



In Memoriam: Allan Metcalf

(1940–2022)

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Each year, since 2008, the American Name Society has held its Name of the Year (NoY) elections. As many ANS members know, traditionally, the results of the NoY deliberations are announced at the annual meeting of the American Dialect Society (ADS). What many ANS members may not know, however, is just how this tradition began. Nearly two decades ago, it was Professor Allan Metcalf who graciously invited the ANS to join the ADS in its hugely popular Word of the Year event.¹ Initiated in 1990 by Metcalf himself, the ADS' Word of the Year vote, or as one *New York Times* reporter recently called it “the Super Bowl of Linguistics”, enjoys significant media attention both in the United States and abroad (Bennet 2015). Metcalf's generous invitation for the ANS to announce the winners of the NoY vote during this special event was no small gesture. It not only helped to establish the NoY tradition, it was also critical in drawing both scholarly and public attention to onomastics and the American Name Society in general. As Michael McGoff (2022) remembers: “It was typical of Allan's generosity when he enthusiastically welcomed the American Name Society to share its Name of the Year selections at the annual ADS event, even focusing the spotlight on ANS first”. Cleve Evans, our first NoY Chair and an ANS Past President, echoed Michael's praise: “I of course hugely appreciated Allan Metcalf's gracious help with the Name of the Year and allowing us to make our announcement of the winners at the Word of the Year event. He was unfailingly kind and supportive and a wonderful friend to ANS and to me personally. He will be greatly missed”.

This was not the first time, of course, that Professor Metcalf came to the aid of the ANS. Each year, over many decades, he took care to file the official paperwork which maintained the legal status of the ANS as a registered scholarly society in the United States. Edward Callary, ANS Past President, shared another way in which Professor Metcalf came to our rescue (2022):

Some decades back when ANS was considering holding annual meetings apart from MLA and not knowing how to go about it, we contacted Allan who had organized ADS meetings since *Moby Dick* was a guppy. Being Allan he was glad to help. I remember he called himself a travel agent at heart

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and his recommendations concerning organizing local arrangements committees, securing meeting sites and the like were extremely valuable and our early independent meetings were successful largely because of his suggestions.

As with everything he did, Allan offered this invaluable behind-the-scenes assistance without fanfare or any expectation of recognition. He helped because that was the kind of man he was. As all who had the privilege of working with him can attest, he was as generous in spirit as he was impressive in intellect.

Professor Metcalf began his scholarly career at the University of California, Berkeley, where he obtained both his MA and PhD in 1964 and 1966, respectively.² Immediately after graduating, he was offered and accepted a position as an Assistant Professor at the University of California, Riverside. There, he served in the English Department for several years before finally joining the faculty of a small private college in Jacksonville, Illinois, MacMurray College. It was there that Professor Metcalf would make his institutional home. During his long and prestigious career at MacMurray, spanning nearly half a century, Metcalf took on a number of different roles. From Full Professor to Departmental Chair, he also rose to become the Director of MacMurray's Journalism Program. In this position, he passed on his passion for the English language to generations of journalism students, many of whom would go on to land positions in some of the nation's most celebrated news agencies (e.g., the *Wall Street Journal*, *Market Watch*, and *Time Magazine*) (Spearie 2022).

Metcalf's service to MacMurray did not end there. Over the years, he later took on appointments as the College Registrar and then Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs, before he returned to his favorite academic position: teacher. As Professor Metcalf would later reflect, upon his retirement: "I have taught just about anything an English department can offer, from Beowulf to Billy Budd, from journalism to linguistics".³ Forever modest, what Professor Metcalf neglected to mention in that self-description was that he not only taught a lot, he also taught extraordinarily well. His love of learning and language ignited students both in traditional and non-traditional educational settings, such as the Jacksonville Correctional Center, where he also taught for nearly a decade. In October of 2000, in honor of his exemplary pedagogical record, he was given the United Methodist Board of Education Award for Teaching Excellence.

As much as teaching was his passion, writing was Professor Metcalf's one true obsession. Throughout his career, he published avidly, extensively, and successfully. One of the nation's best and most beloved dialectologists, his articles appeared in numerous scholarly journals, such as *American Speech*, *Dictionaries*, the *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, and the *Journal of English Linguistics*. In 1985, he served as a guest editor of *NAMES* for a special issue dedicated to the topic of "Names in Dialect". From 1989 to 2000, he was also the contributing editor of the *Barnhart Dictionary Companion*. However, what made his publishing career so exceptional was not so much the volume of his writing but its reach. Along with his scholarly works, Metcalf released a series of extremely popular books which delighted both lovers and haters of US American speech. For example, with the famous US American lexicographer David K. Barnhart, he co-authored *How We Talk: American Regional English Today* (ISBN-10: 06180943624). Other popular books authored by Metcalf include the following: *America in So Many Words: Words That Have Shaped America* (ISBN-13: 978-0395860205); *The Life of Guy: Guy Fawkes, the Gunpowder Plot, and the Unlikely History of an Indispensable Word* (ISBN-13: 9780190669201)⁴; and *Predicting New Words: The Secrets of Their Success* (ISBN-10: 061813008). If publishing eight books were not enough, for nearly a decade he also served as a remarkably frequent contributor to "Lingua Franca", the popular weekly blog of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. Heidi Landecker, one of the Deputy Managing Editors of the *Chronicle*, had this to say about her long-time colleague and friend: "What I loved about Allan was that he didn't need to write about a famous four-letter word for copulation, or read the entire *Oxford English Dictionary* to write about language: His interests lay in everyday words" (Zahneis 2022, footnote). Allan's legendary down-to-earth yet wonderfully quirky style came to him naturally.

Born, bred, and raised in America's heartland, Allan had a special ability to delight readers with the peculiarities, quirks, and downright weirdnesses of US American speech, an ability that was wonderfully reminiscent of another beloved language observer from the nation's "Show Me State"—Samuel Langhorne Clemens, AKA "Mark Twain". A natural-born storyteller, Metcalf was also a favorite interviewee for journalists at home and abroad. From the *New York Times Magazine*, the *Christian Science Monitor*, *National Public Radio* in the USA to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in Australia and the *Guardian* in the UK, he was frequently asked to explain the vicissitudes of the English language. As Dr. Grant Barret of the American Dialect Society reflected: "Among his lasting impacts [...] was setting an example of openness in welcoming newcomers to linguistics and sociolinguistics, school teachers, or fellow scholars" (American Dialect Society 2022).

Metcalf's profound understanding of the intricacies of the English language also made him a valued forensic linguistic consultant for attorneys and members of the law enforcement community. The range of forensic linguistic cases he took on was, not surprisingly perhaps, impressive. Over the years, he served as an expert forensic witness on disputes concerning trademark and copyright law, legal contracts, libel, and plagiarism. He was also a long-time member of the International Association of Forensic Linguistics, one of the world's largest scholarly societies devoted to the research and application of linguistic data for forensic evidence. For most members of the ANS, however, Professor Metcalf will be most remembered for his incredible history of service to our own organization as well as our many sister and allied societies (e.g.,

American Dialect Society, the Dictionary Society of North America, the Modern Language Association, and the American Council of Learned Societies).

On February 24, 2022, Professor Allan Metcalf passed away in Jacksonville, Florida, at the age of 81. The American Name Society expresses its deepest condolences to his family and friends for their loss and extends its sincere gratitude for Professor Metcalf's many decades of invaluable service to the American Name Society. He will be truly missed as a respected scholar, an inspirational teacher, a talented writer, and a forever friend.

Endnotes

¹ A full listing of the words of year can be found on the American Dialect Society website: <https://www.americandialect.org/woty>

² Unless otherwise indicated, the biographical details reported here were taken from Professor Metcalf's official website: <http://www.allanmetcalf.net/>

³ Quote taken from Allan Metcalf's personal LinkedIn page: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/allan-metcalf-7a10b64a/>

⁴ For a review of this work, see Robbins (2021).

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