Simplified Spelling Society Pamphlet No. 1.

On the history of spelling

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We are permitted to make the following extracts from a lecture entitled “The King’s English: from Alfred to Edward VII,” [1] delivered by our first President, the Rev. Professor Skeat, in April, 1902, on the occasion of the Alfred the Great millenary celebrations at Winchester.

“In Alfred’s time,” said Professor Skeat, the English language was unknown to all but the inhabitants of England, and a small part of Scotland. Now it is more widely spoken than any other. . . . When Alfred set himself to revive learning in England by superintending translations (from Latin into the vernacular language) of the ‘Ecclesiastical History’ of the Venerable Bede, the ‘History’ of Orosius, the ‘Pastoral Care’ of Pope Gregory the Great, and the ‘Consolation of Philosophy’ of Boethius, he could never have guessed that the language which he thus fostered would predominate in a new continent, the very existence of which was unknown until six hundred years afterwards.”

The lecturer then proceeded -
“The history of the English language is one of the most fascinating and inexhaustible of all subjects, yet the number of students who have even an elementary know ledge of it is remarkably small. I know of nothing more surprising than this singular fact. The history of English is just the one thing which hardly any schoolboy knows. Very often he can tell you the difference between one ancient Greek dialect and another, and can explain how the speech of Herodotus or Homer differs from that of Thucydides; but to discriminate between the English of Chaucer’s ‘Canterbury Tales’ and that of Barbour’s story of King Robert the Bruce is wholly beyond him. He can translate a piece of Cicero or Livy, but can make nothing of a sentence in King Alfred’s own words. Just as the schoolboy is taught to look with reverence upon every Latin and Greek sentence, so is he, in only too many instances, left to his own devices as regards his native tongue. When he grows up, he often remains of opinion that the only languages worthy of study are those which are commonly called ‘classical,’ obviously with the view of prejudicing learners against all others. Yet even in the teaching of that most useful and indispensable language called Latin, the most lamentable habit still prevails, [2] of carefully suppressing all reference to the spoken sounds of the language, and even of encouraging the belief that the Romans in the time of Caesar took their pronunciation from the English inhabitants of London in the twentieth century. . . . I do most fervently hope that one of the subjects introduced in this twentieth century will be the study of phonetics, including the history of the adaptation of written symbols to spoken sounds. Whenever this is done, the study of languages will enter upon a new phase, and all will be brightness and light and knowledge where at present there is a dense and most discreditable gloom.”

Professor Skeat went on to show that “the chief points in which Alfred’s English differed from our own are these: (1) There is a difference in the dialect employed. (2) There have been great changes in the pronunciation. (3) There have been great, yet wholly inadequate, changes in the spelling. (4) There have been great simplifications in the grammar. (5) There has been a great enlargement of the vocabulary.” We reprint entire that portion of the lecture which, dealing with the second and third of these changes, is germane to the work of the Society.

"*The second* point is that, in the course of a thousand years, great changes have taken place in the pronunciation; a proposition which is true, to some extent, of all the other languages in Europe. Of these, the two which have changed most are English and French; and one result is that, in both these languages, the spelling by no means accords with the pronunciation. In both, the forms at present in use frequently represent the sounds of words as they were pronounced several centuries ago. In particular, the sounds of the vowels have so greatly changed that only one of our English long vowels, the second one *(e),* is a pure vowel at the present day; all the rest have become diphthongs. In Anglo-Saxon the sounds of the five principal long vowels were the same as in Latin and Italian, viz. *a, e, i, o, u* (pronounced as in Italian). But the old *a* (ah) is now *ei* (ei), being pronounced like the diphthong *ei* in *eight* and *vein.* The old *e* is now pronounced like the *ee* in *feet,* which is a pure vowel indeed, but not the same one as at first. The old *i*, once like *i* in *machine,* is now the diphthong heard in *bite,* not far removed from the *ai in Isaiah.* The old *o*, once a pure long *o*, has now a slight after-sound of *u,* thus producing the diphthong written as *ow* in *know.* The old *u*, once the *u* in *rule,* is now usually a diphthong when not preceded by an *r*, as in *mute* or *tune.* At the same time, changes too numerous to be here noticed have taken place in the sounds of the consonants. One of the most extraordinary of such changes is that the old Anglo-Saxon guttural sound of the medial *h*, though still represented in our spelling by *gh,* is either lost (chiefly after a long vowel) as in *plough, bough, dough, high, sigh,* and the like; or else is exchanged for *f* (chiefly after a short vowel) as in *rough,* and *tough,* and *enough.* The sound in Anglo-Saxon was that of the German *ch in nicht or Nacht;* and there can be no doubt that it perished because the Normans, though they were determined to learn English, disliked this sound and wholly failed to master it. The chief reason why modern English spelling is a complete riddle to all but a few students is that modern Englishmen are, as a rule, wholly ignorant of the pronunciation of Latin, of Anglo-Saxon, of Anglo-French, and of Middle English. As a rule, they do not even know that our spelling has a history; and all that they can do is to try to ignore the facts. The strange thing is that they very often feel no interest in the subject, and look upon it sometimes with undeserved contempt. To know all about the correct placing of Greek accents, or the quantities of Latin vowels, is respectfully recognized as a mark of scholarship; but to feel any interest in the history of our native language is often regarded as a superfluous meddling with matters of purely antiquarian interest, such as is only pardonable in an enthusiast. Yet some of the results are certainly curious. To take an example, we actually pronounce *go* as ' go,' but if we double the symbol, by writing two *o*'s instead of one, we no longer prolong the *o* sound, but employ quite a different one; so that whilst writing *too* or *soon* with two *o*'s we pronounce them so that the long vowel has become like the long *u* in *rule.* One would think that a fact so singular would excite curiosity; but fashion steps in, proclaiming that the study of English is useless or vulgar, for, after all, it is merely our native language; and only the classics can confer 'culture.'

"Once more, we spell *oak* with *oa,* and *broke* with *o,* and no one cares. It is looked upon as a meaningless eccentricity. But if anyone should dare to say, 'Then let us by all means disregard it, and spell both words alike,' the cry is immediately raised that the spelling is sacred, and must be kept up in the interests of etymology. The retort is obvious, that in that case the etymological meaning of such spellings ought to be studied. But no; Englishmen will not do that either. They are only satisfied with their spelling as long as they feel that they must helplessly acquiesce in it. They refuse to change it, and they equally refuse to understand it. Let us all learn it by rote, like parrots, is the parrot-cry heard around us; and with that we are commonly content.

"But let us look for a moment at such words as they were used by Alfred. Instead of *oak,* he pronounced it *āc* (aak); whilst instead of *broke,* he used the full form *brocen,* pronounced nearly as *brokken,* with a short *o*, that has since been lengthened and made closer in sound with a light after-sound of *u.* So in other cases, we shall usually find that the modern *oa* corresponds to Anglo-

Saxon â* as in *râd,* a road; *wâd*, woad; *gâd,* a goad; *tâde,* a toad; â*tan,* oats*; gât,* a goat; *bât,* a boat; *sâpe,* soap*; lâm*, loam; *fâm*, foam*; hlâf,* a loaf.

“Again, we write the verb to *heal* with an *ea,* but the substantive *heel* with double *e*. This is because the words, though now sounded alike, were once sounded differently; and even to this day, it is not uncommon to hear in Ireland a distinction made between *sea,* pronounced *say,* and the verb to *see.* The words now spelt with *ea* had once a very ‘open’ sound of the vowel, and often appear in Anglo-Saxon with long œ, as distinguished from long e*;* the sound of the former being much more open.’ Or again, we find a like distinction made between the Anglo-Saxon *ea* and *eo*, the former producing the modern *ea*, and the latter the modern *ee*; as in *east,* east; *leaf,* leaf*; stream,* stream*; bean,* bean; and, on the other hand, *beo,* a bee; *threo,* three*; freo,* free*; seo,* I see; *deop,* deep*; cneo,* knee. These examples must serve, for the present, to illustrate some changes in our pronunciation.

“Thirdly, there have been great, yet wholly inadequate, changes in our spelling.

“The usual idea current amongst Englishmen, due to an almost total ignorance of the subject, is that the spelling of old English is lawless and worthless. But all depends upon the date. Of course the spelling of modern English is hopeless enough, but it differs very little from that of the sixteenth century, when it was to a large extent phonetic, but by no means accurate or careful. The spelling of the fifteenth century is not much better, and it is often from this spelling, as seen in old printed books, that some people form their notions. But when we get back to the manuscripts of the fourteenth and thirteenth centuries, the case is greatly altered. Many manuscripts are carefully spelt upon true phonetic principles, so that it is often perfectly easy to read them rightly, and to pronounce the words as they were meant to be pronounced, in accordance with the symbols employed. This certainly cannot be done in the case of modern English, where the same symbol means two or three different things, so that children have to be informed that, whilst *go* rhymes with *so, do* rhymes with *too;* and that, whilst *toe* rhymes with *go, shoe* rhymes with *do.* In this particular Alfred’s English was immensely superior to our own. When an Anglo-Saxon word is properly written down, there is only one way in which it can be pronounced. The spelling was phonetic; that is to say, a particular symbol meant a particular sound, and no other. The sound might vary according to what precedes or follows the symbol; but if the whole word is placed before you there is no ambiguity. This is, of course, the principle upon which the excellent Latin alphabet was originally founded, a principle still preserved in some modern languages; as, for instance, in Welsh. Englishmen often try to raise a silly laugh over Welsh spelling, in entire ignorance of the fact that it is immeasurably superior to their own. The only doubtful letters in Welsh are *e, u,* and y; there is never the slightest doubt as to the meaning of the symbols for the consonants. You have only to realize that we must not judge them by modern English standards, and they are then easily learnt. It does not matter that the sound of *oo* in *boot* is written in Welsh as *w*. What does matter is, that this Welsh symbol w should never mean anything else; and it never does, unless when it is shortened to the sound of *oo* in *good,* which is of no great consequence. We do far worse things than that.

“After the Norman conquest, our manuscripts continued to be spelt phonetically, that is to say, correctly, for some time. But, as time went on, many of the scribes were Normans, who had been trained to write French, and they revised our spelling for us, introducing new symbols, but unfortunately dropping some of the old ones. For all this, the manuscripts of the early part of the fourteenth century are fairly well spelt; and it is often possible to be able to say positively, from the forms employed, in what dialect and in what part of England they were written. But about the year 1400, so many old inflexions were dropped and so many new forms were thus created, that the spelling did not change with sufficient rapidity, and so became uncertain; and, as time went on,

things became worse and worse. In the earlier part of the sixteenth century, a new idea came in, which has wrought sad havoc and disaster, viz. the notion that a word ought not to be spelt according to its sound, but according to its etymology and derivation; and this specious but senseless notion was attended with the worst consequences. For one thing, the derivations assigned were frequently wrong; and then a spelling was adopted which was neither phonetic nor etymological, but bad both ways. And this is the system which has ever since gone from bad to worse, and has landed us in the present state of chaos.

"The fact is that most people fail to grasp the one leading principle, viz. that it is *the spoken word* that really matters. Writing was invented for the purpose of representing the sound, and is only useful so far as it does so. The sole true judge is the ear. Yet we actually judge by the eye; we actually go by the look of the thing, and consider whether the word looks like Latin or Greek. If it does that, we call it good, in defiance of truth and logic. Yet whilst we are commonly anxious to spell English in such a manner as to show off our Latin and Greek, we lose sight of the material fact that the bulk of the language is neither of Latin nor of Greek origin, but goes back, in countless cases, to Old Mercian or to Anglo-French, neither of which is at all familiar to the average schoolboy. The plea for 'etymological' spelling, falsely so called, is invariably given up by every true English scholar as soon as he really comes to know the actual facts, and can understand a page of Chaucer or a page of Alfred; but, as such scholars are in a very small minority and are likely long to remain so, there is an overwhelming consensus of opinion in favour of continuing to bear the yoke which the printers impose on us. No improvement is possible till a reasonable and decent acquaintance with our old authors is a great deal more common than it is at present.

"Even our boasted acquaintance with Latin and Greek is often but a vain thing. We write *sylvan* as if it came from Greek, according to the old false 'etymology' which derived the Latin *silua* from a Greek word ὕαη, which happened to mean the same thing, viz. 'a wood.' But even if there be any such ultimate connexion, the Latin word is only cognate, not derived. So that, if we really want to show off our classical knowledge, we ought to spell it *silvan* at once. We actually write *victuals* when we mean *vittles,* under the impression that the word is derived from Latin; but, as a matter of fact, it is of French origin, and only goes back to Latin at second hand. It is just as absurd as if we were to write *redemption when* we mean *ransom.* And it would be curious to know how many of our classical scholars are aware that *ransom* and *redemption* are from the same original. I hope there may come a time, before the twentieth century closes, when the claims of phonetic spelling will be fairly considered, impartially and logically, and with reference to true etymological facts. It is no small disgrace to us that its claims are now met only with sneers and scoffs, captiousness and prejudice, and by objections that have been exposed over and over again. The great New English Dictionary, now being printed by the University of Oxford, will probably be completed in some seven or eight years; and we shall then possess a storehouse of references for facts that can no longer be disputed. It will make a great difference. Englishmen are very slow to accept new truths; but when they do so, they do it with conviction. Let them once know the truth of a matter, and they will hold fast to it and abide by the consequences."

[1] Published in full in *Saint George,* Vol. V, No. 19, July, 1902, and here reprinted by consent of the author and of the proprietors (Messrs. Fairbairns).

[2] This is no longer the case. As Professor Skeat remarked in his Inaugural Address on the foundation of this Society, the two great Universities have now united in adopting the reform here urged upon them.