

Hear Our Voices We Entreat:

SCHOOLS AND THE 'COLONIAL TWANG'

1880-1930

ALTHOUGH the origins and nature of a sense of national identity in New Zealanders have been explored in various ways, the part which the schools might have played has not received the attention it merits.

Sinclair notes, of New Zealand history in general, that 'very frequently . . . the shouts of imperialism have deafened historians to the portentous piping of infant nationalism',¹ and this has been so with educational historians: detailed studies of the social content of New Zealand schooling in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have largely focussed on attempts to inspire youthful patriotism through military training and an exalted vision of empire.² Perhaps this is understandable, for the imperialistic and patriotic pieces in the *School Journal*, for example, were meant to be persuasive and striking, and now that their message is no longer fashionable they seem even more strident, even more likely to attract the historian's attention.

But while the *School Journal*, and the locally-produced textbooks which began to appear in the 1890s, gave much space to Britain, the Empire, and the Royal Family, they also included a good deal of local material, and by the time of the First World War a reasonably standard schoolbook account of New Zealand had emerged.³ This stressed a supposed physical resemblance between Britain and New Zealand, the uniqueness of New Zealand flora, fauna and scenery, New Zealand's

1 K. Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Revised Edition, London, 1980, p.226.

2 D. R. Jenkins, *Social attitudes in the New Zealand School Journal*, NZCER, 1939. E. P. Malone, 'The New Zealand School Journal and the Imperial Ideology', *New Zealand Journal of History*, VII,1 (1973). C. McGeorge, 'Military Training in New Zealand Primary Schools', *Australian and New Zealand History of Education Society Journal*, III, 2 (1974). P. Openshaw, 'Patriotism in the Primary School Curriculum 1900-1930', *Delta*, No.24 (1979).

3 For an account of the development of local texts see: C. M. McGeorge, 'The Use of Schoolbooks as a Source for the History of Education 1878-1914', *New Zealand Journal of Educ. Studies* [NZJES], XIV, 2 (1979).

freedom from the social ills of the Old World, and its bright economic and social prospects. It was not a completely coherent picture, but the contradictory elements in it were to some extent reconciled by the notion that New Zealanders were in a unique position to capitalize on their British virtues and create a 'better Britain'.⁴

We can, of course, only speculate on the effect all this might have had on its youthful audience. While it might be a mistake to lurch on, deafened by shouts of imperialism, it would be equally wrong automatically to attribute great significance to the 'portentous piping' just because one is so surprised and charmed to hear it. It all depends on what teachers made of this material, if anything, and on their own attitudes to New Zealand and a possible national identity, and these attitudes seem to have been as diverse and ambivalent as the textbooks — which were, after all, largely compiled by anonymous teachers.

There was, however, one important aspect of a possible national identity on which educationists' attitudes were clear, conscious, and quite consistent: there should not be a distinctive local accent.

The origins of a New Zealand accent are a matter of speculation and this paper, which is concerned with attitudes to speech, does not pretend to discover them. The homogeneity of New Zealand speech, which developed before broadcasting, is a further puzzle, but the answer presumably lies in the similar mixtures of British dialects in all settlements and the considerable geographical mobility of nineteenth-century New Zealanders. Dating the appearance of a distinctive New Zealand accent, even in the most general terms, is a further problem; there is clear evidence from the 1880s and 1890s for the development of a characteristic New Zealand form of speech, but at least two turn-of-the-century observers, who were no fools, denied the existence of any such thing.

Writing in 1898 Pember Reeves said that he had listened in vain for any national 'twang, drawl, or peculiar intonation',⁵ and four years later, O. T. J. Alpers agreed that 'there are so far no alarming signs of a colonial "twang" or of dialectic peculiarities'.⁶

The available evidence suggests, however, that Reeves and Alpers either had cloth ears or that they listened to the wrong people. Sinclair seems much nearer the mark in suggesting that in 1898 'a New Zealand accent must have been the speech of a minority', and in concluding that

4 These matters are explored in more detail in C. M. McGeorge, 'Learning about God's Own Country', NZJES, in press.

5 Cited in Sinclair, p.229.

6 R. F. Irvine and O. T. J. Alpers, *The Progress of New Zealand in the Century*, Toronto, 1902, p.429.

it was probably characteristic of a majority of New Zealanders by the time of the First World War.⁷

A New Zealand accent developed first among the New Zealand-born. In a radio broadcast in 1951 Arnold Wall drew on his memories of New Zealand speech patterns on his arrival from Britain in 1898. The professional class, he said, spoke standard English and a great variety of English provincial dialects could still be heard from the older generation of settlers and from 'some of their immediate progeny', but he was struck by the way in which the younger folk 'spoke "N.Z.-ic" English with great uniformity'.⁸

Census figures also suggest that if those who spoke with a local accent were still in fact in a minority in 1898, it was a substantial minority. By 1886 the New Zealand-born made up 52% of the population (42% in 1878). The report on the 1896 census included, for the first time, a table giving the ages of the New Zealand-born. In that year 63% of the total population had been born here but 96% of those under 15 years of age were native-born. By 1906 the native-born made up 68% of the total population, 95% of those under 15, and 55% of those over 15. In 1896 only 2% of New Zealanders over 50 were native-born; in 1906 7%.⁹

These figures suggest that those who spoke with a local accent or intonation could possibly have been in a majority by the turn of the century, and they also support Wall's report of marked speech differences between older and younger New Zealanders.

It is hardly surprising that the first detailed observations of New Zealanders' speech were made in schools. In the latter half of the 1887 Samuel McBurney, Principal of the Ladies College at Geelong, travelled in New Zealand promoting the teaching of singing by the tonic sol-fa method, giving evening entertainments at which he sang songs of all nations accompanied by Mrs McBurney on the zither, and recording his impressions of children's speech in the phonetic script invented by Alexander Ellis.¹⁰

McBurney sent the results of his observations in Australia and New Zealand to Ellis who incorporated them into his monumental work, *On Early English Pronunciation*, along with extracts from an article McBurney had published in the Christchurch *Press* by way of introduction.¹¹

7 Sinclair, p.229.

8 From a tape obtained from Radio New Zealand's archives in Timaru.

9 *New Zealand census of population and dwellings*, 'Ages of the people', Tables VIII and XI, 1896 and 1906.

10 *Lyttelton Times*, 5 and 6 October 1887.

11 A. J. Ellis, *On Early English Pronunciation*, London, 1889, Part V, pp.237-48. Ellis says the newspaper article was in the *Lyttelton Times*; it was, in fact, in the *Press*, 5 October 1887. The *Lyttelton Times* printed an article by McBurney on school music. The confusion seems to have been McBurney's. Later commentators seem only to have read Ellis's cropped version of McBurney's article. Orsman (*Encyclopaedia of New Zealand*, II, p.677) adds to the confusion by getting both McBurney's first name and the year of his visit wrong.

McBurney observed a rather fluid, complex situation; there was a movement towards a new, uniform pronunciation but it was much more discernible in some children and in some parts of the colony than in others. Isolated children spoke 'broad Scotch, Irish or provincial English' like their parents, but otherwise, he noted, 'the influence of parentage is very slight'. Again, New Zealand children's speech had many features of Australian speech, particularly, McBurney thought, in Wellington, but there were discernible differences between the countries. McBurney had looked for differences in pronunciation between the various Australian colonies but found fewer than he expected, and his adult Australian informants repeatedly said that they could hear no difference between themselves and visitors. 'It is only since coming to New Zealand', he wrote, 'that I have been able definitely to say, "There is another type here"', although this was 'difficult to define'.¹²

In both countries, McBurney said, there was a general tendency towards a Cockney pronunciation, for example, *cow* became *kyow* or *caow*, but in New Zealand certain of the 'leading features' of Cockney pronunciation were much less common and children were much less likely to drop the aspirate, to clip *ing* (*singin'*, *shillin'*) or to insert an *r* between vowels (*I saw-r'im*).

Part of the reason for colonial developments lay in the 'universal tendency of all speech alteration . . . towards what may be called "the line of least resistance"'; 'but why there should be a general tendency, as there undoubtedly is in Australia, to a Cockney pronunciation, when there must have been a very small proportion of the emigrants from Kent, whence this dialect has lately sprung, is a mystery still to be explained.'¹³

McBurney's original *Press* article attributed less influence to teachers than some later writers who, presumably, read only Ellis's version of it. 'It is generally supposed', he wrote, 'that two main influences affect pronunciation — *parentage and the teacher*.' But, he went on, in a passage which Ellis omitted, 'I have only to ask your readers to note that pronunciation of Colonial children of Scotch parents who perhaps have had an Irish schoolmaster, or that of German parents who perhaps have had a Scotch schoolmaster, to see how very little similarity there is between the three parties of this triangular duel'.¹⁴ Teachers, understandably, claimed more influence for themselves: 'Throughout the schools a fair amount of attention is being paid to pronunciation, and I am told by the teachers that common errors eradicated in the lower classes, give very little trouble among the older children, and that good habits formed in school are generally retained afterwards'.¹⁵

McBurney's comments did not occasion much public comment. Ellis,

¹² *Press*, 5 October 1887.

¹³ *Press*, 5 October 1887. Part of this omitted by Ellis.

¹⁴ *Press*, 5 October 1887.

¹⁵ *Press*, 5 October 1887.

focussing on McBurney's comments on the Cockney character of colonial speech, inserted his tables and commentary on them into the section of his book dealing with the speech of South-eastern England so that McBurney's results were tucked away in an unlikely part of a work not readily available in the colonies. The only reported reaction to his *Press* article was a second leader in the same paper three days later.

McBurney had begun by saying that 'I think it may be admitted that the pronunciation of the colonies, as a whole, is purer than can be found in any given district at Home', and he had concluded in the same vein. The *Press* was pleased.

It is satisfactory to learn that the Queen's English is as well or better spoken in the colonies than in the Old Country where it had its birth. . . . Between the different colonies themselves there are numerous variations in pronunciation and articulation . . . and in New Zealand close observation would probably discover differences of speech in the different provinces, public schools and railways notwithstanding. But in the main colonial speech flows tolerably pure from the 'well of English undefiled'. It is nearer the standard of classical English than 'English as she is spoke' in Yorkshire, or Lancashire, or Somersetshire; the astonishment of untravelling Britishers at the purity of the New Zealand accent is proverbial and if there is merit in correct pronunciation, to a large extent we have it.¹⁶

This purity was, however, threatened by the way in which young colonials pronounced their vowels: 'the sounds are attenuated down from their original native breadth to something very much resembling Cockney.' This, the *Press* suggested, rather oddly, was the result of 'an excessive zeal for fine speaking' and an 'unconscious desire not to appear illiterate', and the Cockney accent had been 'adopted by Londoners as a refinement on the broad vowel sounds of the Provinces'.

McBurney's article and the *Press* editorial between them contained most of the conflicting claims about New Zealand speech which shaped later debates: New Zealanders spoke better English than almost any one else; New Zealanders sounded like Cockneys; Cockney was a conscious but vulgar affectation; Cockney was lazy, unthinking speech; teachers could influence speech — for better or worse; teachers played little part in shaping speech patterns.

Given the wide variety of British accents then to be heard in New Zealand, and the fact that an homogeneous local accent was only beginning to emerge, it was quite possible for careful observers to arrive at rather different conclusions. McBurney, for example, noted that flagrant misuse of the aspirate was uncommon in New Zealand, but J. Gammell, Inspector of Schools in Southland, a part of the colony which McBurney did not visit, noted in his 1883 report that 'the initial "h" is cruelly neglected'.¹⁷ Similarly R. Lee, the Wellington inspector, noted in 1882 that one lad who had read well, 'sounding the aspirate', urged a friend to

¹⁶ *Press*, 8 October 1887.

¹⁷ *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* [AJHR], 1883, E-1b, p.4.

'Old yer 'ead down' when playing leapfrog. 'The language of the playground', Lee commented, 'teems with such expressions.'¹⁸

Even more noteworthy are Lee's remarks in 1889 on the tendency of Wellington children to pronounce *oo* as *ew* so that *spoon* became *spewn*.¹⁹ McBurney had noted this 'strange development' in Australia but declared it 'quite absent' in New Zealand; he had also found the speech of Wellington children more like Australian than speech in any other district in New Zealand.

In the 1890s inspectors of schools continued to comment on children's speech, and to make conflicting claims. For example, W. G. Hodgson, the Nelson inspector, wrote in 1893 that, 'although various naitonalities help to make up the staple of our scholars the result of the blending together seems, so far, to have resulted in the disappearance of any marked accents or provincialisms'.²⁰ J. G. Gow, his Canterbury counterpart, however spoke sternly of the need for 'purity of utterance of the vowel sounds' and said that colonial children sounded like costermongers.²¹

By the turn of the century some of the generation McBurney had studied had become teachers themselves, and the inspectors began to comment unfavourably on the speech of both staff and pupils. 'It may not be altogether out of place', wrote the Nelson inspectors, G. A. Harkness and D. A. Strachan, 'to suggest to some of our young teachers that for their own guidance a good pronouncing dictionary should always be at hand.'²² Thomas McKenzie, M.H.R., was much less polite in his reference to teachers who had 'acquired that dreadful Whitechapel Cockney accent'.²³

The available evidence suggests that by this time a uniform, clearly recognizable New Zealand accent was well-established among the young, Reeves' and Alpers' denials notwithstanding. After about 1900 the inspectors of schools commented rather more often on accent and were rather more uniform in their comments, focussing particularly on the way in which children pronounced their vowel sounds rather than on the dropped 'h', their *bête noire* in the 1880s but not a feature of distinctively New Zealand speech later. A. Crawford, the Nelson inspector, linked cheap public transport and the emergence of an 'homogeneous pronunciation' as one item in a list of suggested topics in New Zealand history.²⁴

By this time, too, children who spoke with marked British provincial accents stood out from their classmates clearly enough to occasion some

18 AJHR, 1882, E-1b, p.8.

19 AJHR, 1889, E-1b, p.14.

20 AJHR, 1893, E-1b, p.15.

21 AJHR, 1895, E-1b, p.34.

22 AJHR, 1903, E-1b, p.30.

23 AJHR, 1901, 3-14, p.124. (Minutes of evidence before the Hogg Commission on teachers' salaries.)

24 AJHR, 1910, E-2, p.123.

comment. 'Several boys, fresh from their native Yorkshire heath and Yorkshire Board schools, have passed through my hands', wrote J. Grierson, the Auckland inspector, in 1907. 'Their dialect was as atrociously uncouth as I remember it thirty-five years ago.'²⁵

There was a growing demand that schools take steps to preserve the purity of New Zealand speech. In 1899 Seddon was asked if he would direct teachers to pay more attention to pronunciation. Seddon was dismissive; he thought that British dialects were pleasant to hear and the government would not take action.²⁶ Four years later, when J. A. Hanan asked Seddon to appoint 'specialists in voice-culture' to work in the public schools, Seddon said that all would admit the need for it and the only reason for not doing it was that it would prove too costly.²⁷

Those who wanted the schools to do more were left to take what comfort they could from the brief references to pronunciation which appeared in Hogben's new 1904 syllabus which said that one of the chief objects of instruction in reading was 'clear enunciation, correct pronunciation, tone and inflexion'.²⁸

In the meantime inspectors of schools continued to deplore such pronunciations as *moine* for *mine*, *teown* for *town* and *plasuz* for *places* and to urge teachers to take care with their own and their pupils' speech. The Wellington inspectors wrote in 1908 that 'effective phonetic drill in the lower standards is the only effective means of coping with these faults',²⁹ but teachers were not trained to provide this. Schools under attack for failing to suppress the 'colonial twang' had two stock defences. One was to point out that schools were one influence among many and that their efforts were negated by the influences of the home, the street, and the playground. The other was the old claim that New Zealanders in fact spoke 'pure' English, certainly by contrast with those who spoke English dialects. In 1912 the Nelson inspectors were moved to say: 'The so-called "colonial twang" we in no way condone, but critics are too prone to dilate upon and exaggerate this defect, which suffers little by comparison with the uncouth dialects still frequently introduced by importation from the Home-land. When we notice how rapidly these barbarisms are softened and disappear under the refining influence of our schools we can only congratulate the latter upon possessing and maintaining to some degree the purity of the English tongue'.³⁰

The Cohen Commission of 1912 had wide terms of reference, witnesses and commissioners took the opportunity to discuss a variety of current educational controversies, and of course the question of pronunciation cropped up. The first attack came from Louis Cohen, a barrister

25 AJHR, 1907, E-1b, p.4.

26 *New Zealand Parliamentary Debates* [NZPD], 1899, 108, p.370.

27 NZPD, 1903, 123, p.760.

28 *New Zealand Gazette* [NZG], 1904, p.1064.

29 AJHR, 1908, E-1b, p.16.

30 AJHR, 1912, E-2, appendix C, p.xxxvii.

and sometime member of the University senate. New Zealand speech was nearly as bad as 'Orstrailien' [sic], it was 'a blot upon our national life and habits', it was becoming more and more 'degraded', and it was the result of carelessness and slovenliness.³¹ In future, he said, teachers should be chosen for their English and there should be itinerant instructors in schools.

J. S. Tennant, an inspector of primary schools, raised the question of social class differences when he suggested that the speech of the 'better class of children' was no less pure than, say, ten years before, but that in 'some of the poorer districts' one could hear pronunciation 'one would probably not have noticed twenty years ago'.³² Margaret Lorimer, the principal of Nelson Girls' College, said that she and her staff were 'always waging war against the colonial accent', and she claimed that 'this impurity of pronunciation is in some cases a deterrent to better-class people sending small children to the primary schools'.³³

Like Lorimer, Augustus Heine of Wellington College thought the schools had a duty to 'try to check the objectionable colonial dialect that is spreading so fast',³⁴ while the redoubtable Sir Robert Stout said that the young people he heard in the law courts did not pronounce English as it used to be pronounced, and he thought that New Zealand speech was 'worse in the North than it is in the South'.³⁵

The critics did not have it all their own way. Hogben, in an apparent reference to McBurney, asked Heine how he knew that things were getting worse. Had Heine himself kept phonetic records or did he simply rely on memory?³⁶ One of the commissioners, Frederick Pirani, M.H.R. for Wanganui, who had been born in Australia and grown up in New Zealand, responded to the critics by going on the offensive. Tennant said that he had failed to hear any corruption of spoken English among the better class of children, but had he not heard such affected pronunciations as *faive* for *five* and *taime-table* for *time-table*? What hope was there for change, Pirani demanded, when some of the secondary school principals who had appeared before the Commission used such expressions as *may* for *my*, *Ai* for *I*, *gairls* for *girls*? Had Heine ever heard a primary-school teacher do worse than that?³⁷

Heine replied, significantly, that he had never heard a male secondary-school teacher speak like that. While he himself thought the colonial accent should be suppressed, he did not believe in 'overdoing it, as we find in the case of some people who have been Home'. This suggests that overcompensation and speaking 'fraffly' were particularly characteristic

31 AJHR, 1912, E-12, p.460.

32 *ibid.*, p.525.

33 *ibid.*, p.637.

34 *ibid.*, p.620.

35 *ibid.*, p.611.

36 *ibid.*, p.624.

37 *ibid.*, p.624.

of girls' secondary schools, and in 1914 an anonymous writer to the editor of the *New Zealand Journal of Education* laid specific charges. 'Although the "highly educated" raise white, delicate hands in horror at the death-cry of the language which is being slaughtered by the uneducated and the illiterate, they, poor souls, have, as often as not, the blood of the same maltreated language on their own hands'.³⁸

'Dissatisfied' noted such pronunciations as *tahn* for *town*, *raight* for *right*, and *deah* and *mothah* for *dear* and *mother*. Seven out of ten who used such affected pronunciation were, he said, women and they learnt it in various 'young ladies' Colleges and high schools'.

The Cohen Commission, however, was more impressed by the doom-sayers than the defenders and its first recommendation on the syllabus was on speech-training.

In order to counteract the tendency amongst young people towards slovenliness in speech, indistinct utterance, and impurity of vowel sounds, it is recommended that throughout the whole school course daily practice be given in correct methods of breathing, and in the right use of the tongue, lips, and teeth in speaking. . . . Teachers should be instructed to pay special attention to their own speech in order that their pupils may have, as far as possible, correct models for imitation.³⁹

These recommendations were taken up in the 1913 revision of the primary school syllabus which urged teachers to make a special effort to secure 'purity of vowel sounds' and 'the correct use of the vocal organs' as well as setting good examples themselves.⁴⁰ In the Junior Division of the schools 'purity of speech as to form and sound should be encouraged and common errors corrected as they occur', while in the Senior Division teachers were to pay increasing attention to these matters and to give 'more definite teaching in the sound values of the letters'.

Such general exhortations were of little practical use to teachers and, although the syllabus said that the Department would supply exercises to teachers, these did not appear, probably because the *New Zealand Journal of Education* decided to print a series of notes and exercises based on a pamphlet prepared for teachers in the state of Victoria by that state's Chief Inspector of Schools, Alfred Fussell.⁴¹

How many teachers used these exercises, or Fussell's original pamphlet, is not certain, but it was certainly not enough to satisfy the inspectors. In 1913 the Wanganui inspectors again warned of the danger that

38 *New Zealand Journal of Education*, March 1914, p.33.

39 AJHR, E-12, 1912, p.17.

40 *New Zealand Gazette*, 1913, p.3687.

41 *New Zealand Journal of Education*, issues from September, 1913 to August, 1914. Fussell's pamphlet was *Exercises in Phonics*, Education Department of Victoria Circular of Information, No.13, 1908. It was re-issued in 1914. The introduction by Frank Tate, the Director of Education, condemns the clipping and slurring of words, slovenly speech, the faulty formation of vowel sounds, and a nasal twang — language very like that used by New Zealand critics of local speech. My copy of the later edition belonged to a Timaru teacher.

the young might be swept into a 'flood of faulty and impure vocalization and the pristine purity of the sounds of the English tongue be for ever lost', and the Westland inspector was moved to issue sets of phonetic exercises to schools in 1914.⁴² The 1919 revision of the syllabus once more urged teachers to give exercises to secure 'correct use of the vocal organs, purity of speech, clear articulation, and purity of vowel sounds', and it once more promised that 'exercises designed to secure accuracy of speech will be supplied to teachers by the Department'.⁴³ Once again these exercises failed to appear and the Otago inspectors urged the re-issue of the *New Zealand Journal of Education* articles as an antidote to the 'colonial drawl'.⁴⁴

The smouldering controversy burst into life again in 1922 with the publication of a letter in a Wellington paper claiming that New Zealand speech threatened to 'degenerate into a perversion as bad as the American twang or the Cockney whine'.⁴⁵ Stanley Warwick, a Wellington elocutionist, wrote to the Minister of Education offering to give brief lectures in the schools on pronunciation and the Minister, C. J. Parr, accepted his offer. Primary school teachers were stung by this and a Wellington meeting of schoolmasters condemned Parr's recognition of 'an unsupported declaration from an irresponsible source'. Warwick defended himself by denying that he was prompted by financial interest and by claiming that the elocutionists' methods were effective.⁴⁶

Warwick was not the only one who might have been accused of attempting to profit from the controversy. In July 1922 the *Education Gazette* carried a full-page advertisement for elocution lessons by correspondence. The advertisement condemned New Zealand speech for its 'slovenly enunciation', 'execrable diction', and 'slipshod colloquialism'. The only answer was a course of twenty-four lessons, prepared by Culford Bell, another Wellington elocutionist, and costing five guineas — payable in advance.⁴⁷

Some of the primary schools did make efforts at speech training, but only some. In 1924, for example, the Canterbury inspectors reported that many schools gave regular practice in phonics, some of them using the speech training exercises in the *Live Readers*. The Southland inspectors, however, reported in the same year that in their district 'this phase of school-work is still somewhat indefinite in character'.⁴⁸

The efforts primary school teachers did make were not enough to spare them from criticism, some of it from their secondary counterparts. In 1924 F. M. Renner, of Wellington, claimed that fewer than four per

42 AJHR, 1914, E-2, app.C, p.xxx and E-2, 1913, app.C, p.x.

43 *New Zealand Gazette*, 1919, p.2889 ff.

44 AJHR, 1919, E-2, app.B, p.xviii.

45 *Lyttelton Times*, 1 March 1922.

46 *National Education*, 1 April 1922, p.i.

47 *Education Gazette*, 1 July 1922, p.77.

48 AJHR, 1924, E-2, app.C, pp.xxvi and xxxi.

cent of first-year secondary pupils spoke standard English.⁴⁹ Dorothy M. Stewart, a Christchurch secondary school mistress, poured scorn on Cockney, 'the dialect of the London slum', and uttered the grim warning that 'New Zealand will, if unrestricted, become a Cockney-speaking country'.⁵⁰

There was even more discussion of the 'colonial twang' in 1925. Early in that year it was reported that in Christchurch 'complaints are rife on the prevalence of a "colonial twang" in New Zealand', and papers in other centres gave space to the views of educationists and others on the subject.⁵¹

Again the schools, and New Zealand speech, had their defenders as well as their critics. A visiting British actor, solicited for his views by a newspaper, said that he heard no 'peculiarities of pronunciation or accent' in New Zealand. 'It is like being among our own folk.'⁵² Professor Ramsay of Otago said that 'a larger proportion of the Dominion's inhabitants speak standard English than could be found in any other British community, with the possible exception of South Africa. . . . Certainly the wholesale indictment of New Zealand speech as a "colonial twang" seems uncalled for.'⁵³ The opinions of G. W. Buckle, H.M.I., who had done a tour of duty in New Zealand in exchange for a New Zealand inspector, should also have carried some weight. New Zealand children's speech, he said, 'seems very good to an outsider accustomed to the educational difficulties raised by the existence of dialects in England', and he added that even in the smaller schools he had found speech-training receiving a 'creditable amount of attention, with good results'.⁵⁴

But the critics were far from silenced by such comments. It was suggested that the only ways to save New Zealand speech were to arrange exchanges between British and New Zealand teachers or to make extensive use of gramophone recordings of English speakers, and the Canterbury Education Board received, although it did not act on, at least one enquiry from an English teacher about possible exchanges.⁵⁵

The controversy was kept alive in part by the Minister of Education, C. J. Parr, who put the matter on the agenda of the 1925 conference of inspectors of schools. 'Is there any tendency among the school children in your district towards the development of a distinctively New Zealand

49 F. M. Renner, 'The Teaching of English in Secondary Schools', *Education Gazette*, 1 August 1924, p.130.

50 Dorothy M. Stewart, 'Problems in English Speech: a Proposed Solution', *Education Gazette*, 1 October 1924, pp.160-1.

51 'Is There a New Zealand Accent? Echoes of a Recent Controversy', *National Education*, 1 April 1925, pp.81-82.

52 *Lyttelton Times*, 4 February 1925.

53 *National Education*, 1 April 1925, p.80.

54 G. W. Buckle and J. W. A. McIlraith, *A Comparison of the Elementary School Systems of England and New Zealand*, London, 1925, p.37.

55 *Lyttelton Times*, 27 February 1925.

accent?’ he asked them. Did they observe any broadening of the vowel sounds or any other ‘vicious tendency’?⁵⁶

The inspectors’ views were varied, and some of them curious. J. W. McIlraith, the Auckland inspector who had changed places with Buckle, ‘believed that the accent in the East End was purer than in some districts in New Zealand’. F. T. Warren, also of Auckland, thought that pronunciation was bad in some country districts and he had issued charts to assist teachers in giving ‘voice-drill’. W. Haslam of Canterbury did not think that New Zealand children’s speech was poor, at least not in the classroom, but he noted that in the playground boys considered it an affectation to speak properly.

James Valentine of Taranaki thought that things were better than ten years ago but strongly advocated formal lessons in phonics and the use of Fussell’s pamphlet. A. M. Burns, Wellington, and J. Robertson of Otago both declined to take the pessimistic view, but both thought that efforts should be made to maintain good speech.

There was loud laughter from the North Islanders when T. R. Fleming of Otago claimed that pronunciation was ‘purer’ in the South than in the North and that an English visitor had said that the further south one went the purer the children’s speech. John Caughley, the Director of Education, ‘took quite a hopeful view of the position’, and believed that ‘in no other British community was the speech as sound as it was in New Zealand’.

Parr, who had the last word, was not mollified. He spoke of the need for vigilance to keep the ‘well of English undefiled’, he urged the inspectors to make further efforts towards ensuring a ‘purer accent’, he promised that the Department would prepare a suitable booklet for teachers along the lines of Fussell’s work, and he asked the training colleges to give more attention to speech-training.

Teachers were not given any breathing space while the promised pamphlet was being prepared. The *Education Gazette* of 1 April 1925 urged them not to delay the ‘preparation of suitable exercises’, and it recommended that they consult such works as Hulbert’s *Voice Training*, Walter Ripman’s *Good Speech*, and Daniel Jones’s *The Pronunciation of English*.

Dorothy Stewart, who had studied under Jones in Britain, once more wrote and spoke on the need for training in phonetics, and the dangers of New Zealand becoming a Cockney-speaking country. She and Renner organized a course in phonetics and speech training to follow the 1926 Secondary Schools Conference and by the end of 1925 nearly seventy teachers had indicated that they would attend.⁵⁷ Stewart also published a book on speech training and phonetics for teachers in 1925, and the

⁵⁶ Parr’s questions and the inspectors’ views given here are all taken from a summary of this part of the conference published in *National Education*, 1 April, 1925, p.82.

⁵⁷ *Education Gazette*, 1 May 1925, p.62–63 and 1 December 1925, p.198.

effervescent Harry Gibson, an Auckland teacher, published another.⁵⁸

The promised Departmental pamphlet, No.14 in the Series 'Special Reports on Educational Subjects', appeared early in 1926. The thirty-five page pamphlet contained a preface by Parr urging teachers to greater efforts to maintain 'the purity of our glorious English tongue in the mouths of our young people', and, predictably, it cited Daniel Jones, Walter Ripman, and H. C. Wyld as authorities on pronunciation. In general it resembled Fussell's work, dealing one by one with vowels, diphthongs, and consonants, noting common faults in the pronunciation. There was also a section on the pronunciation of Maori and another on the treatment of speech defects such as stammering and lisping.⁵⁹

The 'Red Book' syllabus of 1929 also prescribed speech training, using some of the phrases of the 1913 revision, and urged the use of the Departmental pamphlet to combat the 'evils of inaccurate speech, and 'bad habits' picked up at home or in the street.⁶⁰

Schools varied in the response they made to all this. In 1927, for example, the Taranaki inspectors reported that the amount of attention given to speech training varied widely in their district, while the Auckland inspectors noted that very little use was made of the pamphlet in their schools.⁶¹ At the end of that year the Minister, after letters of complaint about children's speech, was once more urging teachers to spend at least five minutes per day on exercises from the 1925 pamphlet.⁶² Again in 1930 the Southland inspectors reported that speech training was 'thoroughly carried out', while their Wellington colleagues said that the pamphlet was 'ineffectively used'.⁶³

Through the 1930s and 1940s, and on into the 1950s, some teachers and some schools made efforts at speech-training, but they were fewer and fewer, and post-war syllabuses in English stressed fluent oral expression rather than the niceties of pronunciation. From time to time *literati* snarled at local speech but the confident choruses of the 1920s were no longer to be heard from those who did not like the way New Zealanders spoke.

What conclusions can be drawn from the varied reactions over the years to New Zealand children's speech?

First, of course, there are considerations of social class. Middle class respectability demanded adherence to English manners, institutions, and

58 Harry T. Gibson, *Do You Speak English or Only a Substitute?* Reliance Printery, Auckland, 1925. The book's cover depicted a man pointing an accusing finger, Kitchener-like, at the reader.

59 Education Department, *Speech training*, Special reports on educational subjects, No.14, prepared by direction of the Hon. the Minister of Education, Wellington, Government Printer, 1925.

60 Education Department, *Syllabus of Instruction for Public Schools*, Wellington, Government Printer, 1929.

61 AJHR, 1927, E-2, p.16.

62 *Education Gazette*, 1 December 1927.

63 AJHR, 1930, E-2, p.10.

speech — or at least to people's memories or impressions of them. It is hardly surprising that the secondary schools, long the exclusive preserve of the middle and professional classes, reacted with horror to the speech of the children who came after the introduction of Free Places. The girls' secondary schools took it as their particular mission to suppress a colonial accent but schoolmasters could be just as outraged at it. Firth, the head of Wellington College, was passionately opposed to a 'Cockney' accent and was scathing towards lads who failed his test sentence, 'Shall we go for a sail in the whaleboat? Oh, no, not today.'⁶⁴

But those who sought to rescue their charges from sounding like the common herd had to tread a fairly narrow path, lest they produce the sort of affected speech which Pirani so strongly mocked. Indeed, any unduly cultivated accent could inspire suspicion or derision. When in the late 1920s, Charles Brasch spoke with the accent he had acquired from his English relatives his classmates at Waitaki Boys' High School, many of them from the sheep-owning classes, laughed openly.⁶⁵

There were, it seems, various sorts of speech and they were variously acceptable to different groups and classes. There was, firstly, broad New Zealand, derided and deplored as 'Cockney' or a 'colonial twang', now regarded with a sort of amused affection by the middle classes and good for a laugh in the mouths of Fred Dagg and Lynn of Tawa. Then there was what we might call 'educated New Zealand', still deplored by the purists but praised by those who thought it the negation of all accents, the purest English to be heard, and so on. Finally, there was Received Pronunciation, and more or less successful attempts at it, regarded with suspicion or derision by a large number of people.

The material on which this essay is based sheds much more light on social attitudes than on the true origins and development of New Zealand speech, for even in the twentieth century, when a local accent was well-established, commentators mostly untrained and with different stocks of prejudices, could be flatly at odds with one another; or obviously wide of the mark. In 1900 for example, Mr Hornsby, M.H.R., said in the House: 'Take the ordinary accent of the boys you meet here, and you would think they were newly arrived Cockneys from London.'⁶⁶ the absurdity of this commonly-held belief is nicely pointed up by an encounter a few years later between Spencer Westmacott, a young New Zealand-born farmer, and a boy who *was* newly arrived from London. Westmacott was intrigued by the boy's accent but realized that he was speaking 'in an accent I had learnt to know as Cockney'. The boy, in his turn, was surprised to learn that Westmacott, who had been at Waitaki Boys' High, was not English: 'Go won, you talk like it.'⁶⁷

64 James Elliott, *Firth of Wellington*, Auckland, Wellington, 1937, p.61.

65 Charles Brasch, *Indirections: a Memoir*, Wellington, 1980, p.77.

66 NZPD, 1900, 111, p.519.

67 H. F. Westmacott, ed., *The After-Breakfast Cigar — Selected Memoirs of a King Country Settler*, Wellington, 1977, p.67.

Opinions on the extent to which teachers had caused or could cure the local accent were equally divided. McBurney's doubts on this score have already been quoted, but these were omitted from Ellis's book, and Arnold Wall, who was familiar with Ellis's work, unhesitatingly labelled New Zealand speech 'Cockney' and said this was because among the first school-teachers there was a preponderance of Cockney speakers from London and its vicinity.⁶⁸ This seems quite implausible: certainly the evidence to be gleaned from the turn-of-the-century *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* tells against it. This work gives potted biographies of the headmasters of the majority of New Zealand schools, men who would, generally, have been teaching for some years. Of the seventy-six men in the Wellington district whose birthplaces are given, only nine were Londoners and of those only some were likely to have spoken with anything like a Cockney accent. One of them was educated at Rugby, for example, and another in private schools; one's father was a doctor and another was educated at Canterbury University College. If sheer weight of numbers had counted, then pupils in Otago and Southland should have spoken with marked Scottish accents, for twenty-three of the fifty-six headmasters whose birthplaces can be ascertained with born in Scotland — and there were more Australians (10) than Londoners (4).⁶⁹

The rumpus over pronunciation also provided a lesson for anyone, historian or sociologist, who might be tempted to equate official pronouncement with classroom practice, or to automatically ascribe great influence, for good or ill, to the schools on the basis of what is in the curriculum. For years, of course, the teachers were urged to make bricks without straw; the pamphlet promised in 1913 did not appear until 1926, and those interested were left looking for Fussell's pamphlet or made what they could of the exercises printed in the *New Zealand Journal of Education*. The inspectors of schools reported some successes, and the elocutionists, and a few teachers, made great claims of success, but the bright promises of the 1925 pamphlet, gramophone records, and phonetic training were not fulfilled. The schools' efforts were finally no more than a forlorn hope in the face of a mass movement from below.

What the controversy most clearly demonstrates, however, is what later writers have called the 'cultural cringe', the belief that no good thing could come out of New Zealand and that the best we could hope for was to meet someone else's standards. With this went the view that New Zealand's chief claim to fame was being more like Britain than any other country, in speech as in other things. Those who thought that New Zealand speech was notably 'pure' and those who fulminated against the 'colonial twang' shared the assumption that educated English speech, or Received Pronunciation, set the only conceivable standard and that any departure from it could only be a degeneration as a result of laziness,

68 Arnold Wall, *New Zealand English: How it Should Be Spoken*, Auckland, 1938, p.8.

69 *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, I, Wellington provincial district, 1897; IV, Otago and Southland provincial districts, 1905.

carelessness or sheer incompetence ('the incorrect use of the vocal organs'). New Zealand English was only English defaced or soiled; it was 'impure', 'degraded', 'defiled'. 'Cockney' was thus a convenient summary term of abuse; it was the speech of working-class people, unredeemed by any suggestion of bucolic charm, and it smacked of urban squalor left behind in the Old World.

It is hardly surprising that the controversy over a local accent should take on a more strident form in the 1920s for by then only the most obdurate could still deny that there was any such thing. But the 1920s were, in addition, anxious, xenophobic times. The Great War had toppled thrones and left millions dead and millions mourning; with the end of the Imperial Commandeer prices for New Zealand produce became uncertain and tended downwards; and the October Revolution in Russia sent waves of apprehension and reaction through the rest of the world.

Parr himself spoke wildly of subversion and Bolshevick conspiracies, he saw Reds under the desks, and he and other conservatives saw Britain, and loyalty to her and to the Crown, as the one true source of military and financial security for New Zealand, and of virtue and culture. New Zealand's destiny lay with the British Empire and this and the monarchy became the focus of efforts to inculcate patriotism in children.

These notions lay behind the 1925 pamphlet, and they found expression in it. Teachers had a duty to teach correct speech, wrote Parr in his preface, because children in New Zealand were members of the British Empire. 'As members of the Empire', the introductory section of the pamphlet itself went on, 'our children should be taught to regard the English language first with respect, then with a genuine feeling of pride and affection', and it quoted a British report which described the maltreatment or debasement of English as an 'outrage'.

There had, of course, always been the problem of exactly where correct English was to be found — amongst cultivated Londoners, in the mouths of upper-middle class Englishmen at large, at Oxford or Cambridge, between the covers of Daniel Jones's pronouncing dictionary? The anonymous compilers of the speech-training pamphlet hit upon an incontestable authority which looks inevitable in hindsight but must have been a happy inspiration at the time: 'The phonographic record of the Message from their Majesties the King and Queen to the children of the Empire is an excellent model of standard English pronunciation, and should be used for this purpose as much as for the value of the message conveyed.'⁷⁰

I cannot think of another single sentence written at the time which so neatly expresses respectability's attitudes towards New Zealand speech and New Zealand national identity.

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⁷⁰ *Speech training*, p.6.