

## **NEW ZEALAND ENGLISH PRONUNCIATION: AN INVESTIGATION INTO SOME EARLY WRITTEN RECORDS**

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In 1960 George Turner, writing on the origin of Australian vowel sounds, wrote that such a study was much more difficult than comparable phonological studies of other Germanic languages such as Gothic, Old English and Old Norse because of the absence of relevant written examples of the language for study.

Turner is obviously referring to the fact that Antipodean sound changes were not revealed through a standard spelling system. On the other hand the development of varieties such as Australian and New Zealand English is relatively recent. We know a good deal about the pattern of early settlement, and it is possible to find out quite a lot about the early settlers. And while those early settlers did not obligingly write phonetically, they did sometimes comment on linguistic developments, just as writers of letters to the Editor continue to comment today.

The question I have been asking is: when did people first start to notice a definable variety of pronunciation in New Zealand? And the second question, which is closely related, is: what were their attitudes towards it?

The evidence I have found is of two kinds. On the one hand we have statements made by one or two people who had a knowledge of phonetics and who were interested in language varieties. On the other hand we have comments from those who saw change as decay and corruption and who wrote sometimes quite accurately, if shrilly, about what their ears had been hearing.

The obvious example of my first category is Mr Samuel McBurney who gives what Turner describes as 'the earliest available detailed information on Australian and New Zealand speech'.

McBurney was an Englishman who for a number of years was the principal of the Ladies' College at Geelong in Victoria. He was also a teacher of singing and he travelled about Australia taking classes of tonic solfa singers. It was in order to promote the tonic solfa methods that he and his wife visited New Zealand. It was reported in the *Lyttelton Times*, 6th October 1887, that Mr and Mrs McBurney arranged a public entertainment at which Mr McBurney sang songs of all nations and Mrs McBurney played the zither. Mr McBurney's effort said the reviewer, 'deserved better patronage than it received'.

McBurney had an interest in phonetics and had apparently studied Melville Bell's *Visible Speech* on the voyage to Australia. His interest in singing no doubt also led him to the work of the English phonetician A.J. Ellis, whose books *Speech in Song* and *Pronunciation for Singers* describe sounds using a phonetic system of Ellis's own devising which he called 'glossic'. McBurney sent Ellis a comparative table of the Australasian pronunciations of 44 words which he had noted in the schools he had visited. Ellis was very pleased that McBurney had used his glossic script and commented:

This examination, conducted by one man over such a large range of country is entirely unprecedented, and furnishes the first trustworthy account that has been rendered of Australian English...His phonetic training was, of course, indispensable, and adds much weight to his testimony. (Ellis, 1889:248)

In New Zealand where McBurney spent a month, he visited Auckland, Napier, Wellington, Nelson, Christchurch and Dunedin, and he lists these places separately, showing pronunciation variations in each. It is difficult to know the basis of his observations. We are never told how many speakers he heard in any one place, but are given vague proportions - *g* (general) - more than three-quarters; *m* (many) - more than half, and so on. He also includes ? - 'doubtful if proportion is rightly estimated'. In some instances he distinguishes *Boys* from *Girls*.

It seems that in some cases the absence of any information on a certain word until part way through his research suggests not so much that the feature was not heard, but that he has added further examples to his list as he went along. For example the word *simplicity* appears, with a comment on the final long /i/. McBurney's attention was apparently drawn to this by two Englishmen who remarked upon it as a colonial peculiarity. But this was not until he got to Brisbane. After

this he found it very common in every other city or town he visited. So it seems that once his attention was drawn to it he found many instances of it.

Ellis published McBurney's comparative table (Ellis, 1889: 239-245). He also published extracts from an article McBurney had written for a Christchurch paper.<sup>1</sup> In this article he comments on a number of things he has heard, such as the use of the intrusive r, the absence of the aspirate, the clipping of *-ing* (*singin'*, *shillin'*). He noticed a great variety of pronunciations of *down town*, said that *I die* sounded like *Oi doi*, and commented that the short u in *but* and *tub* approached the /a/ sound in *father*.

Professor Arnold Wall in a broadcast talk given in 1951 made much of McBurney's comments on the /a/ sound, which he gave as /æa/. In fact McBurney only remarked on this in relation to the strange sound emanating from Auckland newspaper boys, calling "Evening Star" - hardly a comment on a general New Zealand pronunciation, as Arnold Wall suggested.

Ellis printed only extracts of McBurney's article in *Early English Pronunciation*, and he selected those parts which described distinctive features of New Zealand English. But there were other comments in McBurney's article which were not printed by Ellis, which seem to me to be equally interesting:

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. At the same time there is little doubt that slight variations will arise by which colonials may be recognised, and naturally there is likely to be a difference between places widely separate. So great has been the intercourse and intermingling of the many parts of which we are made up, that the distinction is not nearly so great as might be expected. Indeed, for months after I had commenced my investigation on this subject, the unfailing answer to my enquiries in the different Australian colonies was, 'We hear no distinction between ourselves and visitors'. It is only since coming to New Zealand that I have been able to say definitely 'There is another type here'. Even this is difficult to define, and, as young people grow up, may alter and perhaps assimilate to that prevailing in Australia, as I found it doing in Wellington more

than any other place. (*Press*, 5 Oct. 1887)

These particular comments were taken up by the *Press*. On 8th October 1887 they published a leader on the subject.

It is satisfactory to learn that the Queen's English is well or better spoken in the colonies than in the Old Country where it had its birth. Mr McBurney, who it would appear has been going among us and engaging us in conversation by way of examining into the health of our aspirates, our final *ings*, our vowels and numerous other ingredients that go into the making of correct pronunciation, assures us of that. In his short but very observant paper on 'Colonial Pronunciation' which we published the other day, he shows that both Australia and New Zealand have their dialectical peculiarities, but the pronunciation of the colonies as a whole is purer than can be found in any given district at Home... 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 untravellered Britishers at the 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.

Samuel McBurney had a professional interest in speech, and his comments and descriptions seem to be almost entirely given without judgement.

My second source of information comes from a group of men who were far less reticent about passing judgement. These were New Zealand school inspectors, many of whom felt it was their clear duty, and also that of all teachers, to preserve the purity of the English language - that 'well of English undefiled'.

From 1880 to 1930 the reports written by the school inspectors were published in the appendices to the Parliamentary Reports on Education. In some years (such as the years immediately following the first World War) the reports were greatly abridged, but in many years they were printed in full. In these reports the inspectors write about the teaching, the children, the syllabus, the buildings and the vegetable gardens of the schools in their particular districts. While these

reports contain fascinating social comment about life in New Zealand at the time they were written, a subject of major concern was reading. Recitation was also seen as an important part of the English lesson. It is when commenting on these two subjects - reading and recitation - that the inspectors frequently added their own observations about pronunciation. The majority of the inspectors were born outside New Zealand, more coming from Scotland than anywhere else.<sup>2</sup> But those born or brought up in Australia or New Zealand do not seem to differ in the nature of their comments on pronunciation from those born elsewhere. To some inspectors pronunciation was a matter of great concern and interest and they commented on it every year in their reports. There were some who never mentioned it.

From reading these reports it seems to me that a pattern emerges. From 1880, when the reports begin, until the turn of the century, there was almost no reference at all to anything that suggests a distinctive New Zealand variety. From about 1900 until 1912 (which was the time of the Cohen Commission on Education), a few comments began to emerge which suggested that inspectors were becoming aware of what one of them described as 'Austral English'. After 1912 the comments increase significantly with many references to impure vowels and the 'colonial twang' and a great concern is expressed that something should be done about it.

In the *Press* leader commenting on McBurney's article, the writer described Mr McBurney as 'going among us...and examining into the health of our aspirates and final *ings*'. From 1880 until the turn of the century we find the usual complaints about elisions - (*Artic* for *Arctic*, *actuly* for *actually*, *famly* for *family* etc) but it was the aspirate and *ing* that caused more concern than anything else to the inspectors.

John Smith, Westland, 1880:

It is a common experience to find children repeating such lines as 'O 'appy 'appy 'ummin-bird', varied by 'O wappy yappy yummin' bird'.  
*AJHR*, II-11, 1880:4)

John Gammell, Southland, 1884:

The initial 'h' is cruelly neglected in many quarters. (*AJHR*, E-1b, 1884: 23)

W.E. Spencer, Taranaki, 1896:

Dropping the final consonant and misplacing the aspirate are also very common in some parts of the district, the latter being very difficult to overcome. (*AJHR*, E-1b, 1896:8)

Some teachers must have observed the inspectors' warnings. When W.C. Hodgson inspected schools in Nelson he found:

A slight tendency to pompousness and a certain exaggerated enunciation of the initial 'h' are occasionally observable. But these peculiarities will doubtless wear off in after life, and are, at any rate, better than a slovenly indistinctness. (*AJHR*, E-1b, 1893: 15)

Comments about the aspirate and *ing* continue to appear for some years, but after the turn of the century there are more comments which suggest that from the inspectors' point of view things were improving. D.A. Strachan, Marlborough, 1907:

The trouble with 'h' was less pronounced this year... (*AJHR*, E-1b, 1907: 23)

A.J. Morton, Westland, 1909:

The consonants suffer most from indolent methods, especially the final letters. This does not apply to the initial 'h'; and the final 'g' of the suffix *-ing*, the omission of which is now infrequent. (*AJHR*, E2, 1909: 124)

The last comment I found on this in the reports was in 1913 from William Austin in the Grey district:

The misplacing of the aspirate and the dropping of the final 'g' were hardly ever met with. (*AJHR*, E2, Appendix C, 1913: xxxvii)

From 1880 until 1900 some of the inspectors commented favourably on the pronunciation they heard in their schools. Their observations reflect McBurney's comments and those of the leader writer in the *Press* that there is much good speech heard in New Zealand.

John Smith, Westland, 1880:

In the upper classes reading nearly always possesses the qualities of fluency and correct pronunciation. (AJHR, II-II, 1880: 4)

P. Goyen, Dunedin, 1885:

The reading is generally characterised by correct pronunciation. (AJHR, E-1b, 1885: 42)

W.C. Hodgson of Nelson was even more specific in 1893:

Although various nationalities help to make up the staple of our scholars, the result of this blending together seems, so far, to have resulted in the disappearance of any marked accents or provincialisms. (AJHR, E-1b, 1893: 15)

From reading through all the reports I was interested to note that almost all the favourable comments on children's pronunciation appeared before the turn of the century. After that they were most rare.

After about 1900 the inspectors began to make specific comments about vowels. It seems that as comments on the aspirate diminish comments on the vowels increase. The first to be noticed was /aɪ/. Robert Lee of Wellington noticed a tendency to pronounce /aɪ/ as /ɔɪ/.

Thus 'fine' is pronounced 'foine'. (AJHR, E-1b, 1889: 14)

The same man blamed the teachers themselves in 1900:

Some teachers...speak so badly as to be disqualified on that ground alone. Those who say 'toe' or 'tew' for 'two', 'foive' for 'five', 'system' for 'system' are manifestly unfit to teach reading. (AJHR, E-1b, 1900: 14)

In 1902 G.A. Harkness of Nelson noticed in some parts 'a twang pronunciation, particularly of the "ou" sound'. (AJHR, E-1b, 1902: 28) The following year he complained about 'the broadening of the vowel "i" until it resembles "oi"'. (AJHR, E-1b, 1903: 30) In 1904 William Gray and Jas Milne of Wanganui suggested that classes should be made to say these words each day in school: *house, pound, ground, round, bounce, how, cow, now* etc. (AJHR, E-1b, 1904: 10) The Wellington

inspectors in 1908 asked teachers to have a special concern for purity of accent. They were troubled by the fact that in the schools they visited there was:

...a failure to appreciate the value of the common vowel sounds - e.g. *moine*, *laig*, *teown* (and a more recent development, *ut* for 'it', *plasuz* for 'places'). (AJHR, E-1b, 1908: 16)

In 1911 D.A. Strachan of Marlborough provided his own collection of errors noted through the year:

Woomen - women, oaften - often, mile - mail, tile - tail, oies - eyes, noine - nine, voilet - violet, bolbs - bulbs, manufactured - manufactured... The small plant ultimately splits the rock, so it is highly important that these should be checked, for hence grow dialects which would, in the end, if given free rein, divide the nation. (AJHR, E-2 Appendix C, 1911: xxvi)

In that year of 1911 the Otago inspectors were also becoming very concerned about the speech in their district, and they said that the teachers were as much to blame as the pupils, a comment reiterated by many of the inspectors:

During the year we have frequently had occasion to comment on the faulty enunciation and impurity of vowel sounds to be met with among our pupils and even among our teachers; but now that the services of an instructor in elocution are provided, we look for considerable improvement in this regard. (AJHR, E-2, Appendix C, 1911: xlix)

It seems from these reports that after the turn of the century the school inspectors were becoming more and more aware of what they termed 'impure vowels'. When they gave examples they nearly always cited the closing diphthongs, not I suspect because these had changed first or more than other sounds, but because these are the sounds that people seem to notice first.

In 1912 a special commission was set up to examine New Zealand education. This was known as the Cohen Commission, after its chairman, and in the final report transcripts are given of lengthy submissions as well as questions and answers from those involved in education throughout New Zealand. Members of the Commission seem to have been especially interested in the question of pronunciation and it comes up on a number of



occasions when teachers were being cross-examined. Margaret Lorimer, Principal of Nelson Girls' College was asked about the pronunciation of her girls, and replied, 'We are always waging war against the colonial accent'. She was then asked if she thought that things were getting worse, and she replied:

Yes, I think so. The particular vowels that are so badly treated are 'a', 'i' and 'o'. A great many children in Wellington talk about 'Dy's By', 'time' is 'toime', and 'flour' is 'fleour'. They twist the vowel sound. (AJHR, E-12, 1912: 637)

Mr Augustus Heine, acting Headmaster of Wellington College was also asked about 'this objectionable colonial dialect', and he too replied that it was getting worse, especially in the last ten years. He repeated this. 'I have noticed it particularly in the last ten years'. He was then asked to provide some evidence for this assertion, and he answered:

Simply on my experience in the English class. Boys of ten or twelve years ago did not have the careless way of pronouncing vowels that they have nowadays. I think it is getting worse and worse every year. If you take a class of thirty at the beginning of the year I do not think you will find more than three or four who will say 'house' correctly. Of course I do not believe in overdoing it, as you find in the case of some people who have been Home, but at the same time the word is 'house' not 'heouse'. Again, a great many, instead of saying 'Oh no', say 'Ow neow'. But you rarely find a boy dropping his h's. (AJHR, E-12, 1912: 623)

Mr Pirani, a member of the Commission, later came back to this topic, and asked Mr Heine to give some examples other than 'house'. Mr Heine obliged:

The 'ou' sound generally, and the pronunciation of 'i'. A large number of boys will call 'fine' 'foine'; and again, the pronunciation of 'a', they will call 'lady' 'lidy', 'make' 'mike', and 'lake' 'like'. (AJHR, E-12, 1912: 624)

Members of the Commission then questioned Mr Heine more closely. How did he know the pronunciation was deteriorating? Had he taken a record of the pronunciation of twenty or thirty years ago? Was he taking a record of it now? Was he noting these

changes phonetically? Mr Heine had to admit that he was relying on his memory. 'It is my own impression', he stated, 'and I am pretty certain of my impression'.

Not all members of the Commission agreed with the criticisms they heard being made of New Zealand speech. Mr Pirani, for example, presented Mr Heine with some of his own examples of impure vowels:

What hope is there for change when we find two of the Principals of the largest secondary schools in New Zealand in giving evidence, using these expressions: 'taine-table' for 'time-table'; 'ai' for 'I'; 'may own' for 'my own'; 'naineteen' for 'nineteen'; 'faive' for 'five'; 'naine' for 'nine'; 'laike' for 'like'; 'gairls' for 'girls'; 'supervaise' for 'supervise'... ..have you heard a primary teacher do worse than that? (AJHR, E-12, 1912: 624)

Mr Heine responded:

I may say I have never heard a male secondary-school teacher pronouncing words in that way. (AJHR, E-12, 1912: 624)

The findings of the Cohen Commission produced great interest in the whole subject of pronunciation in New Zealand. A number of inspectors used the comments made as the justification for urging their teachers to an even greater vigilance in the war against the impure vowels. Some, however, took exception to the adverse criticisms in the Report. The year after the Report of the Commission was published, T.R. Fleming and F.H. Bakewell, inspectors from the Wellington district wrote:

Some weaknesses in the matter of vowel sounds and some slovenliness in enunciation come under our notice, but glaring instances of these faults are now rare - that is as far as language spoken inside the school is concerned - certainly they do not exist to the extent that some of the sweeping assertions made before the Education Commission would lead people to suppose. We are in this matter, quite in agreement with the Nelson inspectors, who consider that critics are too prone to 'dilate upon and exaggerate the prevalence of these defects;' and our experience is precisely similar to theirs - viz., that the spoken language of the children in our primary schools compares more than favourably with that of importat-

ions from other parts of the Empire. It is almost invariably the case that the presence in a class of these newcomers can be unmistakably detected by their strong provincialisms. We do not say that there is not room for improvement; but there is too great a tendency to saddle the unfortunate primary teacher with the sole responsibility for each and every failing of our social system. (AJHR, E-2 Appendix C, 1913: xvii)

From 1912 until 1930, where my research ends, there are constant complaints about impure vowel sounds, and the colonial twang, but once again the sounds specified are always the four closing diphthongs - /ei/, /ai/, /ou/ and /au/; the other vowel specified is the centralised /ɪ/.

The Wellington Inspectors of 1914:

Carelessness or indifference on the part of the teacher is mainly responsible for such improprieties as 'platus' (places), 'dishers' (dishes), 'ut' for 'it', 'paintud' for 'painted'. (AJHR, E-2, Appendix C, 1914: ix)

In a speech to the Wellington Joint Standing Committee of the N.Z. Educational Association, F. Martin Renner in 1924 said:

Our children may not have all the mispronunciations of the typical 'Ostrylian', but it is a fact that scarcely 4% of our first year secondary school pupils speak what one would call cultured English, or standard English.

He then describes what he calls the four most note-worthy defects, and once again those closing diphthongs appear - 'Praise' as 'prise', 'my' as 'moi', 'Mexico' as 'Mexiceow' and 'shout' as 'sheout'. (*Education Gazette*, Aug. 1, 1924: 130)

At the turn of the century the remedy suggested was something called 'oral composition', but after about 1910 we find more and more insistence on the study of phonics, and a special training of the vocal organs, and constant grumblings on the part of the inspectors that the teachers were not taking the time and effort to teach lip drills and breathing exercises. In 1912 the Taranaki inspectors wrote:

A large proportion of the children when they enter school have already acquired habits of slovenly speech and defective methods of breathing in connection with organs of speech. Many teachers seem to overlook the

fact that the speaking mechanism itself has got a defective bias, which can be as a rule be best remedied by a course in phonic drill. The vocal organs must be exercised and drilled in such a way that they acquire the power of producing pure vowel and consonant sounds. (AJHR, E-2, Appendix C, 1912: x)

And the teachers themselves were told to do these phonic drills. The Auckland inspectors of 1913:

There seems but little doubt that the reason why so many teachers lose their voices or suffer from 'weak throats' is that, having so much voice work to do, and being unaware of the complex nature of the mechanism of speech, they unconsciously make improper use of their vocal organ, and sooner or later damage its more delicate parts. (AJHR, E-2, Appendix C, 1913: v)

Five minutes a day spent doing these exercises and lip drill would soon eradicate these faults. And singing would also help to produce those pure vowels. The Otago inspectors of 1919:

We wish, however, that more of our teachers realized the value of school singing as an aid in clear enunciation, in improving the quality of vowel sounds, and in the cultivation of patriotism. (AJHR, E-2, Appendix B, 1919: xviii)

I have concentrated in this paper on the reports of New Zealand School Inspectors. I think these documents do throw some light on the question I initially asked - when did people first start to notice a definable variety of pronunciation in New Zealand? From this evidence it would seem that comments begin to appear after the turn of the century. The features most commented on were the four closing diphthongs and the centralised /ɪ/. This does not mean that these features were not present earlier. McBurney's comments suggest they were. Nor does it mean that they were the only features of New Zealand English. But these were the sounds people first became aware of, and they did not see them as being general in New Zealand until about 1900. On the question of attitudes to New Zealand speech the school inspectors provide plenty of material. Of course they had a special concern with this subject. As one of them pointed out, good speaking was the sign of an educated person. If children were using impure vowel sounds this showed that they were not being properly educated.

Much more needs to be done on this subject, and I think there is more material available. Magazines like the *Triad*, the *Education Gazette*, the *NZ Journal of Education*, the *Bulletin of Phonic Exercises* put out by the NZ Department of Education in 1925 with much space devoted to common errors, - these are all sources of material on this subject. Then there are the voices of elderly New Zealanders recorded by the Mobile Unit of the NZBC in 1940 and kept in the Radio NZ archives in Timaru. And I suspect there is much more that I do not know about. However I think there is probably far more evidence than George Turner ever suspected.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> I would like to acknowledge the help and advice I received from Mr Colin McGeorge of the University of Canterbury Department of Education when I was looking for material on this subject. It was he who tracked down the article by Sam McBurney which was incorrectly given as having appeared in the *Lyttelton Times*.

<sup>2</sup> Information on a number of the earlier school inspectors was found in the *Cyclopedia of New Zealand*, Vols 1-6.

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