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"Voluntary Work for the PRESERVATION OF ENGLISH in South Africa"

By V. E. HANNA

Miss V. E. Hanna needs little introduction to educationists in South Africa. As headmistress of the Jeppe High Preparatory School she played a leading role in primary education. Always active in professional matters, she was an outstanding President of the Transvaal Teachers' Association, and today carries on her work as its General Secretary. She is a valuable member of the Witwatersrand Central School Board.

THROUGHOUT history, language, being a basic means of communication, has been a rallying point for those ready for strife. This is understandable and indeed natural in a world where the first step of the conqueror has often been to attempt to destroy the culture and the language of the conquered. It is extraordinary that any victor should have persisted in this attitude in spite of the lessons that history could have taught him. The language which has been suppressed has seldom died: it has gone underground, to be preserved and fostered in resentment and bitterness, and has then gradually or explosively emerged from its hiding place either to be incorporated in the conqueror's tongue or to absorb it.

For settlers in a new land, as for a conquered people, there must always be a strong emotional tie with the mother tongue. In South Africa, in spite of the long view of the British Government, which took no strong measures to suppress the language of the Afrikaners, we have seen both sides of this story. Afrikaans became for many the symbol of the "oppressed", as well as the badge of an emergent race; English became the symbol of those whose ties were outside South Africa.

For those who can see through the fog of emotion it is obvious that these early attitudes are no longer valid, if indeed they were ever held by intelligent and balanced persons. Afrikaans no longer needs the sentimental boost of the past; English in South Africa has not for many years deserved the stigma attached to it in some quarters as being the language of the Jingoist whose pride it is to be an "uitlander" and whose thoughts are always with his far-off "Home" across the seas.

Proof of this is to be found in the activities and aims of those clubs and societies set up specifically to preserve for South Africa the English tongue and the English way of life: the Sons of England, the Victoria League, the Society of St. George, the Royal Commonwealth Society, the Royal Overseas League —names to make the ignorant think that they all exist merely to perpetuate the Jingo ideal. It is probable that in the beginning they did provide a common meeting ground for exiles who gathered to exchange nostalgic reminiscences, but the men and women of British extraction have marched into a love for the country of their adoption that will brook no denial.

Let us quote from a brochure issued by the Sons of England in 1961:

"... the principal aims and objects of the Society are benevolence to those less fortunate than ourselves, the promotion of the interest of the English language, ideals and customs, and the preservation of our literature, art and culture, together with the British way of life, which all form part of our glorious heritage. *All these we offer as a wholesome contribution to the future welfare of our South African nation.*"

It is very plain that these societies see their task as an effort to keep South Africa from losing something very rich and fine which the English-speaking South Africans ought to give their country.

In the same category come Gilbert and Sullivan Societies, the Dickens Fellowship, the Marlowe Society, and many others of a similar nature to be found in all large centres of South Africa and sometimes tucked away in the smallest outposts. Started usually by an enthusiast for a particular author, these societies have a way of picking out the characteristic which is most relevant to the growth of Western culture as we see it, and making that their greatest interest. Three of the "Aims and Objects" of the Dickens Fellowship will serve to underline my point:—

(a) to knit together in a common bond of friendship lovers of that great master of humour and pathos—*Charles Dickens.*
(b) to spread the love of humanity, which is the keynote of all his work.
(c) to take such measures as may be expedient to remedy those existing social evils, the amelioration of which would have appealed so strongly

to the heart of Charles Dickens, and to help in every possible direction the cause of the poor and the oppressed.

This interest in what the British heritage has to offer us appears too in the work of associations formed with no specific intention of fostering *English* culture. The Independent Cultural Association of Johannesburg, The Theatre Appreciation Group and the Teenagers Cultural Guild of Port Elizabeth, along with others of similar ideals, do much to focus attention on our need for contact with the great cultures of the whole world, and because of this they must perforce present to their members much that has to do with the family of English-speaking peoples.

Writers' clubs are aware of the same emphasis. The Eastern Province Writers' Association exists to encourage creative writing among its members. The English Academy is concerned with language standards. The South African Association for English Education has just conducted a competition for the best play illustrating the contribution made by the British to South Africa. The South African P.E.N. Centre is of course an offshoot of P.E.N. International. Affiliated to the International Association is the Skrywerskring, the Afrikaans version of South African P.E.N.. The English-speaking "centre" has two large and active branches in Johannesburg and Cape Town as well as members in Natal, the Orange Free State, and the Rhodesias. Membership is open to all who speak English and have published at least one book of some literary merit. To quote further: "P.E.N. concerns itself in all that affects the writer, in the encouragement and protection of the spoken word. It is a strong and vocal spokesman for the English-speaking community of South Africa."

Similar efforts are made to encourage good speaking. Indeed, there seems to be a developing awareness of the importance of this. A rash of public speaking groups has appeared on the scene, attached to every kind of institution from the big business concern to the Old Boys' and Girls' Clubs. Chambers of Commerce, shops, mining houses—all realise how urgent it is to have their people proficient in the art of "putting it across", no matter what "it" is their particular interest. Individuals join clubs which can help them in this way. The Johannesburg Toastmasters' Club does much to enliven the spoken word as well as to force an interest in purity of language. Both official languages are accepted in most of these clubs, and there is a steadily growing number of them all over the country. Most of these clubs accept both official languages, although some of the clubs have separate sections for the two language groups. The Toastmasters' Club in one town, for instance, has an annual competition which is arranged in four sections—one for a prepared speech in English, one for an unprepared speech in English, and the same divisions in Afrikaans, and similar instances could be given in many places.

Numerous dramatic societies contribute to this aim for good speech, and these of course give the added benefit of acquainting their members with good drama, for most of them, however restricted the selection for their own performances, hold play readings and discussions of the works of famous playwrights.

Another unofficial body which has contributed to the drive for good speech is the South African Guild of Speech Teachers, an organisation with members in various centres, kept interested by the holding of conferences in their own centres and their common battle against slovenly speech. The Guild "conducts examinations in both official languages, runs non-competitive festivals, organises refresher courses, and is consulted by educational authorities and the general public whenever information is required about matters connected with Speech and Drama."

For the special preservation of the English language in all its purity and dignity and for the form of culture connected with it there are associations such as the English Association, which originated in England and at one time had several branches here but is now active only in the Cape; the South African Council for English Education from whose initiative came the birth of the English Academy, which hopes "to maintain and propagate in Southern Africa the best standards of English reading, writing and speech." Part of its work will be the setting up of machinery whereby Academy awards may be given for attainment in certain standardised examinations in English and for original writing and research, etc. The Academy will also assist in the establishment of libraries; will organize festivals, conferences, discussions, readings; "will seek to ensure that all persons engaged in scientific pursuits have access to English-language publications and are properly qualified to make use of them; will encourage everyone engaged in commerce, trade and industry to become proficient in the use of English; will take practical steps to improve the standards of education in English at schools, colleges, universities and all other educational institutions; will initiate or encourage the publication or distribution of periodicals or publications"; and will take many further steps in the same direction".

Another effort to meet declining standards in English is evident in the way such societies keep watch over public utterances, notices, documents. Little of this work reaches the public notice because the approach is usually made directly to the person concerned in the faulty statement, but that we have

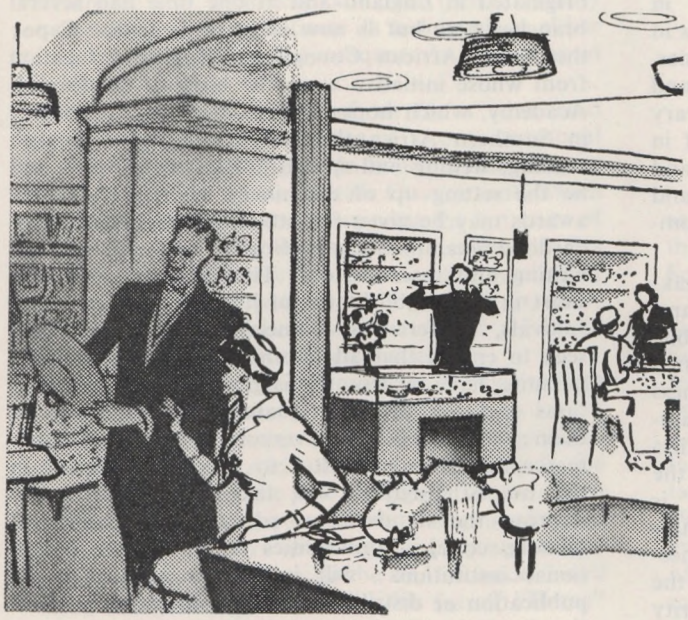
reached the stage when we can all appreciate the force of "Ag pleez, deddy" shows that the public is aware of the need for a drive for better English. Ministers of the Government have openly expressed concern at the deterioration of English and have approved the efforts being made to improve this situation.

In all its branches (they exist in all major and some minor centres in South Africa) the South African Council for English Education has for the last six years given encouragement to all and sundry to improve the level of English used—spelling contests for the primary schools; festivals of drama, of verse-speaking, of public-speaking, and of debating for senior pupils and adults; the loan to schools and Parent Teacher Associations of gramophone records, of extracts from the Classics spoken by the world's finest actors and speakers; quiz evenings; lectures; film shows; widespread attempts to interest the public in the splendid literary programmes offered by Radio South Africa and in the "Extract of Literary Programmes" issued by them.

One of the major problems facing all institutions endeavouring to retain good standards of English has been the reluctance of the English-speaking to take up teaching and the resultant difficulties encountered in obtaining good English teachers in the schools. Many of the societies mentioned, as well as individuals and associations concerned solely with the educational side, have reacted to this deficiency by offering bursaries and scholarships to encourage English-speaking men and women to enter the teaching profession.

The Sons of England has the proud record of having paid out a sum approaching the R100,000 mark in the interests of education, and a large portion of this must have been given in the bursaries which the Society offers every year. The South African Council for English Education has every year awarded about twenty bursaries. At least ten Parent-Teacher Associations offer bursaries every year to induce English-speaking scholars to become teachers. Besides these, many other organisations such as municipalities and mines give help to the children of their employees in this way.

And so the work goes on. There are some who would sneer at these societies as futile "do-gooders", but we would remind them that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for men of good will to do nothing."



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