SSS Newsletter April 1991 [N1]

from Chris Upward (Membership Secretary & Editor)

Founded in 1908.
Past Presidents: Walter Skeet, Gilbert Murray, Daniel Jones, Sir James Pitman, John Downing
President: Dr. Donald G. Scragg.
Vice-Presidents: Professor D. Abercrombie, Lord Simon of Glaisdale

Contents

Meetings

For your diary: dates of Society meetings in 1991 are as follows:
13 April, 27 April (AGM), 13 July, 26 October.

Meetings are normally held on Saturday mornings. All members and interested non-members are welcome to attend and join in discussions. The committee hopes to see new members at meetings and that some will wish to participate actively in the Society's work.

Full details of committee meetings are sent out by the Secretary to committee members in the first instance, and to other members of the Society on request. Why not give him a ring?

1991 Subscriptions

Subscriptions for 1991 are now due. Members who have not yet paid should send £10, US$20, or equivalent, with cheques etc made out to the Simplified Spelling Society. In addition to the enclosed volume, other items in prospect for members in 1991 include full documentation for Cut Spelling *(Handbook, Learner's Guide, Dictionary),* a pamphlet on the typology of spelling reforms from Bob Brown, and occasional *Newsletters.*

[Chris Upward: see **Journals**, **Newsletters**, **Pamflet**, **Leaflets**, **Media**, **Book and Papers**.]

1. Androcles and the Lion, Shaw Alphabet edition

We are pleased to distribute to members the enclosed not easily obtainable volume. The Society has received the remaining copies of the original printing from the Society of Authors, which has been handling the Shaw estate. We have a further 100 or so copies in stock, and would be glad of suggestions for worthy recipients.

What significance has the Shaw alphabet today? Is it just a historical curiosity, representing, with its rejection of the Roman alphabet, perhaps the most extreme (and hence impractical?) approach to English spelling reform? The circumstances of its creation (see Bob Brown's article below) are certainly of historical interest, and we must admire the elegance and consistency of its design. Many readers will no doubt find it repays careful study.

The insights it can give go beyond the historical and the linguistic. A difficulty faced by those who study the psychology of acquiring literacy skills is that, as adults, we can only observe the thought processes of the learner from the outside: we note the progress and the setbacks, and try thus indirectly to deduce what is going on in learners' minds. However, if we take the trouble to master the Shaw alphabet, we can observe ourselves trying to cope with some of the problems that face beginner. Compared with beginners, though, we have an important advantage: we can already read and write (using a different system), so are only transferring our skills from the Roman to the Shaw alphabet. We are not acquiring literacy skills for the first time.

Attempting to master the Shaw alphabet is an interesting task. Most of the symbols are as unfamiliar as the letters of the Roman alphabet are to the child learner, so we first have to memorize their forms. Secondly, we have to memorize the sound-symbol correspondences. And thirdly, we have to practise reading and writing the system until it becomes familiar and its use ultimately automatic. All that, most of us will probably discover, is quite demanding, even as literate adults — although the spelling of individual words is scrupulously regular. Pity therefore the initial learner of conventional English spelling, who has no prior literacy skills at all and at the same time has to come to terms with a quite unpredictable use of symbols.

Psychologists may like to try out the Shaw alphabet as an experimental resource: with articulate, self-aware adult subjects, they can follow some of the same stages that child learners have to pass through en route to literacy in English.

[Bob Brown: see **Journals**, **Newsletters**, **Pamphlet13**, **PV1**]

2. The Shaw Alphabet Competition — Some Background
by Bob Brown, Secretary, Simplified Spelling Society

In 1958 a public competition was held to select a new alphabet for the English language, funded from the estate of George Bernard Shaw who had died eight years previously. Over 450 designs were submitted and a prize of £500 was shared between four entries judged of outstanding merit. It was decided, wisely, not to try to combine such disparate designs. One of them, by the British typographer Kingsley Read, was selected — with minor adjustments — to be the final outcome. In 1962 Penguin Books published, and distributed free to many libraries worldwide, a parallel-text edition of *Androcles & the Lion* using Read's design, again funded from the Shaw estate. Some typewriters were made for the new alphabet, and Read published a duplicated magazine for enthusiasts until he died in 1975. Since then, little has been heard of this brave attempt to revolutionise the way we write.

Such are the bare facts of the Shaw Alphabet Competition, as it has come to be known. You can read more detail in the introductory and explanatory material in the enclosed copy. Other relatively accessible public accounts can be found in Haas (1969) and Tauber (1965). This brief article aims to sketch in a little background not addressed in those public sources, and is mostly taken from research material for a book-in-progress.

During most of his long life Shaw showed strong interest in improving the efficiency of the tool with which he earned his living — the English language. As early as 1901 he was supporting in the Press calls for spelling reforms of the type put forward by his "friend William Archer", who was a leading light in the Simplified Spelling Society and principal author of the scheme later entitled *New Spelling.* A few years later his comments on President Theodore Roosevelt's American reforms of 1906 were characteristically lively! His best-known venture, however, which he called "an advertisement for the science of phonetics", was the play *Pygmalion.* He experimented with various ways to represent Eliza Doolitttle's cockney accent, between the first edition in 1912 and the latest in 1942. Sometime in this period Shaw came to the radical view that digraphic schemes like *New Spelling,* or proposals using diacritics or extra letters, just would not do. The problem was the alphabet. Why not scrap it and start afresh with one designed for the task?

By 1944 he was telling the world that his fortune would, after his death, be used to promote a completely new alphabet. But it was characteristic of the man that he had tantalised others with the prospect of funding before finally deciding on the new-alphabet bequest. One of the more famous of these was CK Ogden, whose Basic English received massive exposure during the 1930s as a simplified form of the language, for teaching and international communication. Ogden did not envisage changing spelling at all — he contended that, with only 850 items to worry about, a learner could memorise the pronunciation and spelling at the same time as the meaning. It is clear from correspondence between these men that Shaw had as late as 1940 led Ogden to believe his project was favoured. So Ogden was naturally surprised — actually 'aghast' might be a better description — to hear early in 1944 that the great man had changed his mind, in favour of a new alphabet scheme. It is interesting to speculate what might have changed that mind.

In January 1942 a typography expert from Sutton Coldfield called Kingsley Read wrote to Shaw about some of the ideas for phonetic writing the latter had mentioned in his preface to RA Wilson's *The Miraculous Birth of Language* (1941). Read was educated as a designer and was for some years a partner in a toy-making business before starting his own company as a lettering expert: he supplied everything from neon- and shop-signs to sign-writing and calligraphy. As a hobby he had been studying phonetics and experimenting with alternative scripts for many years.

A friendly correspondence with Shaw ensued and in the summer of 1943 Read was ready (and bold enough) to send a "manual" to Shaw setting out a new alphabet and its detailed rationale. Shaw was impressed. "This is far and away the best alphabet with the best head at the back of it that has yet come my way" he wrote in a (no doubt highly galling) note to Ogden. It seems to have been early in 1944 that Shaw changed his Will away from Ogden towards a new alphabet trust. He praised Read directly, and promptly introduced him to Sir James (then Mr IJ) Pitman.

Pitman was an MP and head of the family publishing company founded by his grandfather. He was also a lifelong supporter of spelling reform, and at that time an officer of the Simplified Spelling Society. Shaw seems to have seen him as a man-of-action in this field, even going so far as to write to him, following the changing of the Will "and so I wash my hands of the business and leave the field open to you to do the job with a grant-in-aid under the Shaw bequest if you care to." Following the introduction, an active collaboration and friendship ensued, with Pitman offering Read much advice and practical support over the years. In 1946 we find Read sending Shaw a new and improved version of his manual following discussion with Pitman.

As is often the case with complex bequests, immediately after Shaw's demise in 1950 a bitter dispute arose over the Will. The estate had been swollen with income from the musical adaptation of *Pygmalion* as *My Fair Lady,* and the famous film version which followed that. A number of residuary legatees, led by the British Museum, challenged the validity of the alphabet trust that the Will established ahead of them in the queue for funds. The legal wranglings continued over several years, with the contesters finally winning on a legal technicality, despite Shaw's wishes being clear enough.

In no small measure due to Pitman's efforts, a sum of money was set aside, however, to fund an alphabet competition and in 1958 the Public Trustee, as executor, eventually published an advertisement inviting responses.

Due to its origin in the *cause celebre* of the Shaw Will, and its natural appeal to newspaper editors as an eccentric news-item, the competition received wide coverage in many countries. As a result the Public Trustee was astonished to receive a total of 467 submissions from all over the world. A proportion of them were from children, or were ill-informed, or were just plain dotty, but, after discarding these, there was still a large number of serious designs. The panel of judges included Sir James Pitman and Peter MacCarthy, lecturer in phonetics at Leeds University.
Because of the difficulty in assessing the relative merits of very disparate designs, it was decided to compromise and split the prize between four entrants, each judged best in one of four main styles of alphabet. One winner was a Canadian housewife, two were British armchair alphabet-designers and the fourth was Kingsley Read. As the Public Trustee wanted to publish a Shaw play and distribute 13,000 copies to libraries worldwide, the problem was now to distil a single alphabet from the four.

Quite correctly, it was decided not to attempt to merge such different designs and it seems to have been left to Pitman to choose which one should be the basis for the final version. On 19th July 1960 the Trustee finally wrote to Kingsley Read: "Mr Pitman informs me that he recommends that you should provide the final design ... [and I therefore] inform you that I have accepted his advice." Peter MacCarthy then had the unenviable and delicate task of persuading the other winners that their designs would go no further, and the more congenial job of working with Read to polish his submission into the final form you see in the book, Both Read and MacCarthy were much involved during the next two years in the technical challenges of making the transliteration of *Androcles* and seeing the book through the press.

So Shaw's wishes were finally realised, 12 years after his death, and the effect on English orthography was ... a predictable zero. Besides a small duplicated magazine called *ShawScript* that Read put out for a few years after the publication of *Androcles,* no other publication has ever used the alphabet to this day. But the whole exercise was in its way a triumph of scholarship and design — the alphabet *does* map very well onto English phonetics, and its design is efficient and pleasing — so maybe its time will come one day, for some limited purpose anyway. Shaw's conviction that such an alphabet would quickly gain support through its inherent merits, and become widely adopted, seems as fanciful today as ever.

References

Haas, W (ed.) (1969) *Alphabets for English* Manchester: Univ. Press
Tauber, A (ed.) (1965) *Shaw on Language* London: Peter Owen

3. A role for dictionaries in spelling-reform: a French example
by Chris Upward

Spelling reformers have imagined a number of scenarios for the implementation of spelling reform in English. They have imagined the creation of an Academy with the power to decree a reform; and they have imagined voluntary schemes so attractive that individuals world-wide would spontaneously adopt them; or schemes that governments would impose on their education systems; or schemes that commercial enterprises would leap at for commercial profit. While these scenarios may seem in varying degrees utopian, it is worth considering in particular those that have operated in other languages.

Which brings us to a possible role for dictionaries as agents of reform. People get their spellings from reference books such as dictionaries, and if dictionaries change their recommended spellings, so in due course will people — or so the expectation goes. The English-speaking world has no shortage of dictionaries, ranging from the most compendious of all, the *OED, to Webster* in America (whose first edition in 1828 actually makes it a century older even than the first full edition of the OED), and the more recent *Macquarie* in Australia, to say nothing of the competing single-volume dictionaries that emanate from the various publishers especially in the UK and USA. The alternative spellings which these dictionaries list — and so at least implicitly recommend — are symptomatic of the disorder of English spelling generally.

That is why the little book brought out in 1988 by the Conseil International de la Langue Française entitled *Pour l'Harmonisation Orthographique des Dictionnaires* should be of particular interest. Founded in 1967, the Conseil was in 1968 asked by the French Ministry of Education to 'normalize' the spelling of French, a task which it soon realized was beyond its powers at that time. In 1980 therefore it set itself the more modest and realistic aim of trying to co-ordinate the spelling policies of the various dictionaries.

The first step was agreement by lexicographers from the different dictionary-publishers and other interested parties to meet regularly and study the discrepancies between the spellings found in dictionaries, in order to produce a list of agreed forms. Although the representatives of France were numerically dominant in the group, both French-speaking Canada and Belgium were represented, and participants included academics, educationists, a newspaper proof-reader, and a translator with a special interest in terminology, as well a dozen or so lexicographers.

Some 50 meetings were spent surveying the discrepancies found in nearly a dozen different dictionaries, and a list compiled of acceptable alternative forms (eventually published in the volume now under discussion). Often a single form was recommended as 'correct', such variations as were found in the dictionaries having been rejected. But often a preferred form would be shown in plain bold type, with other spellings or pronunciations given in italics as acceptable. Some alternative spellings were noted as out-dated or representing a different pronunciation or form of a word. None of the forms published in the list was to be considered 'wrong'.

The following principles were adopted in compiling the list (here summarized from the preface of the book):

1 *Listing conventions.* Plain bold for preferred forms, bold italics for acceptable alternatives. A good example is **kayak** (the preferred form), with ***kayac*** as an acceptable alternative; some dictionaries had also listed forms such as *cayac, cayak,* but these were not recommended and therefore omitted from the published list.

2 The main *criteria for preference* were usage and analogy, especially sets of parallel spellings. Etymology was occasionally a factor, as was reliable indication of pronunciation. Alternative pronunciations were taken to justify alternative spellings in some cases; thus both **paiement, pavement** were given as acceptable. When none of the above criteria was decisive, a simpler form was shown as preferred, e.g. **aruspice**, ***haruspice.***

3 *Compound words* have always caused uncertainty in French, with the three possibilities of separation, hyphenation, and joining as single-word forms ('agglutination'). The Conseil followed common usage in most cases, though trying to establish generally applicable rules and patterns that could apply to future word-formations; in practice this meant a preference for single-word forms where possible, which have the advantage of clarifying the plural form Oust add <s> to the end). Use of the hyphen could sometimes be determined by meaning. Inflection of compound words according to gender and number was also analysed and some regularizations proposed.

4 *Abbreviations* should add <-s> to form their plurals in the normal way.

5 *Foreign words.* Several potentially conflicting criteria were applied here: usage, simplicity, spelling in language of origin, indication of pronunciation, familiar French spelling patterns.

6 *Recent decisions of the Acadamie française. In* 1975 the Académie proposed some alternative spellings, involving accents and doubled consonants, but in 1987 rescinded almost all its recommendations. The Conseil therefore did not generally include in its list the new forms suggested by the Académie in 1975.

We append a sample of the Conseil's listing below.
The implications of the Conseil's work should clearly be considered for English. What potential is there for collaboration of lexicographers etc in the English-speaking world? They would certainly have plenty to talk about. We may at least note the meetings of the Australian Style Council in 1986 and 1988, as reported by Valerie Yule in the *Journal of the Simplified Spelling Society,* 1988/1, pp.28–30 and 1989/1, p.31. The Simplified Spelling Society may well wish to cite the above example of international co-ordination between French dictionaries in its own campaigns in the future.

abadir, on écrit aussi *abbadir.*
abatage : V. abattage.
abatda : V. abattée.
abatis : V. abattis.
abat-son (un), des abat-sons : V. p. 9.
abattage, on a écrit *abatage.*
abattée, an a écrit abatée.
abattis, on a écrit *abatis.*
abbadir : V. abadir.
abrasax : V. abraxas.
abraxas, on trouve parfois *abrasax.*
abrègement, uns seule forme.
abside (architecture), une seule **forme.**
accon, on écrit aussi ***acon.***
acertainer, une seule forme.
achaine : V. akène.
achar : V. achard.
achard, on écrit aussi *achar.*
achène : V. akène.
achopper, une seule forme.
acon : V. accon.
acuponcture, on écrit aussi *acupuncture.*
acupuncture : V. acuponcturs.
dieu vat !, on trouve de nombreuses autres graphies avec ou sans *t*, avec ou sans traits d'union, *adieu* étant parfois en un mot.

4. Open Letter to the DES

Such have been the political and educational controversies surrounding spelling standards in British schools in the past year or two that the Society decided it should formally present its views to the Government. On 25 March 1991 it addressed the following letter to the Secretary of State for Education and Science in London.

Dear Secretary of State

The Simplified Spelling Society welcomes the Government's concern for spelling standards and especially its recognition of the importance of phonics.

However, although phonics is necessary for the acquisition of literacy skills, it is far from being a panacea for the fundamental difficulties of English spelling. As the DES's Cox Report acknowledged in 1989 (§17.33), English spelling is too unsystematic for many learners to master properly. Examiners' unwillingness to penalize spelling mistakes in most subject examinations is a further symptom of a profoundly intractable problem.

If we are to require correct spellings (as we should), we must ensure they can in fact be learnt by most pupils. This means modernizing (i.e. simplifying and regularizing) English spelling, as it has not been modernized for centuries, though most other languages have modernized theirs since 1900. It is because our systems of currency and measurement were inconveniently antiquated that we decimalized the pound and moved towards metric weights and measures. Similarly, we need to stop wasting pupils' time with an even more antiquated system of writing, and redirect their time and energy to the acquisition of substantive knowledge, understanding and skills.

We will give just two examples of the educational handicap imposed by the irregularity of English spelling:
Different endings have to be learnt for rhyming words, as when *assistant, insistent, persistent, resistant* vary arbitrarily between <-ant> and <-ent>. French children learn that these words all end in <-ant>, and German children that they all end in <-ent>.

Our children have to learn arbitrary patterns of consonant doubling, as when *abridge* has one <b>, but the related *abbreviate* has two. French children learn single <b> for both *abréger and abréviation ,* while Spanish children easily learn that consonants in their language are rarely doubled at all (e.g. *acomodación).*

Not merely do our children face countless examples of such confusion in English, but their confusion is worse confounded when they learn foreign languages.

Even if they learn that *dependant /dependent* have different meanings, such learning is undermined when they meet French *dépendant* for English *dependent.* And learning Spanish *acomodación* makes it even harder to remember which consonants are doubled in English *accommodation.*

The Government's concern to raise educational standards needs to address not just the best methods of teaching literacy, but the problems of English spelling itself, which hold all our children back, including the most able, but especially the less able. However it is not only British children who suffer: the world as a whole looks above all to the UK, the original source of the English language, for initiatives in this field. If appropriate steps are taken, the status of English will be enhanced to the benefit of the world in general, but of the UK more than anywhere else.

The Simplified Spelling Society (founded 1908) has developed an expertise which recognizes the difficulties of modernization (taking public acceptability and the need for continuity into account), but nevertheless sees
it as both necessary and feasible. At this stage, we would merely ask the Government to accept in principle that

- sooner or later all writing systems become out of date
- the current literacy problems of English arise from the neglect of English spelling over many centuries
- it is time to undertake some judicious modernization.

We would be grateful for an opportunity to discuss the practical implications of this diagnosis with you.

A copy of this letter is being sent to the Press Association, to the *Daily Telegraph, Guardian, Independent and Times,* and to members of the Simplified Spelling Society.

Yours sincerely
Christopher Upward, Editor.
Christopher Jolly, Chairman.
Robert Brown, Secretary.

5. Publications available to members [no longer available]

1. AIROE: Leaflet on the work of the Society's opposite number in France, the Association pour l'information et la recherche sur les orthographes et les systèmes d'écriture.

2. Adam BROWN *Homophones and Homographs in Thai, and their Implications,* pp. 117, Hamburg: Helmut Buske Verlag, 1988. An illuminating and detailed account of some salient features of a writing system not based on the Roman alphabet.

3. Harry LINDGREN *Spelling Reform — A New Approach,* pp. 152, Sydney: Alpha Books, 1969. Exceptionally lively (not to say polemical) plea for English spelling reform, including some wickedly witty cartoons, leading up to a proposal for a multi-stage reform, of which the first stage is SR1 (=short /E/ always to be spelt <e>). Two spelling systems of striking originality (Phonetic A & B, the latter using numerous diacritics) are then suggested as long-term possibilities.

4. James PITMAN & John St John *Alphabets and Reading — the Initial Teaching Alphabet,* pp.349, London: Sir Isaac Pitman & Sons Ltd, 1969. The first third of this substantial book discusses the psychology of reading (and especially reading failure) and gives one of the fullest available accounts of the evolution of English spelling and ideas for its reform; the rest then describes the evolution of and experience with the i.t.a.

5. Arnold RUPERT *School with less pain,* 12 page pamphlet on a system for reforming English spelling by adding 14/15 extra letters to the alphabet.