MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS FREDERIC GOMES CASSIDY

On June 14, 2000, Frederic G. Cassidy died at age 92 following a short illness. Up until the moment when he suffered a stroke, he was energetic, purposeful, and mentally acute, and he amazed the university community by continuing to work steadily on the monumental project that made his name familiar to word-lovers around the world. The Dictionary of American Regional English (familiarly known as DARE) was a project he began in 1963 when, at age 56, he could well have been thinking about retirement instead. DARE became his second career and it put the Department of English on the map for the general public as well as for scholars. Reaction to the Dictionary project was so positive, in both scholarly and popular venues, that Fred appeared on the Today Show, the Tonight Show, and in Time, Newsweek, and USA Today, as well as in publications devoted to linguistics; he was also frequently and admiringly mentioned in William Safire’s “On Language” column in the New York Times Magazine.

The Festschrift dedicated to Cassidy on his 85th birthday in 1992 (Hall, Doane, and Ringler, Old English and New: Studies in Language and Linguistics in Honor of Frederic G. Cassidy) is divided into four major sections that suggest the range of his contributions over the whole of his career: Early English; Creoles; Lexicography; and American Language. The foreword to this work contains a long, largely unedited interview with Cassidy, which enables the reader to hear the cadences of his speech.

Cassidy’s interest in Creole English came naturally enough—he was born in Kingston, Jamaica, in 1907, to a Canadian father and a Jamaican mother. He grew up hearing their two varieties of standard British English and the Creole variety of the Black majority as well. (His fluency in the patois was so firmly ingrained that, on visiting Jamaica about seventy years later, he was able to frustrate an attempted robbery by scolding the attacker in Creole.) In adulthood Cassidy liked to joke that his interest in language resulted from osmosis: the words must have seeped into him from the dictionary when, as a small child, he sat on “the big Webster’s” in order to reach the dinner table.

When Fred was eleven, he and his parents, older brother, and younger sister moved from Kingston to Akron, Ohio. Here the young Jamaican was introduced to yet another variety of English and was dismayed to learn that it was he who sounded “funny.” But that distinction was to have a significant benefit. It piqued the curiosity of a classmate who sought to know and befriend the boy who looked, acted, and sounded so different. That classmate was Willard Van Orman (“Van”) Quine, later to become one of America’s most distinguished philosophers. The friendship he and Fred began as boys was to last their lifetimes, nourished by shared experiences at Oberlin College, regular correspondence through the decades, and frequent summer hiking trips.

Cassidy’s time at Oberlin was one of the best periods of his life, a time he remembered vividly, spoke about enthusiastically, and commemorated with regular attendance at class reunions. It was at Oberlin that he explored languages, philosophy, and science, discovered the world’s literature, and celebrated the fellowship of close friends and companions. And it was at Oberlin that he met a young Frenchwoman, Hélène Lucile Monod, who was also to have a distinguished teaching career at the UW–Madison, in the Department of French and Italian. They married in 1931, produced four children, and loved and nurtured one another until her death in 1980.

BA and MA degrees at Oberlin (1930, 1932) were followed in 1938 by a PhD from the University of Michigan. In Ann Arbor Fred had his first opportunity to teach, learning from one of his mentors, Albert H. Marckwardt, that “the secret of undergraduate teaching is to discover the obvious in terms of
surprise.” He also had the chance to learn lexicography firsthand, through his work as a graduate assistant on the Early Modern English Dictionary project. The teaching experience convinced him that a university career was his goal; the dictionary training provided the foundation for two major projects in decades to come.

As his first academic appointment, Fred Cassidy accepted a position in 1939 as Instructor in the English Department at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. He moved steadily through the ranks of assistant professor (1942), associate professor (1947), and full professor (1950), retiring as emeritus professor in 1978. In 1999 he celebrated his sixtieth year on campus. Madison was a place he had no desire to leave, and his colleagues in the department and across the campus were people he was pleased to be among.

Cassidy’s teaching covered a wide range of subjects over the years, including Old English, Beowulf, Middle English, Chaucer, History of the English Language, Introduction to English Literature, Phonetics, Linguistic Geography, and composition. He found time to write dozens of journal articles as well as to edit (with A.H. Marckwardt) the Scribner Handbook of English (2nd, 3rd, and 4th editions); to revise Robertson’s Development of Modern English; to write The Place Names of Dane County and (with Audrey R. Duckert) A Method for Collecting Dialect; and to revise (with Richard N. Ringler) Bright’s Old English Grammar and Reader (3rd edition).

In the 1940s he also did fieldwork for the Linguistic Atlas of the North Central States and (with graduate student Audrey R. Duckert) conducted the Wisconsin English Language Survey, work that established his place in the linguistic geography community and provided valuable experience for the DARE project.

Fulbright Fellowships in 1951–52 and 1958–59 allowed Fred to return to Jamaica, where he traversed the island with a bulky forty-pound tape recorder, a twenty-five-pound converter, and automobile batteries to run the equipment. He made careful recordings of native Jamaicans, who talked with him about their lives and their work: cutting sugar cane, growing pineapples, fishing, or making dugout canoes. These conversations provided the data for his book Jamaica Talk (1961) and for his pioneering work The Dictionary of Jamaican English (with Robert B. LePage, 1967; 2nd ed. 1980). The latter book is notable as the first serious lexicographical treatment of a Creole language; it is considered the standard work and is a model for other Caribbean lexicons.

In a 1963 article “The ADS Dictionary—How Soon?” Cassidy chided the American Dialect Society for failing to act on its longstanding intention of producing a dictionary of the dialects of the United States. Having spoken, he was appointed Editor and urged to get on with the work. With the aid of colleague Audrey Duckert, he inaugurated the Dictionary of American Regional English, obtained a grant from the U.S. Office of Education, and sent eighty fieldworkers out to 1,002 communities across the country between 1965 and 1970 to collect the data for DARE. A massive reading project to collect written citations was undertaken at the same time.

Cassidy recognized that computers would be a necessary tool in the analysis of the 2.5 million responses collected in the fieldwork, so he engaged computer scientists in the then-unusual task of working with words rather than numbers. The unique contribution of computers to lexicography in the DARE project was not just the sorting of the alphabetic responses in various ways, but the linking of each response to a particular “Informant” and to that person’s age, sex, race, level of education, and community type. Cassidy and his computer colleagues devised a map of the U.S. that was adjusted by population density rather than geographic area, so that each Informant had the same amount of space on the map. The program allowed an operator to create a map showing the location of each person who used a particular

(continued)
word so that it would be immediately obvious whether that word had a regional distribution. The program also correlated each word with the social characteristics of the informants so that editors could determine whether a word showed social as well as regional patterning. Many of these maps are included in the text of the Dictionary.

The first volume of DARE appeared in 1985, with Volume II following in 1991 and Volume III in 1996. (Two more volumes of text and a supplementary volume of data are projected.) With the publication of Volume I, John Gross wrote in The New York Times that “It already seems clear that when it is completed the dictionary will rank as one of the glories of contemporary American scholarship” (October 8, 1985). Other reviewers, in both scholarly and popular publications, have agreed. The book has been likened to the Oxford English Dictionary, and Cassidy to Sir James A.H. Murray, its principal editor.

Like the OED, DARE became a much more massive and time-consuming enterprise than originally anticipated, growing into a major unit of the English Department and employing, at one point, a staff of eighteen. Students who were able to mention work at DARE on their résumés found that doors to the publishing world were readily opened, and a letter of recommendation from Fred Cassidy was a very valuable asset.

Cassidy’s accomplishments have been recognized by the awarding of the Musgrave Silver Medal (1962) and the Musgrave Gold Medal (1984) by the Institute of Jamaica; honorary degrees from Memorial University of Newfoundland, Indiana State University, the University of Michigan, Oberlin College, and the University of the West Indies; and the Wisconsin Humanities Council’s Governor’s Award for Excellence in Public Humanities Scholarship.

But public honors are a less important measure of Fred Cassidy’s influence on the world of language scholarship than the testimony of colleagues and former students: these people unanimously remember a mentor whose strong support and gentle criticisms made them better scholars, whose genuine interest in people made every acquaintance a friend, whose intellectual curiosity was never at rest, and whose wit and love of play enlivened every gathering of which he was a part. His friends remember Fred’s love of dancing, playreading, gardening, and good food, his delight in puns, limericks, and all kinds of wordplay, and, perhaps more than anything else, his eternal good cheer and unquenchable optimism. The feeling of many of his colleagues was summed up by one who said, “It was ridiculous to suppose that he could live forever, but I just assumed somehow that he would—or at least until the last volume was completed.” His colleagues at DARE will complete the project in his honor, taking up his rallying cry, “On to Z!”

MEMORIAL COMMITTEE
Joan H. Hall, Chair
Nick Doane
Dick Ringler

UW-Madison Fac Doc 1518 - 6 November 2000