

'An engaging scholarly spirit': Allen Walker Read

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THE RENOWNED American linguist and lexicographer Allen Walker Read, who was born on June 2, 1906, died in October 2002. A universally respected academic lexicographer, he was impressive in his display of knowledge and his readiness to build bridges between the United Kingdom and the United States. Those who met him at conferences admired the authority, modesty and wit with which he spoke on competing lexicographic traditions – sometimes referred to as 'dictionary wars'.

Born in Winnebago, Minnesota, he studied at two universities in Iowa, at the University of Missouri, at Oxford (as a Rhodes scholar 1928–31), and at the University of Chicago, where William Craigie, an editor of the *Oxford English Dictionary*, invited him to assist with the compilation of the *Dictionary of American English* (between 1932 and 1938). A Guggenheim fellowship allowed Read to work at the British Museum in London (1938–41), where he started a *Dictionary of Briticisms*. During World War II, he was asked to compile a dictionary of military terms and to do linguistic research for the US army.

Read started his academic career at Missouri in 1926, continued in the 1930s at Chicago, and from 1945 to his retirement in 1974 held a professorship at Columbia University in New York. From there he could take a critical stance on usage and dictionaries, defending what he thought was good (such as Philip Gove's edition of *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* 1961), but also showing up shoddy workmanship in some other compilations.

Throughout his career, he was exceedingly curious about words: where they come from (etymology), what they mean (semantics), how they are formed (lexicology), how they are treated in dictionaries (lexicography), how they relate to place names (onomastics), and how they vary from one social and regional variety to another (sociolinguistics, dialectology). More than that, he wanted to know (and

share this knowledge with others) about how real human beings use words in real situations for various purposes: to amuse themselves (with graffiti), to be technical and informal (using jargon and slang), to offend (by breaking social taboos) and to mollify (through using euphemisms). Examples of vocabulary he investigated include expressions like *O.K.* and *the almighty Dollar*, words like *blizzard*, and names like *Dixie*, *Rocky Mountains* and *Podunk*.

He published over 300 papers, 26 of which have been collected in *America: Naming the Country and Its People* (2001) and a further 20 in *Milestones in the History of English in America* (2002). Read also edited the journal *American Speech*, contributed the informative article on 'Dictionary' to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and acted as a consultant to a number of American dictionaries, such as Funk & Wagnall's, the *American College Dictionary*, and *Random House*. His incomplete *Dictionary of Briticisms* is being completed and prepared for publication by John Algeo.

Read was a founding member (and later President) of the Dictionary Society of North America (DSNA), President of the Linguistic Association of Canada and the United States, and President of the American Dialect Society and of the New York Society of General Semantics.

Among the numerous honours conveyed on Read are the title 'DSNA Fellow' (one of four awarded by the society in 1983), an honorary Ph.D. from the University of Oxford, and listings in reference works such as the *Biographical Dictionary of the Phonetic Sciences* (1977), the *Oxford Companion to the English Language* (1992) and the *Kenkyusha Biographical Dictionary of English Linguistics and Philology* (1995).

He had a long and full life. He never shied away from controversial subjects, but dealt with them in an engaging scholarly spirit. He was truly one of the forerunners of what we

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63

now call 'dictionary research' or 'metalexigraphy', and what he said in his obituary of fellow lexicographer Clarence Barnhart is equally valid of him: "(He) will always be a renowned figure in lexicography and applied linguistics

and will be regarded affectionately by his wide circle of friends."

Charlotte Schuchardt, Allen Walker Read's wife since 1953, died in July 2002. He died three months later, on October 16, aged 96. ■
