

In Memoriam: Stanley Ellis (1926-2009):  
Preeminent English Dialectologist,  
Broadcaster and Scholar, as well as the  
First Honorary Life Member of the  
International Association for Forensics,  
Phonetics and Acoustics<sup>1</sup>

Stanley Ellis, the son of a modest supervisor in the wool industry, very early in a unique and unexpectedly developing career, would establish his credentials as the leading English dialectologist of his generation through his unrivalled experience as the principal fieldworker for the Survey of English Dialects (SED). The highly ambitious project and remarkable National Survey—one jointly conceived by Harold Orton of the University of Leeds and Eugen Dieth of the University of Zürich, and directed by Orton from its inception in 1946 to its completion in 1962—remains the definitive, and very likely the last, truly national investigation of the nation's regional 'English' speech possible in England.

Fortunately, it was undertaken just before the rich diversity of still localised families, their localised dialects, and their oral culture and richly fed memories, was tragically overtaken by cataclysmic and massive media-induced phonological—and cultural—changes in the late twentieth century. Further, the project had managed to tap into so very many isolated groups often still free from 'vocabulary and speech contamination' by radio, newspapers, and the many more conforming forces that have operated to eliminate the distinctive style of culture so long the birthright of men and women in the places where they were born and had lived their proud and fiercely independent lives.

Born in Bradford, West Yorkshire in 1926, and educated at the Grange Grammar School there, Stan Ellis had obtained a scholarship to study at Corpus Christi College Cambridge, but his studies were to be interrupted by service as a navigator in the Royal Air Force. After this service, he read English at Leeds, where, under the leadership of Professor Harold Orton, he would complete a Master's degree on the dialect of Lincolnshire, and work as principal researcher under his

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<sup>1</sup> These notes owe much to the recently shared thoughts of my friend, J.D.A. Widdowson, so long his close colleague and friend.

mentor on the Continent- assisted four volume *Survey of English Dialects*, and then he would to become Lecturer and Senior Lecturer. Thus he would shape the contents and organisation of the Leeds Archive of Vernacular Culture,<sup>2</sup> as well as winning a pre-eminent position in the world of the study of recent/contemporary dialects—much as treated so proudly and luminously in the milestone International Council for Dialectology Congress in Marburg in 1965.

Stanley Ellis was eminently suited to the demanding task of administering the SED's complex, thorough and extensive questionnaire. His sincerity and open-heartedness, coupled with his genuine interest not only in the dialects themselves, but also in those he interviewed, made him the ideal fieldworker, particularly in the rural regions. Having already used/ qualified the questionnaire during his postgraduate research, he was then appointed as a Research Assistant on the Survey in 1952. In the following five years he travelled widely throughout the North and the Midlands in particular, with his first wife, Jean, firstly by motorbike and sidecar, and later by Land Rover and caravan, he ultimately identifying and interviewing speakers in no fewer than 118 localities out of the total selected network of 313.

He always had the happy knack of quickly establishing rapport with those he interviewed, and his friendly, unassuming, and patient approach coaxed answers to even the most exacting of the no fewer than 1054 questions. He would also, perforce, become a specialist in the electronic recording of dialect speakers. The 404,000 responses elicited by the Survey of English Dialects have not only provided a unique record of older regional speech, but also they have given the most detailed 'folk life' information on pre-mechanised agriculture and on a multiplicity of traditional crafts and/or skills. These are meticulously and elegantly recorded in the official scholarly record of the work, four-volume *Survey of English Dialects* (1962-71).

Indeed, Stanley Ellis quite simply brought the nation's proud dialectology alive for England through so many illuminating—and respectful and fascinating—discussions with the 'locals' about all matters of abiding significance and their whole meaningful world identity to them, namely their folklore and language.

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<sup>2</sup> In the scheme of things, the University of Leeds was long to be home to nationally significant, justly lauded and pre-eminent scholarship in English Language, Lore, Onomastics and Phonology, and so Stanley Ellis would follow so honourably—and round out—the magnificent national tradition of the generous century embracing the work both there and elsewhere of Joseph Wright, J.R.R. Tolkien, E.V. Gordon, A. Hugh Smith, and Harold Orton. Interestingly much of this traditional culture recording would persist at the University of Sheffield. See the next footnote.

*And Now a Personal Tribute*

Quite apart from this enduring legacy, Stanley Ellis was an inspiring teacher who transmitted his enthusiasm for all aspects of language to his students. And as John Widdowson<sup>3</sup> has recently written so powerfully about his friend to *Australian Folklore*

I owe him a particular debt of gratitude for giving so generously of his time, encouragement, and expertise, especially regarding phonology, in supervising my early dialect research, and for his unfailing guidance and advice over many years. During the period of supervision he was diagnosed as suffering from a debilitating illness, but he steadfastly continued to offer his advice and support. Happily, the condition responded rapidly to treatment, and he emerged with renewed energy and enthusiasm.

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After his S.E.D. fieldwork Stanley had been appointed as a Lecturer in English Language at the University, and in due course to a Senior Lectureship. He was long a staunch champion of the Yorkshire Dialect Society, serving on its Council, and acting as its Honorary Secretary, and also as editor of its intellectually powerful *Transactions* for many years, and this longstanding contribution would be formally recognised when he was designated a Vice-President in 1997. In addition to numerous editorials and reports, he was a regular contributor to its *Transactions* on a wide range of language/ fascinating cultural topics.

After taking early retirement in 1983, Stanley Ellis continued his work for the same Society and its noble task of capturing the fading heritage of that region, but he also became increasingly involved in what may be termed ‘forensic linguistics’, he attending law courts around the country, advising barristers or defence counsels, and acting as an expert witness in the ever increasing number of cases where recordings of voices played an important part. His reputation in this field was enhanced by his extraordinarily accurate pinpointing of the voice of the hoaxer who taunted the police in their investigation of the Yorkshire Ripper murders. Yet Ellis was able to locate the voice as that of someone who hailed from Castletown, a small village on the edge of Sunderland, Tyne and Wear, many miles from the scenes of crime. And it was this disregard for this ‘acoustic’ warning which put the investigation back some eighteen months.

Ellis would become even better known nationally through two BBC radio series in the 1980s,—notably those on Radio 4—which so much

<sup>3</sup> J.D.A.W.—now an Emeritus Professor there—was long the Professor of English Language at the University of Sheffield, as well as the Director of the National Centre for the English Cultural Tradition.

clarified the hitherto sentimental material from the Home Service, in such fine, scholarly and identity-confirming programmes such as ‘Take a Place Like...’ and ‘Talk of the Town, Talk of the Country’.

In these, the hearer—through the interviewer—would be meeting people to discuss their distinctive words and accents, while quietly answering questions on etymology as well as on the often buried cultural significance of local place-names.<sup>4</sup> In all of this scholarship was born lightly and shared, not least due to his respect for all his interlocutors.

For he vastly enjoyed travelling around Britain speaking to people about their regional speech and about the ethos/lore of the places in which they lived.<sup>5</sup> He also took part in numerous phone-in programmes, talking to listeners about dialects and about the (topographic) significance of place names and personal names, drawing on a lifetime’s experience and his natural empathy for people, in his talking with a host of different callers. In even more of an Open University style, he would also present other distinctive programmes like Radio 4’s ‘The Routes of English’. Always modest and self-effacing, he gave those making contact a free rein to reveal their own speech and opinions, all of which made for fascinating, and informative listening.

Stanley Ellis kept his youthful appearance and his disarming and engaging personal charm throughout his life, as is obvious in his appearance in the historic group photograph taken at the Thirteenth International Conference on Methods in Dialectology at the University of Leeds as recently as August 2008. He remained active until shortly before his passing on November 12th, 2009, aged 83.

Like many others whose lives and work he influenced, he will be remembered with gratitude and affection as an inspiring mentor and teacher, a most congenial colleague, and a true friend. Apart from the so-based Oxford lexicographers throughout the twentieth century, Stanley Ellis may indeed be styled the most powerful wordsmith, and the finest guardian of the language’s heritage, and true folk antiquarian in that last epoch before the ‘global’.

J.S. Ryan

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<sup>4</sup> It is this ‘Northern Scholarship of Place Names’ that would come south after World War One with both Hugh Smith, and J.R.R. Tolkien, in their further and distinguished careers in the Thames Valley and its universities.

<sup>5</sup> If the comparison may be allowed, his role has surprising parallels to the radio work, and folk culture sympathy—especially in Eastern Australia—of Colin Munro in the decades after World War Two. [See elsewhere in this volume.]