
In Memoriam

William G. Cowan (1929–2001)

WILLIAM GEORGE COWAN: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

With the death of William Cowan on 13 June 2001, Canadian linguistics has lost one of its most distinguished scholars of his generation, and one who has rendered great service to the profession. In particular the Algonquinists of North America were served over twenty years, from 1975 till 1994, by his editing of the papers from the annual Algonquian Conferences, first in the now-defunct Mercury series of the National Museum of Canada (Cowan 1975), then, from 1976 onwards, with the imprint of Carleton University (e.g., Cowan 1976, 1994). As George F. Aubin (2001) relates in his obituary, those who attended these conferences regularly “always knew where Bill would be: up towards the front, perhaps off a little to one side. With his shock of whitish hair, he was easy to locate, even for newcomers. An obvious presence, [. . .]. And he would usually stay from the very first paper all the way to the very last paper, amazingly attentive throughout” (Aubin 2001). In addition, from 1984 until one year before his retirement in 1994, he was editor of the *Canadian Journal of Linguistics*. As he reports in his autobiography, during his “tenure as editor, the journal went from a semi-annual publication to a quarterly and greatly expanded its scope in theoretical and experimental linguistics” (Cowan 2001:242). Only those who have edited at least one volume of collective papers can fully appreciate how much effort is involved in this line of work, but I am sure many contributors have greatly benefitted from William Cowan’s careful work as editor, his advice, and help. Without a doubt, he will be remembered as a kind and generous man by all of us.

I have been asked to write on William Cowan as general linguist; I am not sure I am sufficiently competent to do justice to this request. In my view, Bill, as he preferred to be called,¹ was a linguist *tout court*, and an excellent one at that, but not a theorist of language. Happily, in the spring of 2000, I was able to persuade him to write an autobiographical sketch, which I published in *Historiographia Linguistica* (Cowan 2001). This means we have an account of his career second

¹Not unlike George Bernard Shaw, with whom I always felt he had a certain affinity, Bill was not particularly fond of his middle name, though in recent years, at least for administrative purposes, he used a middle initial.

to none. It was accompanied by a fine and recent photograph of Bill (taken by his son Robert in September 2000), and a full bibliography of his published work (pp. 243–248). As a result, my account of Bill's career can be brief.

Born in 1929 in St. Petersburg, Florida, Bill first enrolled at the University of Florida, Gainesville, in 1947. He transferred to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, the following year, and received his B.A. in English Literature from the University of California at Berkeley in 1951. The Korean War was going on at the time and, facing the prospect of being drafted, he learned of "a provision of enlisting in the army with the guarantee of going to the Army Language School in Monterey if I could demonstrate some sort of competence in Russian [which he had]" (Cowan 2001:231). And so he enlisted at Army Language School in December 1951 and learned, among other things, Arabic, a language he continued to study and teach throughout much of his life. After his discharge in 1954 and a year of study in Salamanca, Spain, a happy confluence of events brought him to Cornell University, where, having been eligible for G.I. educational benefits, he enrolled as a graduate student in Spanish and Arabic linguistics. Having earned his Ph.D. in 1960, and because of his knowledge of Arabic, he was recruited by the Foreign Service Institute, working for the better part of the next four years in the Middle East as a supervisor overseeing the teaching of Arabic to American Foreign Service officers, primarily in Beirut. His first full-time academic appointment was at Brown University in Rhode Island, where he taught from 1964 to 1971. With the Vietnam War raging, and fearing that one of his sons could be drafted, Bill decided to accept the position of Professor of Linguistics at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada, in 1971 where he remained until his retirement in 1994.

Unlike many others who had known Bill as an *arabisant* or Algonquinist, I only really came to know him well in early 1983 (although we were both living in the national capital area and had had epistolary contacts), and then mainly because of his interest in the history of linguistics (e.g., Cowan 1973, 1981). Indeed, I recall that in 1978, following the International Conference on the History of the Language Sciences, which I had organized at the University of Ottawa, he served as one of the referees for papers devoted to Arabic linguistic historiography (see Koerner 1980, section 5). So when, in 1983, I was looking for someone who might be interested in a centenary conference in memory of Edward Sapir (1884–1939), it was Bill Cowan who I turned to first.

At that time few Canadian linguists were aware of the fact that Sapir had spent altogether fifteen years of his life in Ottawa (1910–1925) as Chief of Anthropology of the Canadian Geological Survey, a position which soon was converted into the first directorship of the National Museum of Man in the Victoria Memorial Building.² The response I received from Bill was enthusiastic (if one can say so, since Bill was by no means an extrovert), and we soon were joined by Michael

²Renamed the Canadian Museum of Civilization, the museum moved to the Quebec side of the Ottawa River.

K. Foster, a University of Pennsylvania Ph.D. and an Iroquoianist working especially on Cayuga language and culture. Mike was Curator of Iroquoian Ethnology at the Museum at the time and spoke to the director of the Museum, Dr. George F. MacDonald, who ensured his institutional support for the project. Well before the conference, which fittingly took place in the Victoria Memorial Building where Sapir had once had his office, Bill begun to research the archives of the City of Ottawa, the local newspapers, and other places. It was an activity he obviously enjoyed, not least because he could find information on Canadian poet Duncan Campbell Scott (1862–1947) who, like Sapir, was a member of the Ottawa Literary Club.³ Bill also identified various places in Ottawa where Edward Sapir and his family had had their residences, all of them within walking distance from the Museum. When, in summer 1983, he showed me around, I took pictures of several of these houses, many of which are in existence still today, and subsequently put them into a book of appraisals of Sapir, his life and work (Koerner 1984).

By the fall of 1983, Bill, Mike, and I were holding meetings fairly regularly in our respective homes in order to prepare the program of the Edward Sapir Centenary Conference, which took place in early October 1984. After this most interesting three-day meeting, which was attended by altogether twenty members of the Sapir family alone, our working sessions soon became even more frequent and more productive, as we had decided to prepare a volume of proceedings which would include not only (revised versions of) the twenty or so papers presented at the conference, but also edited versions of tapes of the ensuing discussions. More important still, at least where the history of linguistics is concerned, we had arranged a session of “Reminiscences about Edward Sapir”, where those who had been Sapir’s students or had known him in some other way spoke about their experiences with Sapir, the scholar, teacher, and man. Participants included anthropologists Frederica de Laguna (b.1906), Fred Eggan (1906–1991), and Edgar Siskin (b.1907), and linguists Fang-Kuei Li (1902–1987), Mary R. Haas (1910–1996), and Kenneth L. Pike (1912–2000), with anthropologist William N. Fenton (b.1908) serving as moderator (Cowan, Foster, and Koerner 1986:371–404).⁴

³Bill Cowan had kept an interest in English literature throughout his life, and his enthusiasm about the Sapir Conference project led him also to compile a book-sized collection of Sapir’s poetry (cf. Sapir 1949:614–617, for a select list) which Bill thought might be published, but which Sapir’s second Ottawa-born son, Philip Sapir (b. 1916), objected to, and so it never came to anything.

⁴As we stated in the editorial note (p. 371), we also had invited C.F. (“Carl”) Voegelin (1906–1986), David G. Mandelbaum (1911–1987), and Canadian-born Murray B. Emeneau (b. 1904), but they were unable to attend. Stanley S. Newman (1905–1984), a student of Sapir’s during the latter’s Chicago years (1925–1931), had died several weeks before the conference, but his son had sent me his paper, “Development of Sapir’s Psychology of Human Behaviour”, which was subsequently included in the proceedings (Cowan et al. 1986:405–431).

It was natural that the three of us became good friends as a result of these many meetings. This came to an abrupt end with Bill Cowan's sudden death in the garden of the house he had largely built himself in the woods near Smith Falls, Ontario, some 40 km east of Ottawa. Bill was not only an able linguist but also a skilled handy-man. (His house in Ottawa South already attests to his craftsmanship.) In matters of personal sentiment, Bill was a rather private man. Quite typically, in 1999, on the occasion of his 70th birthday, I dedicated a book to him, which he had read in manuscript (Koerner 1999), only to discover that he was not in the habit of celebrating birthdays, and so I had to send him a copy of the book by mail.

Although in his retirement Bill reduced his linguistic work and tended, with great satisfaction, to his large log house and its surrounding woods, he did produce, together with a colleague of the Slavic Department at Carleton a third, revised, and enlarged edition of their very successful *Source Book for Linguistics* with data from scores of languages from all over the world (Cowan and Rakušan 1998). Also, together with Mike Foster, he produced a beautiful volume of selective papers by the American anthropologist who had lived and worked in Ottawa for most of his life, the late Gordon M. Day (Foster and Cowan 1999). Indeed, he remained ready to involve himself in linguistic matters whenever asked for help and advice.

Professor George Aubin, in his obituary of Bill, characterised his career as that of a scholar demonstrating "thoroughgoing professionalism"; Aubin also points out that his "recitation of events and details only hints at the Bill Cowan [he] knew, the man with the pertinent comments and probing questions, who sometimes showed just a trace of impatience at what he considered fuzzy language or ill-formulated abstractions, who had a disarmingly straightforward manner of speaking, with unfailing politeness and an infectious laugh" (Aubin 2001). I could not have said it better. But I will let Bill have the last word:

I have been fortunate in being associated with four institutions in which morale was high and research and teaching was pleasant and fruitful. Being a graduate student at Cornell, a scientific linguist at the Foreign Service Institute, a professor at Brown and a professor at Carleton has provided me with a wide and rich acquaintance with a large number of linguists, pleasant working conditions, and many opportunities to work on languages like Arabic and Algonquian. I could not have asked for more. (Cowan 2001:242)

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