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THE ENGLISH ACADEMY OF SOUTHERN AFRICA

A commentary by the President,
GWENETH KNOWLES-WILLIAMS

THE "English Academy of Southern Africa" had its Inaugural Meeting in July, 1961 at the University of the Witwatersrand. The meeting took the form of a three-day conference, the major part of which was devoted to addresses to which the public were invited. The theme of the conference was "Falling standards in English— Need for an English Academy in Southern Africa", and the addresses were published in "Symposium, 1961". The establishment of the Academy aroused a good deal of public interest. Meetings were well attended and the press and radio were generous in the publicity which they gave to the various speakers.

There is not, I am sure, any need for me to reiterate all the arguments to convince people of the importance of arresting the decline in the standard of English in Southern Africa. Some of these have been a good deal ventilated recently. It is, I imagine, generally agreed that the English language is an instrument of incalculable value to us— as an international means of communication and a source of necessary knowledge, and as a window on the outside world through which we are to a considerable extent preserved from cultural isolation and through which we get a large part of our entertainment and much of our intellectual stimulation. Professor Jeffares, at the end of his address on "The Importance of English as a World Language" at our Inaugural Conference last year, emphasised one aspect of its importance which is, perhaps, not sufficiently realised—the value to any country which is able to share it of the great wealth of English literature. "Let us not forget," he said, "that learning this language is a first step to discovering the riches of its literature, and literature is the highest because the most deliberate, careful, thoughtful and imaginative form of communication known to man: it is, as Thucydides put it, a possession for ever. We should then regard the learning of English not only as a means to some materialistic end, but as a key to further educational processes. These are the processes by which the people, ALL the people who make up different nations, can be enabled to speak to each other. And speaking is better than shooting."

Implicit in this statement by Professor Jeffares, but requiring to be made explicit because it is so often overlooked, is the close relationship between ugly and inaccurate language and foolish thinking— a subject on which George Orwell writes in one of his essays. Orwell denies the widespread "half-conscious belief that language is a natural growth and not an instrument which we shape for our own purposes", and suggests that the bad language habits which are spreading all over the world "can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble". The passage is worth quoting in full because it is necessary that we should bear in mind a number of sound reasons why we should spend time and money on an "Academy of English", why we should be convinced that " the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers". Orwell is speaking of the decline of English in England and America, but what he says applies to all countries where English is used.

"Now it is clear that the decline of a language

The English Academy was founded in 1961 *to "maintain and propagate in Southern Africa the best standards of English reading, writing and speech." Members of the Academy elected as their first President, Dr. G. Knowles-Williams, an able and alert-minded university woman, to whose energy and resourcefulness the Academy largely owed its foundation.*

Symposium was privileged in 1961 *to be able to print on behalf of the Academy the speeches made at the Inaugural Meeting, when distinguished scholars from South Africa, Rhodesia and Overseas gathered for the occasion. Until the Academy has its own Journal, Symposium will be glad to offer the hospitality of its pages.*

Dr. G. Knowles-Williams's report will be read with interest by all who are concerned with English standards in Southern Africa.

must ultimately have political and economic causes; it is not due simply to the bad influence of this or that individual writer. But an effect can become a cause, reinforcing the original cause and producing the same effect in an intensified form and so on indefinitely. A man may take to drink because he feels himself to be a failure, and then fail all the more completely because he drinks. It is rather the same thing that is happening to the English language. It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. If one gets rid of these habits one can think more clearly, and to think clearly is a necessary first step towards political regeneration so that the fight against bad English is not frivolous and is not the exclusive concern of professional writers."

If we are convinced, as Orwell says, that we can, by taking trouble, improve English usage and by so doing learn to think more clearly at a time when clear thinking is so urgently necessary, then the Academy offers a convenient focus for our endeavours, another starting point for a campaign for better English. I say "another" starting point because I do not wish to minimise or ignore the good work which is being done by other educational and cultural societies in this field. It is indeed specifically suggested in the Draft Constitution of the Academy that it should co-operate with existing societies where aims overlap, in order to avoid duplication and waste of time and effort. The Academy keeps in close touch with the South African Council for English Education (S.A.C.E.E. indeed assisted in the establishment of the Academy). Although the aims of these two bodies are so similar, there is room for both, if they continue to co-operate and share projects, for there are things that one can do and the other cannot.

Co-operation with other associations, such as P.E.N. and Children's Theatre, is most desirable and has indeed already been achieved. I attended a conference of various cultural bodies and Associations (ten were represented) which was called by P.E.N. for the purpose of finding some means of "nursing resources and sharing information". At the Conference a LIAISON BODY was appointed with representatives from P.E.N., the S.A. Society of Journalists and the Academy with instructions to make arrangements for the exchange of information among cultural bodies. A project to be jointly undertaken by P.E.N. and the Academy is already under way and another in which the Academy is collaborating with Children's Theatre, Johannesburg, the University Players of the Witwatersrand University, students from the College of Education and the English Department of the University.

The Academy made a good start at its Inaugural Meeting. The problem which faces the Council and the Executive Committee is to maintain momentum —to sustain public interest generated by the Inaugural Meeting and to initiate projects which will contribute to the implementing in a practical way of the general aim of the Academy. This general aim is defined in the Draft Constitution as being "to maintain and propagate in Southern Africa the best standards of English reading, writing and speech". The Constitution lists various kinds of activities which the Academy might undertake to further this general aim, and during the eight months since the Inaugural Meeting, the Council and the Executive Committee have been engaged in initiating, through sub-committees, various projects which, in their opinion, will in time and by the devoted efforts of the Academicians and the support of the public, have the desired effects.

The task which the Academy has set itself is not an easy one but is, as I have emphasised, of vital importance. The conviction of its importance must sustain us through our initial difficulties. For no spectacular results can be expected from what is in fact a long term cultural and education movement which must begin its work circumspectly and gradually consolidate itself into an instrument which is demonstrably effective. Projects must at this stage be decided on tentatively and a good deal of exploratory work must be done before considerable sums of money can be collected and justifiably spent on them. This exploratory work must be undertaken by sub-committees with the necessary knowledge and experience and with a fund of enthusiasm to carry them over unsuspected obstacles, and to enable them to find time amid their own, often heavy, personal commitments to attend meetings and initiate programmes. The work of the Academy must in fact be shared out so that the few are not overworked and thus unable to do anything properly. The Membership of the Academy needs, therefore, to be increased and spread more widely to provide a sufficient reservoir of talent and willingness to serve, so that sub-committees may be simultaneously working on a number of different projects. The building up of membership and the establishment of sub-committees have been the chief tasks of the Council and the Executive Committee since their election. As the Members of Council are dispersed all over the Republic and even Rhodesia and Basutoland, it will not be possible for the Council to meet very often; and the burden of work will have to be shouldered mainly by the Executive Committee. All members of the Executive Committee, except one (who is in Cape Town) are at present drawn from

the Johannesburg/Pretoria area as it is essential that they should be in a position to attend meetings without having to travel long distances. As membership increases, however, the centre of gravity may of course shift elsewhere, but the initial spadework is being done, and various pilot schemes explored, of necessity, in a comparatively restricted area.

A brochure has just been published explaining the reasons for the establishment of an English Academy in Southern Africa and the conditions of Membership, giving the names of members and office bearers, and reporting progress since the Inaugural Meeting. The introduction to this brochure was written by a Council Member, Professor Norman Mackenzie of the University of Rhodesia and Nyasaland; and the progress report was compiled by the President, Dr. G. Knowles-Williams and the Honorary Secretary Mr. V. H. Osborn (Pretoria members) with suggestions from other members of the Executive Committee (Professor Duminy of Cape Town, Professor Partridge, Mr. Whitmore Richards and Mr. Brian Rose, all of Johannesburg). It is hoped that when this Brochure is widely disseminated, there will be more public understanding of the Academy and its activities, an increase in effective membership and more financial support. For the readers of *Symposium* who may not see this brochure I offer now a progress report under several different headings.

The Institution of Examinations of Proficiency in English

Among the methods of implementing the general aim of the Academy included in the Draft Constitution is the institution of examinations of proficiency in English. The founders of the Academy had this project in mind from the beginning because they were of the opinion that public examinations in English were not in fact a satisfactory yardstick of ability and they thought the public might welcome a kind of English "Taalbond" examination as an additional certificate of proficiency which would be a useful guide to employers in making appointments and a stimulus to employees to improve their English. It was decided to try out a pilot scheme, not, however, in the academic field but in the field of commerce and industry. It would clearly be unwise to rush into a project of this kind without considering carefully whether employers and employees would be willing to support it, and if there was support for it, decisions as to the type of tests to be applied and the standard expected would require a good deal of thought. A sub-committee, some of the members of which are people experienced in the procedures of examining, some with special knowledge of the language requirements in certain fields of commerce and industry, has been appointed and has faced initial difficulties and unexpected "snags". The Committee is at present exploring the possibility of trying out a specific test, with the co-operation of a firm which employs a large number of workers who need in their work a considerable degree of proficiency in using English.

A Festival of Classical English Drama

The Academy is anxious to improve the standard of acting and production of English plays in Southern Africa and to give the public opportunities of seeing first-class productions of classical English drama. A sub-committee has therefore been appointed to consider ways of achieving this aim. The Committee began by considering the advisability of instituting an amateur play festival with Academy Awards for competing societies. As, however, various play festivals are already in existence, sponsored by other bodies, and over-lapping in activities of this kind should be avoided, the sub-committee may decide on some other project or projects to achieve its purpose. Efforts are at present being directed towards the institution of an annual Shakespeare production with a cast partly amateur, partly professional. A number of organizations are keenly interested in this proposal and a joint committee — a Shakespeare Committee — representing these organizations, under the chairmanship of Mr. P. Birkinshaw of the English Department of the Witwatersrand University, has been established with the specific purpose of putting on a first rate production of a Shakespeare play (probably a Matriculation set work) in 1963 in the Johannesburg/Pretoria area. Cape Town already has its Maynardville Company, which has been going from strength to strength for seven years and produces admirable open-air productions of Shakespeare. The Academy indeed suggested to the Maynardville Company that it should bring its highly successful production of "Much Ado About Nothing" up to the Rand/Pretoria area this August. Though the Company expressed great interest in the suggestion its directors decided for various reasons that a visit would not be possible this year.

The Promotion of Literacy Among Africans

One of the means of implementing the general aim of the Academy is the attainment in Southern Africa of widespread literacy in English. The Africans are in special need of help in the attainment of literacy in English and are exceedingly keen to learn it. A standing Committee has therefore been set up to plan a programme to promote literacy among Africans. The Committee has approached its task by analysing the language needs of a specific group,

a "sub-clerical" group whose average scholastic standard seems to be about standard 4. Some sort of incentive is needed to encourage African employees to improve their standard of English. The interest and help of employers is therefore necessary and the Committee has approached employers and found some of them very willing to help. Arrangements are now being made for a trial proficiency test to be carried out with a large sub-clerical group; and a number of other possibilities are being considered. Here is, indeed a field of endeavour where there are clearly great possibilities. To realise these a good deal of money as well as the services of people experienced in the teaching and testing of English among Africans of various levels of attainment will be necessary.

The "Thomas Pringle" Award

Here is another field where fruitful co-operation with existing associations has already been achieved. It is proposed, with the practical assistance of the S.A. Centre of P.E.N., that the Academy should make an annual award of R100 to honour the writers of the best articles in English in various categories of journalism (editorials, feature writing, reporting and criticism of literature and the fine arts). The particular category in any given year will be decided upon by the Council; and it has been agreed, because the necessary support is forthcoming from the newspapers themselves, to make an Award this year to the best editorial written in the year ending June, 1962 in a "Southern African" newspaper.

Amendment to the Draft Constitution

Constitutions of the newly-established associations always take up a great deal of time and cause those to whom the task of drafting and amendment is delegated a great many headaches. The Academy has been no exception to this rule. The nettle has, however, been firmly grasped and a sub-committee of which the secretary Mr. V. H. Osborn is a member, has revised the Draft Constitution, and in the opinion of the Executive Committee has made a very good job of what is a tedious and somewhat thankless but necessary task. In spite of the inclusion of several new clauses, the length has been reduced from 13 to 10 pages and the number of clauses from 38 to 29. This has been done by the merging and simplification of clauses and the clauses have been rearranged under headings in an orderly fashion.

Other matters out of which Academy projects may emerge, which have been raised in Council and Executive Committee meetings, are the unsatisfactory standard of English in some school text books; the possibility of sponsoring lectures and demonstration lessons on the teaching of specific English set books in Matriculation classes by suitably qualified persons; and the publication of articles on the teaching of the English syllabus in schools in Southern Africa.

Membership of the Academy

The Draft Constitution makes provision for four hundred full members. We have at present 102 Full Members and a few Associate and Corporate Members. There is, therefore, plenty of scope for the extension of our membership. The Council may elect to Full Membership any person over 25 years of age who holds a University Degree or equivalent qualification; or is a writer, editor, or publisher of merit; or who has rendered signal service in the furtherance of the objects of the Academy. Application for membership must be submitted on the prescribed form. Provision is also made for Associate Members who are entitled to attend and speak, but not to vote, at all meetings of the Academy and to receive notices and publications sent to Full Members; and for Corporate Members. Corporate Membership is intended to provide opportunity for business firms and corporations or educational institutions to support the Academy through appointed representatives. The annual subscriptions as agreed upon at present are: six rand for Full Members, two rand for Associate Members (or one rand if the member is a student); and a minimum of twenty rand for Corporate Members. The Council consists at present of twelve Full Members; but provision is made for representation of Associate and Corporate members on the Council when we have built up membership in these categories.

Since the term "Southern Africa" as used in the title "The English Academy of Southern Africa" includes, according to the Draft Constitution, the Republic of South Africa; South West Africa, the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland, Basutoland, Bechuanaland and Swaziland, membership is not restricted to Whites. It is open to all people in these territories who have the necessary qualifications and are approved by the Council. The English language is part of the cultural heritage of all Southern Africa. It knows no colour bar and its preservation in a state of good repair is the concern of everyone in this multi-racial continent.