

IN MEMORIAM

Allen Walker Read (1906 –2002)

Allen Walker Read, one of the founders of the American Name Society and for many years one of its most active members at various meetings of the society, an expert on the American language (and what the British thought of it), an expert on word origins, a lexicographer and onomastician, died at the age of 96.

He was born on June 1, 1906, in Winnebago, Minnesota. He grew up in Cedar Falls, Iowa, where his father taught at what was then Iowa State Teachers College. He graduated from that college with a BA (1925) and took an MA at the University of Iowa (1926, with a thesis on some placenames of Iowa "selected from counties A through F," having been inspired by H. L. Mencken to study America's colorful placenames). Then he was off to Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar and received a BLitt there (1933) and, late in life, his doctorate (DLitt, 1988). Read taught at the University of Missouri (home of the redoubtable names scholar Robert L. Ramsay), the University of Chicago (where Read was engaged with the *Dictionary of American English*, edited by Sir William Craigie), and Columbia University (1945–1974, where his name study was rather looked down upon, but his contributions to other aspects of American linguistics could not be denied even by a dean who pointedly referred to him as Mr. Read). He married (1953) Charlotte Schuchardt, then director of the Institute of General Semantics and for many years she and Read were involved with Korzibsky's heritage. Allen and Charlotte had no children. She died just a few months before Read, in July 2002. Read died October 26, 2002.

Read was president of ANS (1969) and one of ANS's most generous and distinguished members. In 1988, *Names* published a *Festschrift* in which Kelsie B. Harder hailed Read as "a scholar who climbs real mountains and the more realistic mountains of knowledge, and both require a physicality of mind and body that rejects moderation and compromise." Read and his wife always liked to combine hiking and mountain-climbing expeditions with their very frequent visits to regional meetings of ANS.

Harder listed some of the many papers Read delivered in his courtly style at onomastic meetings or published in *American Speech* (of which, at one time, Read was editor), *Current Trends in Linguistics* (a topic which drew Read to head the Current English section at the Modern Language Association for some years), *Geolinguistics* (he was a generous and highly respected member of the American Society of Geolinguistics, founded by Mario Pei of Columbia University in 1965), *Names*, and elsewhere.

Read's scholarly work ranged from an early *jeu d'esprit* on American toilet graffiti (published in Paris in the 1920s and reprinted by Reinhold Aman of *Maledicta* a generation or two later) to a call for a placename survey of the United States (*Names* 18, 1970), from a proposed dictionary of Briticisms to a triumphant identification of the origin of the most widely known expression in American English: OK. In 1987, Read turned over 100,000 citation slips on Briticisms to John Algeo, who announced in a 1988 newsletter of the American Dialect Society (of which Read was a distinguished member) that "the editing of the dictionary will doubtless take several years." Some of Read's other work has been made available to scholars. I have edited two dozen of Read's previously unpublished onomastic papers (Mellen Press, 2002) and Robert Bailey has edited Read's published articles on American speech (Duke University Press, 2002).

It is hoped that the papers Read left will find a home somewhere where they can be put at the disposal of serious scholars in the future. Read's papers were those of a packrat, but all very interesting, jotted on citation slips sometimes pasted on the blank back of scrap paper, with handwritten transitions scribbled in to join the examples up into a short paper for oral delivery. Bailey rummaged and created an extensive bibliography of Read, but it is possible that more unpublished, even a few more published, pieces will turn up. Read's passing reminds us that it is truly the duty of the American Name Society to see to it that troves of research materials belonging to members of the society are not lost when a person dies but collected where scholars can use them. Hundreds of talks delivered at the Names Institute, at annual and other meetings, have been irretrievably lost. Some,

granted, may be well lost, but history and scholarship always prefers a complete picture. The regional institutes of ANS did publish a number of collections but there are still many documents "out there," like Read's extensive files, that should be secured.

Of all Read's work, the study of OK is what obituaries featured. In the United States, the *New York Times* (18 October 2002) headlined: "Allen Read, 96, the 'O.K.' Expert, Is Dead." In Canada, the *Globe and Mail* in Toronto headlined (6 December 2002): "Etymologist made his name as 'the OK man'." In Britain, *The Economist*, which dramatically gave him the whole-page, featured obituary (26 October 2002), took the first three paragraphs to comment on OK as "a vocabulary in itself" and called Read "the Americans' champion" of this universally useful expression:

Mr Read showed how, stage by stage, OK was spread throughout North America and the world to the moon, and then took on its new form A[-]OK, first used by space people and frowned upon by purists. Some believe that the Boston newspaper's reference to OK [which Read found, *Morning Post*, 1839] may not be the earliest.

Some are attracted to the claim that that it is of American-Indian [Choctaw] origin. Mr Read treated such doubting calmly. "Nothing is absolute," he once wrote, "nothing is forever."  
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One hopes that Read's many contributions to names study, never mentioned in any obituaries and the word *onomastician* never occurs, will not be forgotten. One hopes that the importance of onomastics and of articles in *Names*, *Literary Onomastic Studies*, and other name journals in which Read published will not forever be ignored. Read's basic contributions to name study are, in my view, even more important than the fact that he wrote the entry for *Dictionary* in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* or that he read through incredible masses of dusty periodicals and forgotten memoirs and travel books to glean datable references to, say, the

pronunciation of the toponym *Niagara*, or that he caught vulgar Americans writing on bathroom walls in 1928 or stuffy Britons mocking American colonials for attaching unusual, to them, meanings to English words such as *bluff* (in geography) or *ordinary* (in the sense of inn). I like to think of Read as documenting so well the renaming of the Northern Andes with the much more American moniker of Rocky Mountains.

Allen Walker Read reminded us repeatedly that placename study involves digging in obscure historical archives and not just looking at recent maps. Read knew that Terminus became a placename in Georgia because of a railroad line and he knew exactly when Terminus was dropped and Atlanta was substituted, and he knew, further, that there were discoverable psychological factors explaining the renaming and also many resonances of the name Atlanta occurring as a result of Civil War violence and twentieth-century industry. On top of that, he rejoiced to find the slang term, Hotlanta. It was the kind of wordplay he liked to find and he called it "frolicsome," for he was perhaps unusual among lexicographers, those necessary drudges (as Dr. Samuel Johnson called them), in not being pompous. He had a gentlemanly air, but he was never a snob, never pedantic. He grew to be very old without becoming old-fashioned. He became erudite without becoming dogmatic. He embraced all the language, the formal and informal, the current and the obsolete. It was all grist for his mill. He continually stressed that language is culture itself, and that to understand the American culture one has to check and cherish American lingo. Read never let us forget that insofar as is possible we ought to seek out the origins of the words we use, names as well as all other words, because they are of significance not only to lexicographers but to students of all the social sciences and all the humanities. He loved to find a better date for every treasure he unearthed. Those principles he clung to are indeed for scholarship forever.

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