

The 1930s British Drama League Dialect Records

It is of the nature of broadcasting that it must be comprehensible to the maximum number. Thus, from its inception in 1922 the British Broadcasting Company was concerned to establish a standard English. In 1926 the Company set up a committee which included Robert Bridges, Poet Laureate, (Chairman), Sir Johnston Forbes-Robertson, George Bernard Shaw and A. Lloyd Jones, Lecturer in Phonetics at the School of Oriental Studies, University of London, Secretary.

In 1928, 1930 and 1932 the British Broadcasting Corporation, as it had by then become, published a series of three pamphlets under the title: Recommendations to Announcers regarding Certain Words of Doubtful Pronunciation.

In the foreword the Director-General, J. C. W. Reith commented that, "since the earliest days of broadcasting the B.B.C. has recognised a great responsibility towards the problems of spoken English. . . They might have been evaded . . . Tendencies might have been observed and either reinforced or resisted. . . . (There was) no attempt to establish uniformity but for doubtful words."

And in the introduction A. Lloyd Jones tells us that, 'compulsory education and universal reading have begun to break up our historic dialects . . . looking forward: broadcasting may have a permanent influence on our language. . . Listeners in various areas hear sometimes types of speech with which they are familiar, sometimes not. E.g. "dance" to rhyme with "Dan" / "dance" to rhyme with "darn". As a comparison, people dress like their fellows and feel out of place if they don't; similar feelings may arise if they are subject to different types of speech. Affectation and pedantry, reactions to perceiving, raise hackles whether or not they are actually there. Likewise there is pride and prejudice in one's local variety of speech. Is there a standard pronunciation or only alternative pronunciations, an unavoidable question any attempt to answer being bedevilled by difficulty if not impossibility of accurate measurement.

Unlike Germany and France we have no standard-imposing organisation. The function of the Advisory Committee on Spoken English is to suggest . . . solutions in accordance with one accepted usage.'

[This is a précis of the opening section of the Introduction to Part I.]

As wireless penetrated the nation's homes and schools successive generations of children acquired an evermore uniform language and regional differences in speech became increasingly diluted and blurred. Within a decade it became clear that dialects spoken for centuries when few people in their entire lives ever travelled more than thirty miles from their places of birth would soon disappear.

In the early '30s the British Drama League engaged the Columbia Graphophone Company to prepare a set of 78rpm shellac records of dialects as exemplars for the acting profession. These were spoken by twenty-four people still regularly speaking dialects of their regions. Thus, this set is probably unique as a prime source of knowledge of dialects of the British Isles before the birth of radio. The richness and diversity are astonishing. The introductory text and listing are reproduced from the original album; matrix numbers and dates of recording have been added.

These Records are issued by the BRITISH DRAMA LEAGUE

9, Fitzroy Square, London, W.1.

The aim of the League is to assist the development of the Art of the Theatre, and to promote a right relation between Drama and the Life of the Community.

Membership is open to all persons who are concerned with the practice or enjoyment of the art of the Theatre. Any organized society or group may also become affiliated to the Drama League, and as an affiliated body acquire all the privileges of membership. The annual Subscription for Individual Members or Affiliated Organizations is One Guinea.

Privileges of membership include use of the League's Library of over 25,000 volumes, receipt of the League's monthly Journal, "Drama," Advice by post, etc. The League also includes a special Village Drama Section, and organizes Community Theatre Festivals, Drama Schools, Costume Department, Bookshop for Members, etc.

Under the Chairmanship of Mr. Geoffrey Whitworth, Director of the British Drama League, the special Committee entrusted with the preparation of the present series of Dialect Records included—

The Rt. Hon. Lord Tweedsmuir.

Miss Elsie Fogerty, C.B.E., Principal of the Central School of Speech Training and
Dramatic Art.

Miss Mary Kelly, Secretary, Village Drama Section, British Drama League.

Mr. W. H. Kerridge, late Principal, Education Department, H.M.V. Gramophone
Company, Limited.

Mr. J. Clifford Turner.

Mr. William Will.

Bearing in mind the primary object of the Series, the Committee has not attempted to select the various dialects on a strictly uniform basis. To provide a complete phonetic standard of each variant would have been far too large an undertaking. The twenty-four examples offered will, it is hoped, meet the needs of Actors, Play Producers and Teachers, faced by the problem of a form of dialect with which they do not happen to be familiar. In such cases recourse to the appropriate gramophone reproduction will offer a trustworthy model.

Each record starts with the same "Standard Passage"—a short monologue based on Skeat's Phonetic Survey (1884), which comprises in the shortest possible space all the sounds in the phonetic alphabet.

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