Harold E. Palmer After He Left Japan

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Biographical information on Harold Edward Palmer (1877-1949), an English educator, is abundant and easily accessible. It deals, however, almost entirely with the years before and during his stay in Japan. Information on him after he left Japan is at best fragmentary. This article is an attempt to fill in those missing years after he left Japan in 1936.

1

After working for 14 years as Linguistic Adviser to the Japanese Ministry of Education and Director of the Institute for Research in English Teaching, Palmer returned to England to work for Longmans, Green as an adviser on linguistic problems and as a textbook writer. In fact, he had been offered the position by the publisher in 1935, when he was in London to attend the memorable conference on vocabulary selection for the teaching of English as a foreign language by the Carnegie Corporation.

His first major publication after returning to England was A Grammar of English Words. The author's intention is stated in the book's introduction (Palmer 1938a: iii).

First, as its title indicates, it is a grammar. It is not, however, the sort of grammar that contains chapters defining, describing and explaining respectively the noun, pronoun, verb, adjective, etc., in classified order, nor is it a grammar of which each chapter is devoted to some part of the sentence (subject, predicate, direct object, etc.) ; it contains, as a matter of fact, no chapters at all. Like a dictionary it is a collection of words in alphabetical order, but unlike a dictionary it gives the grammar of each word in detail ; it is a grammar of words.

The work listed one thousand English words which in his experience had been found to give the most trouble to foreign students, together with their pronunciation, information concerning the several meanings of each word, its inflections and derivatives, and
the collocations and phrases into which it enters.

A second major work, published in the same year, was The New Method Grammar. Referring to this book Palmer's daughter, Dorothée Anderson, explains (Anderson 1969: p.158):

It is written for younger students of English as a foreign language. It is written in English for it is not assumed that the students are ignorant of that language. In general, the book follows the lines of traditional grammar and the terminology with which most teachers are familiar. It deals with the grammar of classes of words not with the grammar of individual words. The book is looked upon simply as a series of definite instructions as to how to build up English sentences in the manner of those who use English as their mother-tongue.

Father was very keen on introducing charts and diagrams to demonstrate the whole aspect of the particular subject under review. Indeed a number of his books contain such material and a good example of this feature is given in the appendix of The New Method Grammar. It takes the form of a syntactic railway system, viz. sentence construction.

Palmer's third and last important publication was The International English Course. From the editor's preface to the 1965 edition (Palmer 1965: v–vi) we learn:

The International Course of English, printed in separate bilingual editions for Spanish, French, Italian, Dutch, Czech and Polish students, was Palmer's crowning achievement as a text-book writer. . . . The course is intended for beginners, and for those students who already have some knowledge of English but need a rapid revision course with the emphasis on conversational English.

The merits of the International Course are obvious, but its most interesting feature is undoubtedly the systematic presentation of the material in the form of substitution tables, the possibilities of which were first demonstrated by Palmer himself in his book 100 Substitution Tables.

Among his articles was a particularly interesting one written in 1942 on the then current issue of spelling reform (Palmer 1942: pp. 320–322).

2

Palmer was able to acquire a house with three acres of land in Felbridge, near East Grinstead, Sussex in 1936. This was, his daughter recollects (Anderson 1969: p. 158), where, for so many years, he had hoped to come and live one day. Here he lived with his wife, Elizabeth, devoting his energies to writing. The property at Felbridge included a garden room, in which a full-size Japanese room which had been shipped from Japan to England was erected. The room had been presented to him as a memento by many of his friends when he left the country. Phyllis Willis, A. S. Hornby's daughter, who visited Palmer with her father shortly after the Second World War, recollects the room in a letter to the writer (Willis 1990: personal correspondence).
I recall one visit to Harold Palmer, with my father. He and his wife were living. I believe, at Felbridge, near East Grinstead. Their house had a large garden, and he had a garden room containing a complete Japanese room that he had brought back with him—presumably when he returned to England from Tokyo some years previously. It had tatami, shoji, engawa, a tokonoma, everything properly done, and I believe he did most of his work in that room.

Many years later the room was presented to the British Museum (personal correspondence with Mr. Victor Harris, Department of Japanese Antiquities, The British Museum, 1990).

In Felbridge with more leisure at his disposal, Palmer could indulge himself in his ideas and many hobbies. A ‘Syntax Garden’ was one of his notable achievements (Anderson 1969: p. 159).

Father decided to construct a practical plan of his syntactic railway system in part of the grounds of his property. This involved several months of enjoyable work. He would collect boulders, stones, etc., for placing in strategic positions to form hills in miniature — excavate soil to represent valleys and so forth. Junctions and stations were installed at the appropriate places and as much of the natural terrain as possible utilized to make the whole appear in the form of a large landscape. If a simple sentence were needed, it would necessitate following the main line and picking up one of a number of words at various stations. Or additional words could be introduced by diverting the train on to various lines by means of the appropriate junctions according to the part of the sentence needed. This offered innumerable sentences built up in an interesting and amusing manner. It was one of Father’s proud achievements and all visitors were invited to inspect his syntax garden for a demonstration of its workings.

He was also interested in the art of Bonkei (miniature Japanese landscape gardens on trays), archery, map-making, typography and printing, as well as being an amateur actor, motorist, and impassioned geologist (Anderson 1969: p. 160; Hornby and Jones 1950: pp. 91-92). Furthermore, he was an ardent supporter of the League of Nations and ‘one-world’ movement (Redman 1967: p. 16). His energy was such that he enthusiastically pursued all of these activities in addition to his professional work.

3

It seems that Palmer desired to establish an Institute for Research into English Language Teaching in London. However, he was deeply disappointed at the lack of response to his proposal. A further major blow around this time was the death of his only son, Tristram. The Second World War had broken out in 1939. Tristram had joined the Royal Air Force, and was subsequently promoted to bomber pilot. In July 1942 he was killed; Palmer never recovered from the shock, and from then on his health deteriorated.
During 1944 he was sent by the British Council on a lecture tour of South America. Reginald A. Close, who met him in Buenos Aires, writes as follows:

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Dear Professor Tanaka,

I am afraid there is not much I can tell you about Harold Palmer’s life after he left Japan. I met him in Buenos Aires in 1943 or 1944.

He had gone there as an adviser on English language teaching, probably under the auspices of the British Council. I remember Palmer’s telling me that he had tried to arouse interest in the foundation of an Institute for Research into English Language Teaching in London and that he was disappointed by the lack of response from the people he met in London. However, the lack of response was probably due to the fact that the Second World War was either imminent or in progress. He was then appointed to Buenos Aires, where he hoped to find sponsors for an Institute like the one with which he had been associated in Tokyo. But again he was disappointed.

However, I think his failure to find support for his project both in London and Buenos Aires was also due largely to his precarious state of health. In Buenos Aires I found him to be a sick man, worn out by his exertions, and he needed someone to nurse him.

Friends of mine told me that when he returned from Buenos Aires to live in East Grinstead, Sussex, in England, he showed all the symptoms of having suffered a nervous breakdown.

My own opinion is that most of what he achieved was done in Japan. He was creative pioneer who blazed a trail which Hornby and his disciples followed with great advantages to all of us who are concerned with English language teaching.

Yours sincerely,

R. A. Close

Ronald Mackin, at that time Director of Studies in the Instituto Cultural Anglo-Uruguayo, met him in Montevideo. Many years later he recollected Palmer’s visit (Mackin 1990: pp. 16-17).

Some forty years ago, a fragile Harold Palmer was sent by the British Council on a lecture tour of South America. He did not complete it, but fulfilled his programme in Rio de Janeiro and moved on to Montevideo and Buenos Aires, where he enthralled large audiences of English teachers and students, avid to hear the words of the leading guru of
the time. They little realised what went on behind the scenes to enable him to appear before them; but when he did appear, temporarily “above the line” as he put it, it was to delight them not so much as a serious lecturer, which he was, but as a “light entertainer”, which he claimed to be (and was!)

Part of Palmer's stock-in-trade was to demonstrate his ostensive procedure in a first lesson of Japanese delivered to the whole assembly. “Korevanandesuka?” he would begin, holding up a book... and there they were launched into this extraordinary lesson by this extraordinary man, with never a word of English or Spanish, in which they enthusiastically joined, “conversing”, as the Learn-a-language-in-a-week advertisements say, about books, pens, microphones and the more usual props of the direct-method first lesson.

4

Palmer returned from South America a sick man, and was in poor health during his remaining years at Felbridge. He died of acute cardiac failure and broncho pneumonia at his home on the sixteenth of November, 1949. (see Appendix)

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