

# In Memoriam

THOMAS PYLES (1905–1980)

On 27 January 1948, Elliott V. K. Dobbie, then Managing Editor for *American Speech*, wrote to an Oklahoman colleague: “In our next issue we shall have an article on Oklahoma given names, by Thomas Pyles, which I think will please you. Pyles will probably be tarred and feathered and chased out of the state—but the article is worth it” (from the correspondence file of *American Speech*). The article Dobbie referred to was “Onomastic Individualism in Oklahoma,” published in the last issue of *American Speech* for the year 1947 (even then worthy scholarly journals were not always coming out quite on time).

When the article was published, Pyles was finishing a four-year association with the University of Oklahoma and was preparing to move to the University of Florida, where he would spend the next seventeen years. There is no evidence that he was retributively chased out of Oklahoma for publishing the article, much less tarred and feathered in the process, but Dobbie’s admiration for the essay has been widely shared. Whether Pyles himself would have been equally equanimous at the prospect of paying for the publication of truth with such corporal insult is moot—but it would have been characteristic of him to be so.

When he went to Florida in 1948, Pyles did not mend his ways. In a few years, he wrote another essay in the same vein as the portentously tarbrushed article: “Bible Belt Onomastics; or, Some Curiosities of Antipedobaptist Nomenclature,” published in *Names* 7 (1959): 84–100. Both articles deal with the wonders of given names in the American South, where the exuberance of onomastic imagination has been untamed by social propriety or religious tradition. The article in *Names* ends with a rollicking eleven-stanza poem consisting entirely of attested given names arranged in riming couplets of trochaic tetrameter. A typical stanza is the following:

Leos, Cubie, Dicie, Metha,  
Shi, Revonie, Sag, Uretha;

Arsie, Kissie, Bussie, Missie,  
Yada, Telka, Clell, Elissie.

Pyles was fascinated by the freedom which inland Southerners, even those of undeniably high culture and social position, exercise in the naming of their offspring. He was also intrigued by the explanation for that freedom, so unlike the onomastic habits of his own Maryland, which—although South—was not so South as all that. Thus, beneath the hijinks and fun of his two articles on naming practices in the South, lies a serious concern with the social and historical concomitants of name-giving.

Pyle's interest in onomastics was not limited to given names. He was also intrigued by humankind's fascination with titles. Even before the article on Oklahoma names, he had published a short piece in *MLN* on "Dan Chaucer" and the role of that expression in altering the use of the ancient title *dan*, that is, *dominus*. Later he was to examine in another high-spirited article the treatment accorded "British Titles of Nobility and Honor in American English." These four onomastic essays were gathered together, with others on various aspects of the English language, in a collection of his writings, *Thomas Pyles: Selected Essays on English Usage*, published by the University Presses of Florida in 1979.

Although Pyles is best remembered for his work on American English and the history of the English language, as embodied especially in his books *Words and Ways of American English* (1952) and *The Origins and Developments of the English Language* (1964, 1971), members of the American Name Society will remember him for his devotion to name study. In addition to writing his entertaining and perceptive essays on the subject, he served on the Board of Managers of the Society from 1960 to 1963. The American Name Society and its work were always close to his heart.

Thomas Pyles died on 25 April 1980, after a prolonged illness that had interfered with his writing but did not prevent him from continuing to observe the English language and the onomastic vagaries of its speakers. It is easy to picture Tom in that heaven world whither all good onomatologists go. He is doubtless there observing the naming of angels and contemplating what an essay he might write on that subject. But what is the celestial equivalent of tar and feathers?

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