CONTENTS

Preface vii
Acknowledgments ix
Introduction: Allen Walker Read, American Scholar xi

EARLY AMERICAN ENGLISH
1. Milestones in the Branching of British and American English 3
2. The Embattled Dominance of English in the United States 22
3. The Impact of “Ethnicity” on Attitudes toward the English Language 30
5. Amphi-Atlantic English 55
6. The Assimilation of the Speech of British Immigrants in Colonial America 83
7. The Distinguishing Features of American Talk 95
8. Words Indicating Social Status in America in the Eighteenth Century 104
9. The Allegiance to Dictionaries in American Linguistic Attitudes 110

O.K.
10. The First Stage in the History of O.K. 123
11. The Second Stage in the History of O.K. 149
12. The Folklore of O.K. 171
13. Later Stages in the History of O.K. 192
15. Sticking to the Facts: A Letter to Rowland Berthoff 245
THE F-WORD
16. An Obscenity Symbol 251
17. A Type of Ostentatious Taboo 270
18. Where Does That Word Come From? 277

A LIFE IN LANGUAGE
19. A Personal Journey through Linguistics 303
20. A Life Exhilarated by Language 318

Appendix: Bibliography of the Papers of Allen Walker Read 329
Notes 351
References 397
Index 431
Facts are the stuff of history, and no one writing the linguistic history of America has accumulated more of them than Allen Walker Read. Trained in his love of facts on the staff of the Dictionary of American English at the University of Chicago (where he was employed from 1934 to 1938), he learned where to look for the tiny details that illuminate, through words, the cultural past.

Now that facts from distant repositories are available electronically, we need to learn again what to do with them—how to weave them into a narrative. Throughout his long scholarly life, Read has spun tales out of the archives, and the first chapters in the volume that follows show how Americans learned to recognize themselves, and be recognized by others, in the nuances of their languages.

The second portion of this book puts on display two of the words that form the centerpiece of Read’s scholarship. The separate chapters show how facts and fictions need to be unraveled, how we need to regard all facts as tentative since other facts may emerge to change the story, and how we need to keep faith in them.

The penultimate two chapters are fragments of autobiography, and the final one is almost a ghost story in which the central figure is haunted by the linguistic image of who he is and who he might want to be.

In collecting these papers, I have been enabled by the cordial cooperation of Allen Walker Read and Charlotte Schuchardt Read, who welcomed me to their home and invited me to inspect the treasures it contains. Our first step was to compile a bibliography of Read’s papers, published and unpublished, and the fruit of this effort will be found in the appendix. From this huge collection the following have been selected to enable a generation too young to have heard him to imagine the pleasure of hearing one of his talks.

Preparing the volume for publication has been enabled by a grant from the University of Michigan (for keyboarding). A first-year student in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program—Emily M. Smith—learned the joy of fact checking by work-
ing on the typescript. Anne Curzan of the University of Washington and Carol Shannon of the University of Michigan helped invaluably to bring the project nearer conclusion. Leonard R. N. Ashley’s work on a volume of Read’s papers on names urged me to conclude this effort. Charles Carson worked miracles in copyediting and production. Frank Abate made the index. Working on behalf of the American Dialect Society, Ronald Butters of Duke University has brought the volume to publication.

As I think of my own writings on the English language, I am struck by how much Allen Walker Read has been my teacher (though through his example rather than his classroom). I am glad to repay the debt I owe to him.

RICHARD W. BAILEY
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INTRODUCTION

ALLEN WALKER READ, AMERICAN SCHOLAR

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Serendipity, as Horace Walpole explained in 1754, is the happy capacity people have “of making discoveries, by accidents and sagacity, of things they were not in quest of,” and serendipity has been the hallmark of Allen Walker Read’s career as a scholar. Long before the fashion for the “anthropology of everyday life,” he was seeking out cultural history in the most obvious places—ones that others overlooked because the evidence was in plain view. Historians had read colonial American newspapers for the great events of the day; Read noticed the advertisements for runaways and discerned something about early life in America. Those who used roadside “conveniences” in the 1920s were embarrassed or amused by the notes penciled on the walls. While official America was painting over these graffiti, Read was recording them in his notebook for later interpretation. Classical scholarship still held the rapt admiration of the scholarly public in Read’s youth, but it took the imagination to be curious and a willingness to be patronized to take on, as he did, the grammar of Pig Latin.

Having the sagacity to see the exotic in the familiar is one part of serendipity; the other is to seek out places where accidental discoveries may occur. For Read, these places were most often libraries and archives, and he drew forth from them the most unexpected evidence for the history of American life. As readers of this volume will discover, he sat down to read an 1838 reprint of an English book published in 1628 and discovered that, within a decade of the settlements at Massachusetts Bay, Native Americans were using “broken English” to communicate with one another across the linguistic differences that divided them. By collecting things that might be of interest later and preserving and organizing them, Read gathered his own archive, enabling him, as a
mature scholar, to produce essay after essay abundantly, and often amusingly, filled with examples and illustrations.

Read has achieved well-merited celebrity for his scholarship—not only in the sort of recognition awarded by specialist groups like the American Dialect Society, but also the larger fame that comes from being profiled in the *New Yorker* (Stacey 1989). Such recognition was particularly gratifying to a transplanted Midwesterner, born in 1906, living in the rarefied intellectual village on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, where the yen for Europe is far more strongly felt than nostalgia for the American backwoods. Postwar New York still echoed with the wars of *reubs* and *slickers*, so much the grist for American humor at the end of the nineteenth century, when these two words first appeared in print. Read sided with them both—he was a backwoodsman in the country of sophisticated.

To many of his colleagues at Columbia University, Read’s scholarly credentials were dubious. In a stinging rebuke, his dean, Jacques Barzun, described an opinion that he disliked as “admirably summed up in 1964 by a distinguished linguist, Mr. Allen Walker Read” (Stacey 1989, 66). The *Mr.* was a deliberate slur to draw attention to the fact that Read did not have a doctoral degree, an indictment sufficiently damning that Barzun did not have to mention that Read’s B.A. was from the Iowa State Teachers College and his M.A. from the University of Iowa. Though Barzun might have mentioned that Read had been a Rhodes Scholar at Oxford (1928–31), it was still true that he had no handle other than *Mr.* to prefix to his name. At Oxford his teachers had included such eminences as J. R. R. Tolkien, Henry Cecil Wyld, and Charles Talbot Onions—the last of the four original editors of *The Oxford English Dictionary* (*OED* 1933). He had written a dissertation, too—a 273-page typescript, “The Place of Johnson’s Dictionary in the History of English Lexicography” (1933e). For these efforts, he gained a B.Litt. in 1933 (after a two-year ordeal with “revisions” by the demanding Oxonians).¹

Longevity brings rewards, fortunately, and Read eventually had conferred upon him honorary doctorates from universities in Cedar Falls, Terre Haute, and Chapel Hill. At last, in 1988, Oxford awarded him the degree of doctor of letters, an honor based on a
careful reading of his writings by the learned dons. Oddly enough, this most American of scholars has two of his four earned degrees from a foreign university.

Read in his life and work expresses the ideal of a democratic education as described by Ralph Waldo Emerson in his address to Phi Beta Kappa in 1837, “The American Scholar.” Emerson hoped to rouse his audience to independence from European cultural authority: “The millions, that around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests” (52), he declared. Read has devoted enormous scholarly energy to freeing our thinking about our language from the “colonial cringe,” the idea that whatever is different in our culture from the fashions of the “mother country” is necessarily worse. It is now difficult to appreciate how powerful that idea was, the notion that the fashions of London in speech ought to shape American talk. As Read explained in his essay on dictionaries in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*: “Rather than observe the language around them, as Englishmen commonly do, Americans give up their autonomy and fly to a dictionary to settle questions on language” (Stacey 1989, 65). Only in Read’s lifetime have the New York City schools finally abandoned the test that required prospective teachers to have a knowledge of the London-based RP, “received pronunciation,” if only a passive one.

While the notion that RP rules is no longer part of American views, English people still cling to the helm of language standards (though the people in steerage are in charge of the direction of the vessel). Even when an authoritative voice, like R. W. Burchfield’s—Burchfield edited *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary* (*OEDS* 2 1972–86)—speaks of the increased importance, even the dominance, of American English, there is a sense in Britain that the tail—that’s us—is somehow wagging the dog. Like his influential mentor, H. L. Mencken, Read has questioned whether we are not all the same animal—neither language community having any special claim to the forepart or the hindquarters.

American cultural independence is a theme—though a subtle one—in the very first of Read’s publications, appearing in *Dialect Notes* in 1927, when he was just 21 years old. In 1829–30, the Virginia polymath Robley Dunglison published a glossary of Ameri-
canisms in the *Virginia Literary Museum*, a short-lived magazine issued by the professors at Thomas Jefferson’s university. In the days before microfilm, a publication like the *Virginia Literary Museum* was difficult to obtain in middle America—Read was at the time an instructor in English at the University of Missouri, where Robert L. Ramsay was kindling his enthusiasm for place-names. Read thought that an edition would be a valuable contribution to the “American Dialect Dictionary” just announced by William A. Craigie (1925) in *Dialect Notes*. (This work, for which Read became first research associate and then assistant editor between 1934 and 1938, eventually appeared as the *Dictionary of American English* [DAE 1938–44].) In the same volume of *Dialect Notes* with Read’s “Dunglison’s Glossary” was Mitford M. Mathews’s (1926) similar treatment of the glossary to David Humphrey’s *The Yankey in England* (1815), “sometimes referred to,” in Mathews’s words, “as the oldest glossary of Americanisms in existence” (375).

Mathews (1926, 380) observed that “it is misleading to refer to them [the words in Humphrey’s list] as Americanisms. Of the 273 words in the list over 150 of them represent pronunciations more or less common in England and in America before 1815.” In other words, Humphrey’s list included colloquial expressions widely used on both sides of the Atlantic during the early national period. Read’s (1927a, 422) comment on Dunglison is subtly different: “His sport was that of many a later man: the proving that many so-called Americanisms are distinctly of British origin.”

After his return from Oxford, Read would join Mathews on the staff of the *DAE*, but it is important to note the differences in their views. Mathews simply presumed that very many “Americanisms” are really British in origin, though perhaps obsolete or dialectal there. Read called this quest a “sport” and invited readers to suppose that the play spirit in word coinage was at work in America to the same extent it was in England. Mathews emphasized what is British; Read, what is American. Some of Humphrey’s words “may at present be regarded as American contributions to English speech” (381), wrote Mathews, expecting that further evidence from Britain would diminish the list. Read made no such bow to England. The *OED2* (1989) provides no earlier British source for the Ameri-
canisms Read selected from Dunglison for particular discussion: *blizzard* and *sockdologer* (both meaning ‘a violent blow’), and *honeyfuggle* and *hornswoggle* (both meaning ‘to dupe’).

English influence has long suffocated colonial thinking, and in his diary, H. L. Mencken wrote favorably of one of the survivors of the Oxford experience, Samuel Eliot Morison:

> Morison is a sound historian, and an excellent writer. From 1922 to 1925 he served as Exchange Professor of American History at Oxford. Despite this experience, which is commonly ruinous to American pedagogues, he retains a sense of humor and an American point of view. [1989, 199]

Like Morison, Read retained a sense of humor and an American point of view, not the obvious or easy course of conduct for so thoroughly Midwestern an Oxonian as he. (Read’s O. Henry–influenced story that concludes this volume (323–27), “Rhodes Scholar,” expresses this dilemma exquisitely. No one can doubt how he would have wished his character to respond to the roll call!)

In his famous “explanation” prefixed to the *OED*, James Murray (1933, 1: xxvii) wrote that “the circle of the English language has a well-defined centre but no discernible circumference.” For Murray, there was no difficulty in locating the “centre,” and in his own pronunciation he tried to suppress the vowels of his upbringing in the Scottish borders and replace them with the proper sounds of Oxford. Even thinkers with more linguistic self-confidence than Murray have often been afflicted with fears about their “extra-territorial English.” In twenty-first-century America, it is not difficult to locate persons who believe that *gull* ‘dupe’ is “central” (because used by Shakespeare and Ben Jonson) and *hornswoggle* “peripheral” (because it is merely an Americanism).

In forming his ideas about English, Read was very much influenced by Mencken, whose 1919 *American Language* was a strong anti-British polemic published in an edition of only 1,500 copies, since its publisher, Alfred A. Knopf, did not believe that such views would be popular in the heady days of the Wilsonian alliance between British and American interests. A second edition, with some of the stridency toned down, appeared in 1921, and,
with various revisions, expansions, and condensations, it remains an influential and widely read book today. In the *New Yorker* interview, Read said: “And I think that if any single influence got me started it was Mencken’s ‘American Language’” (Stacey 1989, 60). Eventually, Read came to know Mencken personally and gathered material to assist in the enlargements of the great book (which over the next 30 years expanded into some 3,800 pages).

In that interview, Read makes clear that he was a somewhat timid disciple of the great satirist, even when Mencken praised him enthusiastically.

[Mencken] was based down at Baltimore, but every once in a while he would make a trip to New York City, and we had lunch together a number of times. I must confess that I was never at ease. I looked up to him so much that I was tongue-tied and inhibited, so I’m not quite sure what he thought of me. I just couldn’t be myself when I was in the presence of a man that I idolized as much as I did him. [Stacey 1989, 60]

Another cause for timidity was Mencken’s increasingly strident right-wing political view as he descended from satirist to misanthrope.

In the same era when he was having lunch with Mencken, Read compiled an inventory of his own “Personal Facts,” and these were very different from Mencken’s:

- Birth: June 2, 1906, at Winnebago, Minnesota
- Citizenship: U.S.A.
- Marital status: Unmarried.
- Politics: Member of Democratic party, New Deal wing.
- Religion: Emancipated Baptist.
- Health: Excellent
- Temper: Sweet and reasonable, except under strong provocation.

[Read 1947d]

Mencken was a supporter of the German cause as America entered both of the twentieth century’s “world wars,” and, in fact, the leisure to write *The American Language* stemmed from the fact that his pro-German writings were no longer welcome in his newspaper, the Baltimore *Evening Sun*, after the sinking of the *Lusitania*. 
Though at first a supporter of Franklin Roosevelt, Mencken was soon denouncing the New Deal as a “political racket” at the time he was lunching with Read. As Mencken spewed “strong provocation” here and there in journalism criticizing American political life, it must have seemed wise to remain respectful and silent.

Nonetheless, Read took Mencken’s American linguistic patriotism very much to his heart. Mencken’s first blast on behalf of American English had come in an article he wrote for the *Evening Sun* in 1910, “The Two Englishes,” and that title became “The Two Streams of English,” the opening section of *The American Language* (1936, 3–89). He began with an arresting assertion: “The English people speak an English which differs enormously, in vocabulary and idiom, from the English spoken by Americans” (quoted in Fecher 1978, 290).

In December 1938, at the Dialect Society meeting in New York, Read presented a paper titled “The Definition of the Word ‘Briticism’” (1938d). On the evidence of the *OED*, the word *Briticism* had first appeared in print in 1868 in the New York magazine the *Galaxy* in an essay by Richard Grant White, an excursion into linguistic patriotism he soon published in his popular book, *Words and Their Uses* (1872). White was a usage writer of strong, definite, and sometimes ill-informed opinions, but he was also a strong and definite American linguistic patriot who thought that English people had no more right to determine correct usage than anyone else—in fact, no one else had such a right except, maybe, White himself. His tone reflected the same arrogant superiority that English writers had assumed in commenting on Americanisms. Thus, White described the expression *he commenced poet* as “remarkably coarse and careless”; *directly* ‘immediately’ he thought “quite indefensible”; the distinction between *drive a carriage* and *ride* on horseback he thought “a notable British affectation.” For him, the era of Briticisms began in 1707 with the union of the parliaments of Scotland and England, and it became abundant and obvious at the time of the separation of the United Kingdom from its most populous colonies on the western shore of the Atlantic.

White had had his fill of the natter of British travelers reporting the extravagant and improper usages of Americans. (Read
would subsequently find these reports a mine of information about early American usage, and some of his essays on this subject are to be found in this book.) White liked the sort of tale where the American visitor confounds English snobbery. The distinction between sick ‘nauseated’ and ill ‘unwell’ struck him as both British and “perverted,” and he was glad to report an anecdote in which the American visitor got the best of his British host:

I was present once when a British merchant receiving in his own house a Yankee youth at a little party, said, in a tone that attracted the attention of the whole room, “Good evening! We haven’t seen you for a long while. Have you been seek” (the sneer prolonged the word), “as you say in your country?” “No, thank you,” said the other, frankly and promptly, “I’ve been hill, as they say in yours.” John Bull, although he blushed to the forehead, had the good sense, if not the good nature to join in the laugh that followed; but I am inclined to think that he never ran another tilt in that quarter. [1872, 196–97]

This is the sort of story that Americans came to love after the Civil War, one in which the vigorous young country confounded the stale prejudices of the old one. (Our American Cousin, the comedy Abraham Lincoln was enjoying at the moment of his assassination, dealt with exactly this theme.)

Mencken was not the only proponent of American linguistic independence. In 1892, Brander Matthews, a forerunner of Read’s at Columbia University, expressed displeasure with the “lofty condescension” of English critics. “In the ordinary speech of Englishmen,” he wrote, “there are not a few vocables which grate on American ears. Sometimes they are ludicrous, sometimes they are hideous, sometimes they seem to us simply strange” (15). These locutions, however, should be studied with lexicographical dispassion. “Of Criticisms there are as many and as worthy of collection and collocation as were the most of the Americanisms the all-embracing Bartlett gathered into his dictionary” (14).4

It was this idea that Read took to heart, and in 1938—six months before his foray into defining Briticism for the American Dialect Society—he published an essay titled “Plans for ‘A Historical Dictionary of Briticisms’” in the American Oxonian. In this essay, Read’s views of language history were fully articulated.
Studies of present-day English are usually based on the assumption that the English of England is the norm of the language and that American English is a variant form of it. But inasmuch as Americans have received their language by inheritance from the past, springing from colonists who spoke English as their mother tongue, it would be a reasonable experiment to judge British English upon the norm of American English. On this assumption, which has much to be said for it, the words found in England but not in America could justly be called “Briticisms.” In the proposed work, these will be collected in glossary form, illustrated by dated quotations. [1938f, 186]

Here is the first description of the dictionary that Read intended to make an important part of his life’s work. In order to support himself and the work, he applied for and received a fellowship from the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, first awarded for the period from 1 December 1938 to 31 May 1940, and then renewed for an additional year. Read sailed for London in March 1939, but with the outbreak of war in September, he returned to New York to continue his collecting in the Reading Room of the New York Public Library. Still, it was a low point in his life, and when the fellowship ran out, he took a one-year appointment as an instructor at the Illinois Institute of Technology, where he taught, among other things, “Remedial English.” In July 1942, he was inducted into the U.S. Army, rising from private to staff sergeant before being discharged in August 1945. As he explains in his reminiscence in this volume, he was assigned the congenial duty of helping to compile the Dictionary of United States Army Terms (U.S. War Dept. 1944).

Despite everything, Read continued work on his dictionary of Briticisms. Owing to the prejudices of a prospective English publisher, it assumed various titles, including A Dictionary of the English of England and Briticisms: A Dictionary of the Speech of England as Distinguished from That of America. He produced specimen entries for words beginning with *Da-* in 1946, and these attracted the enthusiastic attention of his old mentor, Mencken. Encountering an eminence from the Bollingen Foundation on a train in January 1947, Mencken saw that he might have stumbled on a source of support for Read’s work.
I made some propaganda at once for Allen Walker Read’s “Dictionary of Briticisms.” Cairns [the Bollingen adviser] professed to be greatly interested and promised to tackle Mellon. The Read book certainly should be published, but equally certainly no commercial publisher could afford to undertake it. It will probably run to three volumes folio. I have seen specimens of it and have a high opinion of it. [1989, 429]

This “high opinion” might have located a sponsor for the work, but in 1948 Mencken suffered a massive coronary that effectively ended his career. Read persevered, of course. More specimen entries (this time from Cab- to Car-) appeared in 1955; a project description in 1959; a paper at the MLA Present-Day English section in 1968.

Reflecting in 1989 on the history of the project for the New Yorker, Read summed up his work in these words:

By 1941, my material was nicely rounded. I really wish I had published it then, but I had to make a living after my fellowship was over, so I accepted a teaching position, which took up my time. If I had published it earlier in the game, I could have produced a very respectable book that would be the data base for any later studies on the subject, and I would have been wise to do that. But I just didn’t. I was looking forward to a bit more perfection than I could ever hope to achieve. [Stacey 1989, 73]

Like the extension of his dissertation on Johnson’s Dictionary, this work too needed “a bit more perfection” than was possible.⁶

Read’s craving for perfection was increasingly difficult to satisfy, and it would have been all too easy for him to descend into eccentricity and solitude as his “one-room occupancy” in lower Manhattan began to suffocate in paper. Fortunately for him, he had met Charlotte Schuchardt in 1939 when he encountered her working in the Institute for General Semantics, an enterprise of the émigré Count Alfred Korzybski, on the fringes of the University of Chicago campus. Fourteen years would elapse before he felt sufficiently confident in his abilities to provide for her. Achieving tenure at Columbia, Read could transport his archives uptown and marry. Like her husband, Charlotte is a Midwesterner with a sense of mission built around language. They have, through words, sustained each other to this day.
Read has made a lifetime of study of Americans and their talk. He took to heart Emerson’s injunction that “we have listened too long to the courtly muses of Europe” (1971, 69), and it is noteworthy that among his many publications are essays devoted to the language of Washington Irving, Walt Whitman, and Carl Sandburg. But Emerson’s American Scholar was not a bookworm. “Life is our dictionary,” Emerson declared; “colleges and books only copy the language which the field and the work-yard made” (60–61). Like Wordsworth, Emerson believed that the vitality of the language lay in the usage of ordinary people. Echoing the same theme, Brander Matthews (1892, 29) declared, “The grammarian, the purist, and pernickety stickler for trifles, is the deadly foe of good English, rich in idioms and racy of the soil.” Neither Emerson nor Matthews was quite prepared for just how racy the speech of the “soil” might be.

In the 1920s Read began to be curious about the origin of the word fuck—a subject about which he remains curious today. His papers on this subject are gathered in this volume, and readers will note that in the many essays devoted to fuck he never employs the word itself but rather such indirect locutions as “the colloquial verb and noun, universally known by speakers of English, designating the sex act” (see chap. 16, p. 256). Noting that the word had been entered in dictionaries until the end of the eighteenth century (though not in Johnson’s), he was severe in his judgment of the editors of the OED.

It is to the lasting shame of Murray and Bradley that their linguistic sense was not strong enough so that they could dissociate themselves from the warped outlook of their age. [p. 263, this volume]

Read was not the only critic to censure the OED for omitting the taboo words. In the same year as Read’s 1934(g) essay (chap. 16, this volume), A. S. C. Ross reviewed the republication of the Dictionary and wrote, “It certainly seems regrettable that the perpetuation of a Victorian prudishness (inacceptable in philology beyond all other subjects) should have been allowed to lead to the omission of some of the commonest words in the English language” (quoted in Burchfield 1973, 84).
This prudery may seem faintly absurd or even ridiculous today, but in the early part of the twentieth century it was serious business indeed. Read’s first adventures into the domain of the forbidden were made “in the course of an extensive sight-seeing trip throughout the western United States and Canada in the summer of 1928,” when he carefully copied “folk epigraphy” from outhouse walls (Read 1935f, 17). Having compiled these notes into a glossary, he submitted his manuscript to a German philological journal but was told that “it could never appear in a public periodical,” even couched in the deepest obscurity of a foreign language. Finally, in 1935, he had the collection published in Paris in an edition limited to 75 copies: *Lexical Evidence from Folk Epigraphy in Western North America: A Glossarial Study of the Low Element in the English Vocabulary* (1935f). The title page and preface are filled with dire warnings.

Judged merely as reading matter, the following work (apart from the Introduction) is abominably, incredibly obscene, and the compiler begs that any one will lay this book down who is not prepared to look at all social phenomena with the dispassionate eye of the anthropologist and the student of abnormal psychology. [5–6]

Not until 1977(a), when it was reprinted as *Classic American Graffiti*, did this publication reach a very wide audience, though Read made sure that the Paris edition was reviewed in such journals as *Language, Modern Philology*, and *American Speech*.

There is no reason to believe that Read’s prefatory warnings arose solely from a fear of opprobrium or of imprisonment as a pornographer. In the late 1930s, he visited Ann Arbor and stayed with H. V. S. Ogden and Margaret Ogden, both of whom he had known at the University of Chicago. Harry Ogden was a cousin of Charlotte’s, and Margaret was a deeply learned philologist, but *Folk Epigraphy* was too vile, as Read thought, for a woman’s eyes. To Harry Ogden he presented one of the 75 precious copies, wrapped in brown paper and tied with string, warning him to heed the announcement on the title page: “Circulation restricted to students of linguistics, folk-lore, abnormal psychology, and allied branches of the social sciences.” Only in 1971, when he began to correspond with others about the etymology of *fuck*, did Read begin to treat this material dispassionately.
Emerson’s American Scholar was proud of his country’s independence and appreciated that real life is lived in the open air. Still another trait of this ideal person was the ability to discern patterns in a mass of facts.

To the young mind, everything is individual, stands by itself. By and by, it finds how to join two things, and see in them one nature; then three, then three thousand; and so tyrannized over by its own unifying instinct, it goes on tying things together, diminishing anomalies, discovering roots running underground, whereby contrary and remote things cohere, and flower out from one stem. [Emerson 1971, 54]

Read’s “unifying instinct” has applied itself to a myriad of facts—advertisements for runaway slaves and indentured servants in colonial newspapers; language games (like doubletalk and Pig Latin); the place-names of America (a task begun with his master’s thesis on Iowa place-names and continued when he assisted an important early mentor of his, Robert L. Ramsay, in producing the _Introduction to a Survey of Missouri Place-Names_ [Ramsay, Read, and Leach 1934]). Everywhere there are facts and more facts. He challenges us to employ our “unifying instinct” and make sense of them.

Science was part of Read’s upbringing. His parents had both received bachelor’s degrees from Hillsdale College in Michigan, and his father was the sole faculty member in the sciences in a series of small-town Midwestern colleges (while continuing his education along the way with an M.S. from the University of Wisconsin and further graduate study at the University of Illinois). These appointments included Parker College (Winnebago, Minn.), Central College (Pella, Iowa), and Iowa State Teachers College (Cedar Falls). Read’s sister Mary Jo Read, five years his junior, graduated as her brother had done at Iowa State and went on to an M.S. at the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. from the University of Wisconsin. For the Read family, science was central to life.

When American linguists—following the intellectual example of William Dwight Whitney—talked of language study as a science, Read was prepared from his childhood to embrace that notion. Speaking at Georgetown University in 1961, he put his convictions in these words:
Other people may prefer to accept their goals from the maxims handed down in their culture or from the assumptions of the religion they have espoused. While linguistics itself does not offer criteria for ethical judgment, its clarifications are so freeing, the enlightenment it yields is so stimulating, that one’s sense of mission has ample scope for the dedication of a lifetime. [Read 1962d, 69]

Read’s “mission” has been to let the facts speak for themselves. But he has compelled them to tell a tale, one of the sweep of American history as pioneers inscribed names on the land and filled the wilderness with voices. These voices, for him, have authority—notwithstanding the sneers of English visitors or the arrogance of self-appointed advocates of a linguistic elite. Graffiti in the New York subway or scrawls in public conveniences speak with as much authority as the oratory of politicians or the solemn utterances of heroic figures. The facts are egalitarian; they are everywhere; they are nearly always filled with the spirit of fun.

Read’s interest in American names has barely been mentioned—though it is the subject of a separate volume, America: Naming the Country and Its People (Read 2001), edited by Leonard R. N. Ashley. Nor has this essay addressed Read’s devoted service to the General Semantics movement, a viewpoint that has engaged his attention and energy since the 1930s. Understanding language helps identify “semantic blockages” that prevent people from saying what they would wish or compel them to say things that they do not wish to say. Liberating people from the prejudices of their language has been a constant in his “sense of mission.” He has been eloquent, too, about “linguistic imperialism” and the self-centeredness of “ethnicity.” He has made these views public wherever he could reach an audience—whether through television or dictionaries or encyclopedias or popular magazines or uncounted miles of travel to talk about his life’s work.

Of course, Read might have done more. Someone so infused with the work ethic and so dedicated to the ideal of perfection will always come short of his dreams. His accomplishments are worthy of celebrity, and this volume will enable others to appreciate them.

His has been the work of the American Scholar.