fraser criticises the exterior aspect of the fortress, Captain Frankland complains about the soldiers’ lack of vigilance. At four in the morning, when he reaches the outer barrier of the fortress, the English officer is surprised to see that no sentinel is on duty. His postilion clambers over the barricade, and reaches the *corps de gardes*, where he finds a corporal who comes and opens the gate. When Frankland observes this lack of discipline in “one of the strongest fortifications of Austria”, he writes a complaint for the commander of the garrison (Frankland 1829:9-10). James John Best, who also finds the gates of the fortress closed, accepts this situation: he explains that the gates had been closed at ten, and he arrived at midnight (Best 1842:327).

Another British officer, Eustace Clare Grenville Murray, has a different perception of the thorough passport control at the entrance in the fortress. He even expresses his “delight in the passport system”, and reveals its advantages for the security of the city and its inhabitants. He thinks that “there is some good in the passport system”, because “a passport enables a traveller at once to prove his identity, and the amount of consideration to which he is entitled. It enables him, indeed, to show that there is nothing wrong or questionable about himself or his business, an advantage sometimes of great importance to a stranger in an out-of-the-way place” (1855:208). He had all the reasons to praise the passport control, as it ensured him instant access to the ball of the nobility of the Banat!

The travellers who visit the city in the latter part of the 19th century perceive the same features of a military city. Nina Elizabeth Mazuchelli notes that Timișoara “consists of an inner town and an outer one, the former surrounded by strong fortifications. Wherever one looks there are bastions and ditches, and great guns and little guns menacing us in all directions, and seeming to dodge our movements continually” (Mazuchelli 1881:43).

The fortress often made British travellers reflect on the tumultuous history of the city. Hunter is interested in the medieval period, and he emphasises the role of the citadel in those times. He specifies that it was built “by the ancient kings of Hungary” (1803:142), and it was besieged several times, until the Ottomans conquered it in the latter part of the 16th century.

A medieval event which draws the attention of the British authors is the peasant rebellion led by Gheorghe Doja. Hunter offers several details about the development of this movement, and is horrified by the cruelty of Doja’s execution. Hunter perceives the event “with a mixture of horror and admiration, as it furnishes, on one side, as striking an instance of barbarous ingenuity, and, on the other, of heroic fortitude, as any recorded in history” (1803:147). An account of the terrible execution is included in his travelogue:

Their leader, George Doscha, who, a few days before, had been proclaimed king, was made prisoner with a number of his adherents, and, in this town, was sentenced to expiate his rebellion by the following dreadful punishment. Forty of the chief confederates were thrown into prison, where they were confined for several days, without receiving any sustenance. In the mean time, as tokens of mockery and contempt, a throne, a crown and a sceptre, of iron were forged. As soon as finished, they were all put into a furnace, where they remained till they were red hot. They were then taken out, and Doscha being brought forward, and, undressed, was seated on the throne, the crown was placed on his head, and the sceptre in his right hand. When he was half roasted, nine of his famished companions, all who had survived their sufferings in prison, were let loose on him, in the expectation that they would immediately devour him. Of these, three were stubborn, and, absolutely refusing to touch him, were immediately dispatched by the executioner: the others tore and mangled him in a horrible manner, and were allowed to escape. During these agonies no sigh, or groan, or tear, escaped him, and his only exclamation was, ‘I have brought up hounds to devour me.’ Saying this, he gave up the ghost. (Hunter 1803:146 -147).

Robert Townson also refers to the peasants’ revolt lead by Gheorghe Doja, and is appalled by the cruel execution (Townson 1797:256 -257).

Some British travel accounts include references to the old Turkish fortress. In the first part of the 17th century, William Lithgow considers it one of the most important Turkish military centres (Lithgow 1632: 362). In the same period, John Smith refers to the role of this important fortress in the fights between the Austrian army and the Ottomans.

Several 18th and 19th century travelogues include references to the conquest of the fortress by prince Eugene of Savoy. For instance, Hunter mentions that it occurred after a long siege of ten weeks (Hunter 1803:142-143).

Another historical event which drew the attention of the British travellers who visited Timișoara is the Revolution of 1848. During his visit, Paton finds a city seriously affected by the war:

As I approached the town itself, I in vain looked for the noble alleys of trees that used to be the delight and ornament of the place; all had been hewn down by the grim axe of war, the fortifications covered with the marks of cannon-balls, and the roofs of the houses within battered to the bare rafters, or altogether roofless. (Paton 1861:36)

Nina Elizabeth Mazuchelli also refers to the damages of the city during the revolution.

For Alan Ogden, Timișoara, “the long arm of Vienna”, is the last Romanian city he visits during his journey in our country, and it also an inspiring place for his concluding reflections: “Timișoara, with its Hapsburg legacy, was the perfect place for me to leave Romania, for it is an example of the many strands of history that make up this fascinating country” (2000:204).

7. Conclusions

This literary tour can increase the students’ interest in travel literature and in British literature, as well as in the history and culture of the city. Several connections between the travellers who visited Timișoara and other British personalities of their time would also be helpful. This field trip has an interactive character: the students can be organised in groups, and each group can be divided into several presenters: each group presents one of the main places (Bega Canal, Victory Square, Liberation Square, Union Square, the Bastion) and each reader will present a fragment related to a certain building (for instance the texts about the Orthodox Cathedral). The students can comment on the report between past and present and on the objective or subjective character of the accounts in discussion. I think that this literary tour would also be useful for foreign students who are involved in international programs in Timișoara.

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