

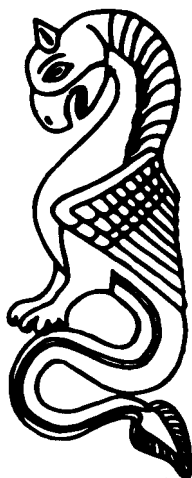
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HAROLD ORTON: A BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

By STANLEY ELLIS

Emeritus Professor Harold Orton is not regarded by any of his friends as retired. The freedom he gained on retirement from the onerous cares of departmental administration and the University governing bodies on which he served has given him time to do more of what he regards as real work. His dedication to the study of English dialects and his application to the wider field of dialectology have been lifelong. His reassurance to generations of students that their academic interest in dialect would give them "a hobby for life" has been witnessed in his own experience. Dialect has indeed been his hobby, but a hobby pursued with a wholeheartedness and enthusiasm that have resulted in a tremendous contribution to the knowledge of his chosen subject. In his book on Byers Green dialect the scholarly chapters do not overshadow the practical reality of his fieldwork on the touchlines of the football field of his native village. His father was the schoolmaster of Byers Green, near Bishop Auckland, County Durham, and in the language of the mining community there existed an enormous body of material worthy of investigation. In his boyhood, Harold was a keen footballer and has been known to claim enough ability to have become a professional. Indeed, his interest in the results of the professional game is still a keen one.

Bishop Auckland Grammar School was the scene of more than football triumphs, however, and as a young undergraduate of less than military age he was able to begin his university studies at Hatfield College, University of Durham. The first world war called him when in 1917 he joined the Durham Light Infantry and became an Army Officer, went to France and in 1918 was severely wounded. In 1919 he was invalided from the Army and whilst still under treatment resumed his studies at Merton College, Oxford.

His war wounds were the end of his football-playing career. He declined to permit the amputation of his shattered right arm which the doctors had recommended, and his achievement in defeating the disability has been a tribute to his fierce determination. Oxford associates remember him in his undergraduate days with his arm in

a high splint, and Mrs Elizabeth Mary Wright, 35 years later, was to remember and comment on his courageous attitude towards the necessary change to left-handed living.

At Oxford he met Joseph Wright and Henry Cecil Wyld and it was his association with the latter that influenced his work on the history of the English language and prompted his keen interest in the field of "occasional spellings" and in the work of the seventeenth-century grammarians. He was awarded a University Research Scholarship in Philology and took his B.Litt. at Oxford in 1923. From 1924 to 1928 he was Lektor in English at the University of Uppsala, Sweden. His experience in the atmosphere of that great Scandinavian University strengthened the incisiveness of his researching mind and gave him a further impetus towards his eventual work on the investigation of living dialect. His interest in Medieval Literature was also active, however and in 1939 he published with W. L. Renwick his work on *The Beginnings of English Literature to Skelton*, a work which has recently been revised and republished.

On his appointment to Armstrong College, Newcastle (later King's College of the University of Durham and now the University of Newcastle) he began his survey of Northumbrian dialects which might be regarded as the basic preparation for his work on the *Survey of English Dialects*. Living in Newcastle he was able to meet women from the small communities to the North of the Tyne who came into the city hawking fish, and here again contacts were established which gave a further opportunity for the fieldwork on which he was so keen.

He left Newcastle for Sheffield at the outbreak of the second world war and his graphic description of his arrival in Sheffield in the blackout in September 1939 is one to be treasured. He remained Lecturer in charge of the Department of English Language at Sheffield from 1939 to 1946 but his wartime secondment to the British Council, as Deputy Director of Education from 1942 and as Acting Director from 1944, meant that he was necessarily less able to take part in university affairs. His experience of British Council administration was to stand him in good stead later when he served on university committees in his professorial capacity. He had not allowed his war wound to prevent his being recommissioned in the Territorial Army in 1940, and in 1945-6 he was Commanding Officer of the Sheffield University Senior Training Corps.

He was fond of reminding his students of his period of activity as a Consultant Member of the B.B.C.'s Advisory Committee on Spoken English from 1934 to 1940, and his discussion of the pronunciation of standard English was always enlivened by his memories of B.B.C.

experience. His own spoken English retained no sign of the Durham accent that he has always been able to resume at will, though it must be said that under great provocation there have been moments when traces of the syntax and phonology of his boyhood companions have appeared.

Although first a dialectologist, Harold's contribution to the wider field of philology has been considerable. The knowledge he passed on to students and his publications relating to sound change and development were often enlivened by reference to dialectal information.

Dialectal research was necessarily restricted by his activities in other fields from 1939 to 1945, but he had noted the publication of the *Linguistic Atlas of New England*, and his own ambition to investigate English dialects in a comprehensive manner in order to produce a Linguistic Atlas of England was not dormant. He had been concerned in the mid-1930's with Professor Horn of Berlin University, Professor Kurath (then at Brown University) and others in discussions about such an Atlas, but these talks had brought no progress. Immediately after the end of the war the resumption of contact with his old friend Eugen Dieth produced a preliminary plan for collection of materials for a Linguistic Survey of England. Money for any research task was scarce, even non-existent, in England in 1945 and the Philological Society's interest in a Dialectal Survey was limited by financial stringency.

When Harold moved to the chair of English Language and Medieval English Literature at Leeds in 1946 the moment for action had come. He and Eugen Dieth spent the next few summers in preparing various versions of a Questionnaire eventually published in 1952. This chapter of his life has been fairly well documented in his own writings in the *Leeds Magazine*, in the *Transactions* of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, and in articles written with Eugen Dieth. We have a brief description in his *Introduction to the Survey of English Dialects* of the preparation of the questionnaire, but the more human side of the period is preserved in the minds of those who worked with him then and later. The phrase "yawn and bash on" which came out of those hot days spent in the basement of the Brotherton Library is a famous one for later generations of his students.

Dr Fritz Rohrer and Dr Peter Wright give some idea in this volume of the early days of the Survey's work.

Teaching undergraduates was always a pleasure to Harold. "We will play some linguistic games today" was often his introduction to a session that proved to be nothing short of sheer hard work—exhausting, provocative, and therefore stimulating. It is his capacity for stimulating others, his undivided purpose, his "single eye" as he himself puts it,

which are the outstanding features remembered with affection and considerable awe by his Leeds students. Undergraduate and post-graduate students were inspired by his energy and enthusiasm in dialect studies. Monographs at both first and second degree levels were turned out in great numbers during his teaching career at Leeds. These are almost invariably authoritative presentations of the dialectal situation in communities all over England, fashioned to a similar plan, and therefore comparable. During term time he could spare little time during the day for appearances in the "Dialect Room." Dr Halliday, his co-editor on the northern volume of the *Survey of English Dialects*, worked alone, but by no means anonymously, and everyone connected with the Department was very conscious of what work was going on. Once office hours had ended, Harold would take up his pen at his dialect desk and continue with his own editorial task.

During these years his work as joint Editor of the Yorkshire Dialect Society's *Transactions*, his editorship of *Leeds Studies in English*, his work with the Yorkshire Society for Celtic Studies and the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society, as well as his membership of many other learned societies took up a great deal of his time and energy. He was forever campaigning through all these bodies to get help for the Survey. Financially he had to operate on a shoe-string. The University was unable to give him all the money he needed during those years of financial stringency. He gained help from private individuals, ranging from cash donations to the gift of motorized transport for fieldworkers. Fees from broadcasts and lectures were waived in favour of donations to the University Dialect Research Fund, which he brought into being.

Adviser, cajoler, pressurizer (all these he had to be), father confessor to his fieldworkers, male and female, encourager of those who faltered, he was at the same time able to devote time to his passion for gardening and for house-heating—he was an early exponent of house insulation and the benefits of double-glazing. He had the devoted support of his wife, Joan, and during those hard-working years saw Betty, his daughter, graduate at Oxford and take a higher degree at Leeds.

With the triumph of the publication of the first part of the *Survey of English Dialects* in 1962, brought about by his personal contact with the Leeds publishers, E. J. Arnold and Sons, he continued to assert the need for a programme to complete the publication of the basic material and to continue the exploitation of the enormous collection of materials in the archives of the Survey. The University's generosity to the very limit of available resources served to cover the costs of publication even after Harold's retirement, and by 1970 all four basic volumes of the Survey material should be in print.

Harold's retirement in 1964 meant that he could at last accept the pressing invitations from American universities he had previously had to refuse. In 1954 he had been visiting lecturer at a summer session in Michigan. In 1965 he visited Kansas and Michigan, in 1966 Iowa, and in 1967 and 1968 Kansas again. Meanwhile the publication programme of the *Survey of English Dialects* volumes has continued actively under his direction, and his annual six-month stay in the United States seems to be a rejuvenating factor. He returns to England with renewed vision for future activity. His most recent honour, the award of an Honorary Ph.D. at Uppsala, is a tribute from a wide circle of Scandinavian friends. Typically, Harold himself regards the honour as one conferred on the leader of a team. Further trips as Visiting Professor to American Universities seem to be the likely pattern for him, but work on dialectal matters will never be allowed to flag and the Atlantic commuting that has made him personally known to a wider body of students will no doubt continue to be taken in his stride.

When Harold retired from the Chair of English Language and Medieval English Literature at the University of Leeds, many of his students wrote to me to enquire if any testimonial was being devised to commemorate his years of devotion to their welfare. Harold had made it known for many years that he felt little sympathy for testimonial funds and was adamant that none should be made for him. A Festschrift such as this one, prepared for him by his academic colleagues and read by his admirers, is perhaps the best possible tribute that we can offer him.