

WALTER SPENCER AVIS, 1919-1979

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Walter Spencer Avis was born in Toronto on 4th June 1919. After overseas service with the Canadian Army during the Second World War, he returned to Canada to take his B.A. at Queen's University in 1949 and his M.A. at the same university in 1950. His Ph.D., from the University of Michigan, followed in 1955. In 1952, he had been appointed to the teaching staff of the Royal Military College of Canada, where he was ultimately to hold a full professorship of English, a post which he combined with that of Dean of the Canadian Forces Military College. In 1978, the Royal Military college honored him most fittingly by devoting the second of its Occasional Papers of the Department of English, R.M.C., to Walter S. Avis: Essays and Articles (Vincent, Parker, and Bonnycastle 1978). Avis's death, which took place in his home in Kingston, on 11th December, 1979, was peaceful, but was as unexpected as it was saddening to all who knew him.

Walter Avis was a scholar so outstanding in his field of Canadian English that even to outline his achievement is to limn the history of scholarship on this topic over the past three decades. His early work (Avis 1954, 1955a, 1956) was devoted to defining Canadian English, by differentiating it from its southern neighbor, and this was soon followed by articles on every aspect of the topic. His concern for the totality of the study was shown by his series of bibliographies of writings on Canadian English, of which the first (Avis 1955b) appeared in the first volume of the Journal of the Canadian Linguistic Association,¹ as its title then was, which he had helped to found. These culminated in the first independently published bibliography of Canadian English (Avis 1965) and, true test of seminal scholarship, this has provoked other similar works since. It was natural, however, that his major interest should have been in the vocabulary of Canadian English for, as he wrote himself, "That part of Canadian English which is neither British nor American is best illustrated by the vocabulary" (Avis 1967: vii). His many articles on the vocabulary of Canadian English led naturally to the seven major dictionaries (Avis, and others 1962; Avis, Gregg, and Scargill 1963; Avis, and others 1967; Avis, ed.-in-chief 1967, and 1973; Avis, and others 1973; Avis, Gregg, and Scargill 1977). One measure of the importance of these is shown by their having produced, by 1975, nearly one hundred advance notices and reviews; a measure of the dictionaries' success lies in the fact that only three of these reviews (Hewson 1972; Moore 1967; Story and Kirwin 1971) contained comments which could be interpreted as adverse.

Any attempt to assess the value of Avis's work² must inevitably begin by reporting its sheer volume; up to 1976, when circumstances required that Avis send the present writer a bibliography of his publications, talks, and other scholarly activities, he had written or edited nine books, had published forty-six articles, and had given fifty-six talks to various organizations. But mere volume is of little account, and it is the excellence of Avis's work that matters. If, as many scholars hold, examples be the lifeblood of linguistics, then one has but to glance at the barest summary of his work to see how vital it is. It was common for him to produce over fifty examples to support his views; on occasion, his score was over a hundred. Not only to lexicography, but to all his writing, he brought a width of experience and a depth of understanding by no means common in modern linguistics; he never lost sight of language as a social and historical phenomenon, and his work now touches and now illuminates many parts of Canadian life of yesterday and today. The scholarship, modernity, and balance of his lexicography mark it unmistakably as great. In scholarship, he could distinguish immediately and clearly what was American, what British, and what truly Canadian. As a modern lexicographer, he insisted that a dictionary should reflect and inform about, but should not try to legislate, the common use. The balance of his mind led him to insist that the only sensible criterion for Canadians to follow was the usage of educated natives of Canada (Avis 1967:viii); but he was equally firm in rejecting the idea that Canadian English was a language separate from that spoken by Americans and British (Avis [1966]:3). But the true measure of his scholarship is its effectiveness; learned and unlearned men will long argue about what Canadian English is, but, thanks greatly to Avis's work, none can doubt that it is there.

As a servant of his discipline, Avis was untiring. He was a founding member of the Canadian Linguistic Association³ and, after a long period of service to that association, first as its secretary-treasurer (1956-1959) and then as its secretary (1959-1967), was ultimately its president (1968-1970). In 1972, the Association appointed him an Honorary Life Member, and in the following year the Canadian Journal of Linguistics 18, 2 (Fall/Autome 1973) was dedicated to him, his portrait appearing as its frontispiece. In 1965, he was a member of the founding committee for the Canadian Association for Applied Linguistics. From 1969 till its completion, he was a member of the Advisory Council for the Survey of Canadian English, conducted by the Canadian Council of Teachers of English, of which body he was a director-at-large from 1971 to 1974. But his interests were not limited to Canada. In 1959 he was secretary, and in 1960 chairman, of the Present--day English Section of the Modern Language Association. From 1954 to 1975, he was Canadian Secretary of the American Dialect Society; in 1980 he was to have become the Society's vice-president, and would have been its president in 1982.

These, however, are but a few of the highlights from a life of energetic support for scholarship; the full list of Avis's achievements occupies a legal-sized page of single-spaced typescript. On the lighter side, it is refreshing to record that his life-long interest in hockey was recognized in 1975, when he was made an Honorary Director of the International Hockey Hall of Fame. Perhaps the most agreeable thing to report is that two of Avis's early aspirations were realized before he died. Already in 1957, he was stressing the need for a dictionary that would be specifically Canadian, and he was also looking for a nation-wide survey to determine Canadian practice in pronunciation and spelling (Avis 1957:255-56). It is most pleasant to think that the dictionaries were in print and the Survey of Canadian English was completed while he was still leading his active and busy life. It is, alas, much less pleasant to look at the field of scholarship on Canadian English as it is without Wally's genial, inspiring, and well-loved figure.

FOOTNOTES

1. With the issue of 7, 1 (Fall/Automne 1961), this became the Canadian Journal of Linguistics.

2. A complete list of Avis's writings on Canadian English up to 1975 appears in Avis and Kinlock ([1978]) as items 102 through 153, and items *676 and *677; his work thereafter appears as items 675 and 678 through 680 in the same publication. To these should be added Avis (1975), Avis (1978a), and Avis (1978b).

3. It is significant that his name appears twice on the cover/title page of the Journal of the Canadian Linguistic Association 1, No. 1 (October 1954).

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