
In Memoriam

Frederic G. Cassidy, 1907-2000

Frederic Gomes Cassidy, one of the kindest, gentlest men I have ever met, died in Madison, Wisconsin, on June 14, 2000 as the result of a stroke he had suffered a month before. Cassidy's professional accomplishments leave lasting marks on the study of the English language; his personal influence is beyond measure.

Fred was born in Jamaica, British West Indies, where he spent the first decade of his life. After earning his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, he migrated to the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in 1939—and never left. In 1999 he celebrated a 60-year association with UW-M, a half-century and a decade more which benefitted them both.

Cassidy is, of course, best known for his general editorship of the *Dictionary of American Regional English*, which brings together most of what we know about lexical (and much other) variation in American English. Before DARE, he made his mark as a historian of the English language and in onomastics.

Fred was not present at the founding of the American Name Society, but he joined early on and rapidly became one of its staunchest supporters. He was president of ANS in 1980 and a frequent contributor to ANS publications. His first contribution to *Names* was (appropriately) in volume 1, a review of *Orkney Farm-Names*. Forty years later, his last (I want to say most recent), "A Note on Names and Censors," appeared in volume 41. His best-known onomastic work is *The Place-Names of Dane County, Wisconsin*, publication number 7 of the American Dialect Society, originally published in 1947. "Cassidy's Dane County," as the book is generally known, is arguably the most influential study of placenames to have appeared in the United States. Its methodology, sources, analysis, and style of presentation have informed the last half century of placename research and its influence appears today as strong as ever. Cassidy was an active placename scholar until the end of his life and at least one article, "Some French Place Names in Wisconsin," (a revision of an earlier article) will be published posthumously (in *Place Names in the Midwestern United States*). Another monograph, which to my knowledge has not been published although it was

completed some time ago, is his study of the placenames of Brown County, Wisconsin.

It is impossible to know how many people were brought to the study of English through contact with Fred Cassidy, surely scores if not hundreds, and how many thousands of others gained a new appreciation for the soul of the language through his writings, his interviews and the writings and interviews of others, especially concerning DARE, but few other scholars have had such lasting influence. My own case may be more typical than I know. One of the requirements at the University of New Mexico, where I was a Master's student in Comparative Literature, was a course in the history of the English language—which was dreaded by all literature students. Like many others I put it off as long as I could, but finally I had to enroll and graduate or start losing credits whose time was expiring. Still clear in my mind is the first day of that class when the text was announced: *The Development of Modern English*, by Stuart Robertson and Frederic G. Cassidy, which I dutifully bought and somewhat less dutifully began to read. But by the time we reached the Indo-Europeans, I began to take interest and before the first great vowel had shifted, I was hooked; I would take other courses and pursue the English language further. Years later I told Fred this story; he smiled as only he could and replied "I've been accused of many things, but being an evangelist was never among them." If he only knew.

Fred was a most generous man, and he would give freely of his time, even with the many demands put upon it. He drove down from Madison on a number of occasions and spoke to my students, giving them an original address and answering questions he had heard dozens of times before as though they were unique and the most perceptive questions he had ever been asked. Sometimes we could pay him; other times it was only a cafeteria dinner, but it made little difference to Fred.

A poem I read in high school, whose author, title, and subject I have long forgotten, but it was on the death of someone notable, likened the deceased to a great tree which had fallen in the forest "leaving there a lonesome spot against the sky." I thought of this line when I heard of Fred's death. For many of us, there is a lonesome spot which will not soon disappear.

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