

ALLEN WALKER READ

For most people, their native tongue is like the air -- hardly noticeable. But Allen Walker Read, for over sixty years, has noticed his. Now, around the world, he is recognized as a preeminent student of the English language, particularly as it has developed in America.

A Middle Westerner, he took a Master's degree at the University of Iowa in 1926, attended Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar, then spent the 1930s at the University of Chicago on the staff of the Dictionary of American English. After a stint in the Army, he joined the faculty of Columbia University in 1945 as professor of English, a position he held until retirement in 1974. An oddity of his career -- which he pursues still with undiminished interest -- is that nobody knows what to call him. As an etymologist he deals often and expertly with the history of words; as a semanticist, with the meaning of words; as an onomatologist, with the special class of words that are names; as a linguist, with theories of language; as a lexicographer, with the creation of dictionaries. He puts it best, however, avoiding fancy terms: "I regard myself as a student of human culture, using language as the chief material of my research."

His current project, a Dictionary of Briticisms, begun in the 1930s, is actually the last shot of the American Revolution. Usually the history of American English is studied from a British standpoint. By turning the tables and treating British English from an American perspective, his dictionary will free us finally from linguistic colonialism. Oxford University has recognized his achievements with an honorary degree. Since he has devoted a life-time to the English language in America, it is especially fitting that we celebrate Allen Walker Read with our degree of Doctor of Letters.