

## ***ALLEN WALKER READ, AMERICAN SCHOLAR\****

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SERENDIPITY, as Horace Walpole explained in 1754, is the happy capacity people have “of making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of.” Serendipity was the hallmark of Allen Walker Read’s career as a scholar. Long before the fashion for the “anthropology of everyday life,” he was seeking out cultural history in the most obvious places — ones that others overlooked because the evidence was in plain view. Historians had read colonial American newspapers for the great events of the day; Read noticed the advertisements for runaways and discerned something about early life in America. Those who used roadside “conveniences” in the 1920s were embarrassed or amused by the notes penciled on the walls. While official America was painting over these graffiti, Read was recording them in his notebook for later interpretation. Classical scholarship still held the rapt admiration of the scholarly public in Read’s youth, but it took the imagination to be curious and a willingness to be patronized to take on, as he did, the grammar of Pig Latin.

\* This tribute to Allen Walker Read, updated by Professor Bailey, is an excerpt from his Introduction to *Milestones in the History of English in America*, a collection of Read’s papers published by Duke University Press for the American Dialect Society, 2002.

Having the sagacity to see the exotic in the familiar is one part of serendipity; the other is to seek out places where accidental discoveries may occur. For Read, these places were most often libraries and archives, and he drew forth from them the most unexpected evidence for the history of American life. He sat down to read an 1838 reprint of an English book published in 1628 and discovered that, within a decade of the settlements at Massachusetts Bay, Native Americans were using “broken English” to communicate with one another across the linguistic differences that divided them. By collecting things that might be of interest later and preserving and organizing them, Read gathered his own archive, enabling him, as a mature scholar, to produce essay after essay abundantly, and often amusingly, filled with examples and illustrations.

Read achieved well-merited celebrity for his scholarship not only in the sort of recognition awarded by specialist groups like the American Dialect Society, but also the larger fame that comes from being profiled in the *New Yorker* (Michelle Stacey, September 4, 1989, “At Play in the Language”). Such recognition was particularly gratifying to a transplanted Midwesterner, born in 1906, living in the rarefied intellectual village on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the yen for Europe is far more strongly felt than nostalgia for the American backwoods. Read sided with them both — he was a backwoodsman in the country of sophisticates.

Read made a lifetime of study of Americans and their talk. He took to heart Emerson’s injunction that “we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (1), and it is noteworthy that among his many publications are essays devoted to the language of Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, and Carl Sandburg. But Emerson’s American Scholar was not a bookworm. “Life is our dictionary,” Emerson declared; “colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made.” (2) Like Wordsworth, Emerson believed that the vitality of the language lay in the usage of ordinary people. Echoing the same theme, Brander Matthews declared, “The grammarian, the purist, and pernicky stickler for trifles, is the deadly foe of good English, rich in idioms and racy of the soil.” (3) Neither Emerson nor Matthews was quite prepared for just how racy the speech of the “soil” might be.

In the 1920s, Read began to be curious about the origin of the word *fuck*. Some of his writings on this subject are gathered in *Milestones in the History of English in America*. Readers will note that in print he never employed the word itself but rather such indirect locutions as “the colloquial verb and noun, universally known by speakers of English, designating the sex act.” (4) Noting that the word had been entered in dictionaries until the end of the eighteenth century (though not in Johnson’s), he was severe in his judgment of the editors of the *OED*.

It is to the everlasting shame of Murray and Bradley that their linguistic sense was not strong enough so that they could dissociate themselves from the warped outlook of their age. (5)

Science was part of Read's upbringing. His parents had both received bachelor's degrees from Hillsdale College in Michigan, and his father was the sole faculty member in the sciences in a series of small-town Midwestern colleges (while continuing his education along the way with an M.S. from the University of Wisconsin and further graduate study at the University of Illinois). These appointments included Parker College (Winnebago, Minnesota), Central College (Pella, Iowa), and Iowa State Teachers College (Cedar Falls). Read's sister Mary Jo Read, five years his junior, graduated as her brother had done at Iowa State and went on to an M.S. at the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. For the Read family, science was central to life.

When American linguists — following the intellectual example of William Dwight Whitney — talked of language study as a science, Read was prepared from his childhood to embrace that notion. Speaking at Georgetown University in 1961, he put his convictions in these words:

Other people may prefer to accept their goals from the maxims handed down in their culture or from the assumptions of the religion they have espoused. While linguistics itself does not offer criteria for ethical judgment, its clarifications are so freeing, the enlightenment it yields is so stimulating, that one's sense of mission has ample scope for the dedication of a lifetime.

Read's "mission" has been to let the facts speak for themselves. But he has compelled them to tell a tale, one of the sweep of American history as pioneers inscribed names on the land and filled the wilderness with voices. These voices, for him, have authority — notwithstanding the sneers of English visitors or the arrogance of self-appointed advocates of a linguistic elite. Graffiti in the New York subway or scrawls in public toilets speak with as much authority as the oratory of politicians or the solemn utterances of heroic figures. The facts are egalitarian; they are everywhere; they are nearly always filled with the spirit of fun.

Read's craving for perfection was difficult to satisfy, and it would have been all too easy for him to descend into eccentricity and solitude in post-World War II lower Manhattan. Fortunately for him, he had met Charlotte Schuchardt in 1939 when he encountered her working at the Institute of General

Semantics, an enterprise of the emigre Count Alfred Korzybski, on the fringes of the University of Chicago campus. Fourteen years would elapse before he felt sufficiently confident in his abilities to provide for her. Achieving tenure at Columbia, Read could transport his archives uptown and marry. Like her husband, Charlotte was a Midwesterner with a sense of mission built around language. They sustained each other until their near-coincident deaths — Charlotte on July 25, 2002, Allen eighty-three days later.

Read's interest in American names is the subject of a separate volume, *America: Naming the Country and Its People* (6), edited by Leonard R. N. Ashley, and I direct attention to the introduction to that volume for particulars on Read's contribution to onomastics. Others in this issue of *ETC* describe his devoted service to the General Semantics movement, a viewpoint that engaged his attention and energy beginning in the 1930s. Understanding language helps identify "semantic blockages" that prevent people from saying what they would wish, or that compel them to say things that they do not wish to say. Liberating people from the prejudices of their language was a constant in his "sense of mission." He was eloquent, too, about "linguistic imperialism" and the self-centeredness of "ethnicity." He made these views public wherever he could reach an audience — whether through television or dictionaries or encyclopedias or popular magazines or uncounted miles of travel to talk about his life's work.

Of course, Read might have done more, and he was disappointed that he never brought his proposed *Dictionaries of Briticisms* to completion. Someone so infused with the work ethic and so dedicated to the ideal of perfection will always come short of his dreams. His accomplishments are worthy of celebrity.

Allen Walker Read devoted his life to the work of the American Scholar.

## REFERENCES

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2. Read, Allen Walker. 1971. Unpublished manuscript, pp.60-61.
3. Matthews, Brander. 1892. *Americanisms and Briticisms, with Other Essays on Other Isms*, p.29. New York: Harper.
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