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A Short Account of Simplified Spelling and the Simplified Spelling Society.

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The Simplified Spelling Society was founded in 1908 "to recommend simpler spellings of English words. . ." and it was later laid down that "no simplification can be of much practical value which is not systematic" and "the utilitarian aim being economy of the time and labour of learners". (Introduction to "New Spelling".) Its first president was Dr. Walter W. Skeat, Professor of Anglo-Saxon at Cambridge, and in 1911 he was followed by Dr. Gilbert Murray, O.M., Regius Professor of Greek at Oxford. In 1946, he was succeeded by Professor Daniel Jones, Professor of Phonetics at University College, London, who in turn was succeeded by Sir James Pitman in 1968.

English history is studded with spelling reformers from the 16th century onwards, but it is enough to mention the last of these - and probably the most successful and outstanding - whose work the Society in a very real sense continued. Sir Isaac Pitman, the grandfather of our present President, died in 1897, and he had spent a lifetime in trying to persuade the English-speaking peoples to systematise their spelling. Sir Isaac began his work before the day of universal education when illiteracy was widespread in Britain. It is hard now to understand how he and his followers were truly crusaders, moved by an enthusiasm "born of the conviction of the importance of the phonetic principle as a factor in education and general progress". Isaac Pitman's Phonography (Shorthand) met at the outset a personal need for faster communication (the business need had not yet developed), and won world-wide acceptance. He himself had little money out of it (his sons later built up the firm which bore his name). In his time the profits from Phonography were used to subsidize his Phonotypy (Spelling Reform), which had the greater need and was, if anything, his greater love. Always, in Isaac Pitman's time, there were lectures on Spelling Reform after the classes in Shorthand and we have reports of classes in reading - and of great success under appalling conditions - at Manchester,Glasgow, Sheffield and other places. Imagine having no school-reader except the New Testament, deprived children, and no fire in the middle of December. These were the conditions reported at Dumfries. Yet, we are told that children learnt to read in six months and it was always being reported that after learning in reformed script, the reading of traditional print caused no difficulty. One of Sir Isaac's brothers took his alphabet to America, and school books were printed and put to use in schools. About the year 1870, we have a number of reports from American teachers and educational administrators in several States - New York, Massachusetts, Illinois, Iowa, etc. The tremendous gain in speed of learning to read traditionally and in reading at all, the great improvement in traditional spelling are all mentioned, as are the huge output of written work at an early age, the growth in general knowledge and poise, the great improvement of conduct both in and out of school.

The enterprise of Sir Isaac Pitman in the educational field was repeated by the Society. Around 1914 school books were produced by the Society and supplied to head teachers, who would put them to use in their schools. Not all head teachers dared, even when they wanted, to use the books, but a number were found from Dundee and Stirling in Scotland, through Durham, Hull, Leeds, Manchester and Hereford to London, who tried them out during the next ten years or so. We have the reports of those teachers still and, in some

cases, of His Majesty's Inspectors. The books were by modern standards dull, without colour or illustration, but the reports said precisely what had been said by the American teachers a half-century before. (See S.S.S. Pamphlet No. 7).

From 1875, when the parliamentary report said that only one in twenty-five school children was able to read a short paragraph from a newspaper with fair accuracy, until 1963, when the Central Advisory Committee for Education reported that nearly a fifth of the Secondary School population aged 15 had a Reading Age of 12 *or less*, the government body responsible for education (Board, Ministry, Department, etc.) has continually deplored the failure of the schools to teach reading in many cases. Teachers will tell of bright children who do not learn to read properly because the task is too difficult in the early stages and a child often becomes frustrated before a book has the chance to become interesting. This failure to learn to read has been a constant theme of educationists over the years. About 1966, the head of the Department of Humanities of one of our biggest technical colleges did a research into the reading ability of 800 Technical College students (not the street corner loungers), in two of our northern cities and he came to the conclusion that 22% had such problems in reading that they were unlikely to have success in written examinations and that 28% exhibited ignorance of 13-year-old vocabulary.

Since 1877, many recommendations have been made to the Government of the day by the Society and its predecessors. In that year a determined effort to interest the Government was made by the London School Board with the support of many other School Boards in Britain. That effort, like those that followed, was in vain, but at least it brought into being the Spelling Reform Association (a forerunner of the Simplified Spelling Society), and into the movement men like Professor Skeat and Sir George Hunter, who were later to play an important part in the affairs of the Society.

The Society had been encouraged by the reports from schools about the use of its "Simplifyd Speling" between 1914 and 1920, and after the first World War an attempt was made to have spelling reform included in the 1920 Education Act. That attempt come to nought. In July, 1923, a deputation from the Society waited upon Sir Charles Trevelyan, when he was President of the Board of Education. In 1926, Lord Eustace Percy was approached when he held this post and, in 1933, Viscount Irwin (later the Earl of Halifax), when he was President of the Board, received a memorial supported by more than 900 university officials, vice-chancellors, professors and lecturers (and 900 meant then just about everyone who mattered in the university world), by 250 members of the House of Commons, 20 bishops, 30 mayors of cities and towns, 10 peers and no less than 10 teachers' organisations, including the N.U.T., N.U.W.T., N.A.S., A.M.A. and E.I.S. Lord Irwin was asked nothing more than to set up a representative committee to consider whether English spelling could and should be simplified, and if so, what amendments should be recommended. Lord Irwin was as obdurate as his predecessors. He "could not recommend the expenditure of the time and money which the proposed enquiry would involve." In the words of one national editor, "The matter, unfortunately, is one that would win no votes for any political party."

It was in connection with the memorial to Lord Irwin that the Society evolved what came to be known as New Spelling. It set out to show what could be done by a rearrangement of existing letters. The Society was well aware that certain matters, e.g. the treatment of unstressed vowels, could not be adequately dealt with by this means, but it believed that greater changes, even if desirable, would give the system even less appeal. It put forward the scheme as a basis for discussion. The Society has never claimed that New Spelling was the best system and asked only that a Government Commission be established to decide on a system.

During the 1930's, the mainspring of the Society was without doubt Sir George Hunter of the Swan Hunter shipyards at Wallsend-on-Tyne. Even the office of the Society was moved to Wallsend. Sir George left to the Society a legacy of £20,000 and, although the Income Tax Commissioners have refused to recognize the Society's income as that of an educational charity, the income and capital from Sir George's legacy have, to this day, constituted the greater part of the Society's money. The members of the Society were grievously disappointed in 1933. As Sir George wrote to Lord Irwin, the Society had complied with every stipulation laid down by him and his predecessors. They could but carry on with their work, hoping that some day in the future a Minister might be impressed with its value. Sir George died in 1937.

The Society was largely inactive for a time after the disappointment of 1933, but one member of its Committee was Professor Lloyd James, Professor of Phonetics at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London University. A meeting on board ship in mid-Atlantic between him and Mr. I. J. Pitman (now Sir James) may be said to mark the starting up again of the movement for spelling reform. Sir James knew his grandfather's work thoroughly and he burned with the same enthusiasm for spelling reform. As head of the publishing firm of Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, he was in a special position to be of great value to the Society, and in May 1936 Sir James was elected to the Committee.

The book, to be later named "New Spelling", was produced. Earlier editions of the "Proposals for Spelling Reform" had been largely the work of Mr. Walter Ripman and Mr. William Archer. The Proposals were completely revised and issued as the book, *New Spelling*. The book, together with a dictionary, was prepared over a considerable period of time and after deep consideration of all available research on its subject matter by a committee consisting of Professor Gilbert Murray in the chair, Professor Lloyd James, Professor Daniel Jones, Mr. Harold Orton (then of Sheffield University but later Professor of English Language at Leeds), and Mr. I. J. Pitman and Mr. Walter Ripman (the only surviving author of the earlier editions). Its publication was undertaken by Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons, and in the words of Professor Lloyd James, "It is one of the most remarkable statistical investigations into English spelling ever undertaken."

The Second World War was almost upon us but the Society continued its work. It was proposed, as soon as times were again propitious, to launch another school experiment and to prepare for it modern colourful school books. The provision of these books was held up by the acute paper shortage which followed the war, and by the time that printing was again possible on any scale, the University of London and the National Foundation for Educational Research had tentatively begun the enquiry into the effect of learning to read by a systematic spelling, which the Society had been urging upon them. The Society had covenanted to pay to the University of London Institute of Education £300 net for each of the years 1950 to 1957.

In 1949, and again in 1953, Dr. Mont Follick, M.P. for Loughborough, had been successful in the parliamentary lottery for the right to promote a Private Member's Bill in the House of Commons. He was a keen spelling reformer and naturally his two bills were concerned with spelling reform. The first Spelling Reform Bill was lost by only three votes, despite the opposition of the whole of the Front Bench. As one M.P. said at the time, "There was no doubt who carried the honours of the day." The second bill was drafted and introduced by Mr. I. J. Pitman (as he then was), M.P. for Bath, and the charges of the parliamentary draftsman were later paid by the Society.

This bill proposed that research be undertaken into the value of a systematic system of spelling in teaching children to read English. In spite of Government opposition, the

arguments in favour of systematizing English spelling swayed the members of the House of Commons and the bill received its second reading and passed the committee stage. This degree of success, however, put both sides in a quandary. On the one hand, the Minister, Miss Florence Horsbrugh, could not ignore the expressed view of the House of Commons and on the other hand, Mr. Pitman knew perfectly well that the bill had no chance of passing in the House of Lords. Accordingly, he and his friends, including Mr. Gordon Walker, advised Dr. Follick to conclude a bargain with the Minister, which Mr. Pitman had negotiated. He withdrew the bill and she, on behalf of the Ministry of Education, undertook to approve and facilitate the actions of a competent body, if one could be found, in carrying out the research, which the bill would have imposed upon the National Foundation for Educational Research if it had become law. The undertaking was given by the Minister in the answer to a question on May 7th, 1953.

In June 1953, while the bill was in the public eye, Sir Graham Savage, Education Officer for London, and Mr. Maurice Harrison, Director of Education for Oldham, both members of the Committee of the Society, persuaded the Association of Education Committees to accept a motion tabled by the Oldham Education Committee and moved by Mr. Harrison at the Association's summer meeting, that research be undertaken on methods of teaching reading, including enquiry whether the use of simplified spelling would be an aid to the teaching of reading. It was necessary that local education authorities should be ready to provide schools for any future experiment.

As early as 1949 the Society's officers had first approached London University about further school experiments. The University had agreed and appointed a research officer. The research was, however, so ineffectively designed that no conclusions could be drawn from the report. For instance, the children tested were not those in the first stages of learning to read, but those who had achieved a significant degree of success in reading words in the traditional orthography.

Little more was done for some time, but meanwhile Sir James Pitman had evolved the Initial Teaching Alphabet, using the Society's system as a base, and had been largely instrumental - he was a member of the Committee of the University - in persuading the University and the National Foundation for Educational Research jointly to undertake the research into the question of whether the unsystematic spelling of English caused difficulty in learning to read and write it, which had been envisaged in the bill. The first research using the Initial Teaching Alphabet was launched in English schools in 1961, and others in America and elsewhere in 1963 and later. Twenty-one schools, which were all that could be found, in 1961, to try the new systematic spelling, did not provide the minimal number of children estimated to be required for the first British research. Today, there are more than 4,000 schools in Britain alone using the Initial Teaching Alphabet to teach reading, and more than 17,000 outside Britain in America and the rest of the English-speaking world. This is an indication of the initial difficulty which had to be overcome in finding co-operation in the use of a different spelling and also an indication of the progress made since 1961. Of course, to members of the Society, the difficulty was no new experience and the results no surprise. They knew what was going to happen. It had all happened at least twice before in entirely different places and under entirely different conditions. But the educational world had to be again convinced and so, London University and the National Foundation for Educational Research, two highly respected research bodies, were chosen to undertake the research into the effect of traditional spelling in school.

Many members of the Committee of the Simplified Spelling Society have given many lectures on simplified spelling to many different kinds of audience, in universities and colleges of education, to Women's Institutes and Rotary Clubs, etc. We have, all of us,

been called "cranks" by the uninformed. The present writer has been accused in a newspaper of "tampering with the language that Shakespeare wrote" by a reporter, who obviously did not know that Shakespeare did not use the spelling in modern school books. The editor of a well-known national newspaper once wrote that, if Shakespeare saw "cough" spelt with an "f", he would turn in his grave. When Sir George Hunter wrote, pointing out that that is exactly how the word is spelt in early Shakespearean folios, his letter was ignored. And that is how some behave who, knowing nothing of the history of English spelling, dare to rush into print about the spelling of our language. George Tomlinson was a great Minister of Education, unafraid of innovation, but even he, when approached, wanted to see a wide demand for spelling reform before he would consider it. In order to work up a demand for reform, one must prove that something is lost without it. How does one persuade others to read the proof, particularly as those with the greatest need are the very ones who cannot read easily and easily understand? It is difficult to realise how opposed to spelling reform are those who have never thought about it in this country, which has laid such great stress on correct spelling, probably because of the difficulties involved.

Today, for the first time ever, the old picture has changed and the subject of spelling reform is no longer regarded as the aim of cranks. The conviction of Parliament and the press reports of the period of the Simplified Spelling Bills saw to that. For the first time an official document, a Report from the Schools Council, has said that the best way to learn to read in traditional orthography is to learn in a simplified system. That report was referring to the Initial Teaching Alphabet. "This particular simplified spelling system has made it easier for the majority of children to master the beginnings of reading and writing." The Initial Teaching Alphabet, while a simplified system of spelling, is not the digraphic system of "New Spelling" but is a monographic one based on that system. Thus, the augmentations of the Initial Teaching Alphabet may very obviously and very easily be turned from their i.t.a. monographs into the corresponding S.S.S. digraphs. As a result of i.t.a., many English-speaking children, their parents and their teachers, have come to realise that traditional spelling is far from perfect and not in any way sacrosanct. Helping children to read and to write more easily by the adoption of a systematic simplification has been one of the aims of the Society and greater progress towards this aim has been achieved during these last ten years than during all the preceding years of the Society's activities. That is a tremendous achievement, and it is the opinion of the present writer that the growing numbers who have been brought more easily and rapidly to read traditional English by means of i.t.a. will also, as a result, be more willing than previous generations to bring about further applications of the principles for which the Society stands.

In the meantime the Society has in February, 1971, sent to the present Secretary of State for Education and Science, Mrs. Margaret Thatcher, a fresh letter urging once more an enquiry into "the educational, financial and international advantages likely to result from modernizing our out-of-date spelling conventions."

The Simplified Spelling Society