

Our Own Voice. Canadian English and How it is Studied, By R.E. McConnell, [Toronto: Cage Educational Publishing, 1979. 276 pp. \$14.95.]

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Book Reviews

Our Own Voice. Canadian English and How it is Studied

By R. E. McConnell

(Toronto: Gage Educational Publishing, 1979. 276 pp. \$14.95.)

To assert that it may never be possible to write a comprehensive, up-to-date study of Canadian English is a quite serious position. Anyone planning to write such a work would need to have access to detailed diachronic and synchronic studies of the vocabulary of Canadian English; to areal studies showing how Canadian English varies in space; to historical and demographic studies relating these to settlement patterns and to the language of the source countries; to sociolinguistic studies showing how Canadian English varies socially; to sociological studies which could be used to explain the role of Canadian English in Canadian society; and so on.

Scarcely any of this is available. The first problem, and it is no doubt as familiar to folklorists as it is to dialectologists, is the vast area over which the relatively light population of English-speaking Canada is spread. There are simply not enough fieldworkers to cover the area that has to be covered. And this fact is compounded by other difficulties which again should be familiar to folklorists. The settlement varies enormously in age: in parts of Newfoundland it antedates Queen Elizabeth I's letters patent to Sir Humphrey Gilbert,

but in much of the country it is as recent as today. Nor does it show any sign of stopping to let us catch up. The areal variation that is discernible is constantly being complicated by the mobility of the population: the migration of Newfoundlanders to Toronto, for example, may eventually lead to the loss of Newfoundland characteristics by their children, but in the meantime it contributes to the difficulty of trying to describe English in Toronto. Again, there is no sign that the population is prepared to stop moving around. Presumably social mobility has the same kind of effects. For example, if the children of working-class parents who left Newfoundland to live in Toronto get a better education there than they could have had at home and become members of the middle class, does this mean that they become bidialectal, reserving a kind of English in which the Newfoundland elements are more obvious for more personal and familiar situations, and using a more Torontonian kind of English for more impersonal, transactional situations? If so (and research elsewhere would lead us to expect such a situation), then again the possibility of describing the roles of English in Toronto has been complicated.

In the circumstances, it is impossible to write a comprehensive and up-to-date study of English in Canada. The best we can hope for is something tentative and partial, drawing on the relatively small number of studies that are available, extrapolating from them as far as possible.

Professor Ruth McConnell of the University of British Columbia has written such a book. It is a remarkable achievement. Its intended audience is the senior high school English class, where there has long been a great need for a first-rate work on language and Canadian English. However, it is scholarly enough to be used as a textbook at a much more advanced level. We will both be using it as a text in university-level classes. And it is interesting enough to appeal to anyone with an informed interest in things Canadian.

In its use of extant works on Canadian English, it is remarkably comprehensive, thorough and up-to-date. Almost all the published studies which are of any importance at all are drawn on; there are numerous references to ongoing work and to results which have not yet been published; in addition, some scholars, and notably W.S. Avis, seem to have prepared material for McConnell's use. The book is divided into two parts; the first deals with the historical origins of Canadian English and the development of English in Canada, especially with reference to the lexicon. The second deals with regional variation: ch. 3 deals with language and dialects; ch. 4 with dialectology; and ch. 5 with some of the known regional variations within Canadian English. The book also contains a 16-page bibliography of studies of Canadian English, related varieties of English, linguistics, and Canadian cultural history.

Because of the intrinsic problems of studying Canadian English, the book is heavily dependent on its sources. Potentially that is a very serious handicap: as one of our Ottawa Valley informants once remarked, you can't make mahogany furniture out of basswood slabs. In some cases, to compare the published studies of Canadian English to basswood slabs would be undue praise. There is a notable exception: the lexicographic scholarship represented in the *Dictionary of Canadianisms on Historical Principles*, the *Gage Senior Dictionary*, and of course the eagerly awaited *Dictionary of Newfoundland English* is outstanding, and McConnell is

able to draw extensively on this scholarship in her discussion of the vocabulary of Canadian English.

In other respects, however, the basis for McConnell's work is sometimes shaky. No doubt she would be as glad as the rest of us if comprehensive studies using appropriate techniques were available. What is available in fact is sometimes merely impressionistic and anecdotal. When it is based on more formal techniques of investigation, the results have sometimes been marred by unsatisfactory questionnaire or sample design, as in the 1971 Survey of Grade 9 pupils and their parents in parts of the country. At other times the studies are based on data gathered by means of European and U.S. dialectological techniques which are of questionable validity outside of Newfoundland and the Maritimes. And so on.

In two ways, McConnell overcomes the problems posed by the uneven qualities of her sources. The first is simply that her own scholarship is better than that in some of her sources. For example, her discussion of the relationship of Canadian English to its historical sources in the U.S. and Britain recognizes that that relationship is very complex, that (like Canadian English) neither of the two sister varieties has ever been monolithically uniform, and that only with great caution can their present state be taken to indicate their state at the time when they exerted their influence on what was to become Canadian English. To mention just one example, she draws on sources which suggest that the voicing of intervocalic /t/ (so that *butter* rhymes with *rudder*) is an American phenomenon which is spreading in Canada (e.g., p. 27, 37) through recent American influence. In the first place, the voicing is far from uniform in American English; in the second, it has yet to be demonstrated on the basis of a valid sample that this usage is increasing in Canada; in the third, the phenomenon is well documented in studies of British English in the 16th century, and noted in many modern studies of British, New Zealand and

Australian speech. It is certainly possible that it has occurred in Canada since it was brought here by the first settlers, and that its spread (if it is spreading) is completely unrelated to American influence.

The second positive feature of the book is perhaps its best quality. It is designed, as already mentioned, for use in schools, and the pedagogical method on which it is based is heavily inductive. In order to use this methodology as fully as possible, it is available in a school edition which incorporates a forty-eight-page Student Handbook of things to think about, examine, investigate. But its method is in fact inductive throughout. It combines its thorough and informed discussion of Canadian English, which is printed in a column of black type occupying about two-thirds of each page, with marginalia printed in red which variously comment on the text, illustrate it, or invite the reader to criticize, qualify or extend it. Thus at almost every point those sometimes dubious assertions which are taken over from the sources McConnell has drawn on are implicitly questioned — as they should be.

As a textbook for its primary audience, it is exemplary. No better work is possible at present (Well, one qualification: someone at Gage's should hang his head in shame at the mess made of the phonetic transcriptions in the book). With its attractive layout, its generous and well chosen illustrations, its inductive approach, it may help us to overcome the fundamental problem that there are not enough field-workers to do the work that has to be done. For university courses on the English language, the book is more than adequate, and again certainly the best that is available.

For folklorists, the book has many points of interest. Naturally it does not give as complete a picture of Canadian English as the Dictionaries do. But, as McConnell mentions in paraphrasing M.B. Emeneau's discussion of the Lunenburg Co. (N.S.) word *Belsnickels*, the folk heritage of Canadian English is revealed in

the language (p. 167); and the dialectologists and lexicographers whose work she draws on and extends therefore share folklorists' interest in folk speech, rural customs and regional cultures. This common interest is particularly clear in her discussion of "Folklore and Sayings" (pp. 135-8), but in fact it pervades much of the book. As a synoptic view of what is known about the linguistic reflections of the folk heritage of Anglophone Canada, the book is in every respect the best work available. In addition, just as a book to browse in, reflect on, and perhaps respond to, it is a delight.

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Linguistic Survey of the Ottawa Valley
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Canadian Folklore Perspectives

Edited by Kenneth S. Goldstein
(St. John's: Department of Folklore,
Memorial University of Newfoundland,
1978. 68 pp. \$4.00.)

Aside from the editor's two pages of introduction, this item is composed of four contributions that originated as presentations at a panel on "Folklore Research in Canada" at the annual meeting of the American Folklore Society in Detroit, Michigan, November 3-6, 1977. The initial two papers are essentially regional surveys emanating from the country's two university departments of folklore: Neil V. Rosenberg reports out of Memorial University of Newfoundland on "Regionalism and Folklore in Atlantic Canada", and Elli Kõngäs Maranda writes out of Laval University on "French-Canadian Folklore Scholarship: An Overview." Both surveys concentrate on current developments and direct the reader to earlier writings for information on past accomplishments rela-