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## Robert McCrum, William Cran, Robert MacNeil, **The Story of English.**

Elisabeth Sifton Books. Viking. (Viking Penguin Inc., 40 West 23rd Street, New York, N.Y. 10010, U.S.A.), New York, 1986. Hard covers. Dust jacket. Large format. Good paper. Profusely illustrated. Many maps and illustrations in color. 384 pages. \$29.95.

Some of our readers may wonder why we are about to review a book on the English language. What is the connection of *The Story of English* with "things Lithuanian?" First of all, *Lituanus* is published in English. In addition to this, there is, one could say, an older historical connection. Some readers of *Lituanus* may recall that, about twenty years ago, we have reprinted an article: "English and Lithuanian: Two Candidates for the International Language." (This article was originally published in *The English Record*, Vol. XIX, No. 4, April, 1969, pp. 60-67, and then reprinted in *Lituanus*, Vol. 15, No. 3, Fall, 1969, pp. 25-34). What we have hinted at, or just suggested, so many years ago, has definitely been stated in the book under review here. Let us compare. In 1969, we wrote:

"Having admitted both English and Lithuanian to the candidacy of an international language, we shall proceed to analyze the relative likelihood of their adoption" (*The English Record*, XIX/4, p. 62).

After applying ten criteria, we had to come to the following conclusion:

"A simple conclusion may be reached: English definitely has a greater possibility of becoming the international language," (*The English Record*, XIX/4, p. 67).

On the dust jacket of *The Story of English*, we read the following:

"*The Story of English* is the extraordinary tale of a language that came from nowhere to conquer the world. Two thousand years ago, English was confined to a handful of savage and now forgotten tribes on the shores of northwest Europe. Today, in some form or another, it is spoken by perhaps a billion people, of whom 350 million — nearly one-tenth of the world's population — use it as their mother tongue. More widely scattered, more widely written and spoken than any other language in history, English has become a global phenomenon of our times."

This book is really, as it is stated both on the dust jacket and elsewhere, a companion volume to the PBS television series. Since the television series consisted of nine half-hour presentations, this book also has nine main chapters: Chapter 1: An English-Speaking World; Chapter 2: The Mother Tongue; Chapter 3: A Muse of Fire; Chapter 4: The Guid Scots Tongue; Chapter 5: The Irish Question; Chapter 6: Black on White; Chapter 7: Pioneers! O Pioneers! Chapter 8: The Echoes of an English Voice; Chapter 9: The New Englishes. There is also an Introduction, The Table of Illustrations, an Epilogue, Notes and Sources, Table of Maps, Picture Credits, and an Index.

*The Story of English* is, clearly, not a traditional history of the English language. It is somewhat less and, at the same time, somewhat more than that. Apparently, the authors of the book, as well as the producers of the television series intended, primarily, to show the unusual growth of English — from the speech of several thousand (we'll never know how many . . . ) Germanic tribesmen to a truly international, universal and global language. No language has ever achieved such spread, such status, and such importance. In showing this growth and spread, which the authors accomplish quite convincingly and succinctly, they have also committed, in my humble opinion, certain (semantic?) errors in judgment. (Unless, of course, this was done not by the authors themselves, but by some PR people in the publishers' establishment).

Let us look at that statement we cited in its entirety, from the dust jacket of the volume. Take the very first sentence: "*The Story of English* is the extraordinary tale of a language that came from nowhere to conquer the world." If this statement had been made, let us say, before 1786, then it would have been proper to refer to the origin of English as coming "from nowhere." But now, almost exactly 200 years since the famous speech by Sir William Jones, and after two centuries of research in this area, to say that English came "from nowhere" is a little too much even for the extended PR metaphor. After all, on page 51, the authors clearly refer to the "Common Source" of Sir William Jones (1786), and which we today call the Proto-Indo-European. We do know quite a bit about the "nowhere" of the statement on the dust jacket, or the

"Common Source" of Sir William Jones. And that, in my opinion is one of the great shortcomings of this book: practically nothing is said about the basic features of this "Common Source," of the mother tongue of all Indo-European languages, of Proto-Indo-European. In spite of the great changes, in spite of the great additions to the vocabulary of English through many centuries, through many influences, English is still primarily an Indo-European language, historically rather closely related with all non extant and spoken Indo-European languages. This fact, after all, could be one of the reasons, although very difficult to prove on practical grounds, why English conquered the world. As a matter of fact, English may be considered more Indo-European than any other related language because all the primary influences upon the formation of English came from closely related Indo-European languages: Celtic, Latin, Scandinavian languages, French, Greek, German, Dutch, Italian, Spanish, etc. Only much later did the non-Indo-European languages influence English, and this mostly in the lexicon, or vocabulary: Arabic, various American Indian languages, etc.

On the other hand, since, as we have mentioned above, this book is primarily for the non-linguist, one should not blame the authors for this minor discrepancy, as it were. One must admit that the book is very interestingly written, it almost reads like an adventure story. One aspect of the whole story is done exceedingly well, namely the unusual ability of English to enrich itself with new vocabulary. This is very beautifully presented in almost all the chapters of the book. We have observed this very same fact in 1969, and it is proven beyond any doubt in this book.

In 1969, we stated:

**"4. Vocabulary.** Nobody can estimate exactly the various "sources" of the lexical treasures of a language, but a certain approximation possibly can be achieved . . .

English, although by history and its basic structure a Germanic (Teutonic) language, has drawn heavily upon the Romance languages, primarily Latin, and later French, for its vocabulary. English also has some tiny residues of Celtic and later borrowings from other Germanic languages such as Scandinavian languages, Dutch, and German. Quite a few words came into English from Greek, usually through Latin. After English became a colonial language in many parts of the globe, it adapted and accepted words from many sources, from the American Indian languages, from the languages of India, from Arabic, from various African languages, and even from Australian aboriginal languages." (*The English Record*, XIX/4, pp. 63-64).

All of these aspects of the enlarging of English vocabulary are dealt with, in one way or another, in practically all nine chapters of *The Story of English*. It is illustrated here with many examples, linguistic data, citations from appropriate sources, dictionaries and authors. In such a way, by 1986, English, without any doubt whatsoever, has achieved the largest general and special/technical vocabulary in the world. Although nobody agrees on the method of counting words, English is supposed to have more than 500,000 words. Even the editors of the most comprehensive dictionaries of a language cannot hope to have an active command of so many words. It is generally assumed that an educated speaker of English uses about 10,000 words. The King James version of the Bible has about 8,000 words. Shakespeare has used 30,000 words in his writings. With the rapid expansion of various scientific and technological fields, there is no end to this vocabulary explosion.

*The Story of English* is so rich in problems that, in a short review, we cannot even touch upon. One has to limit oneself to only some points, some problems raised in the book. Therefore, we'll touch upon only two more problems.

The saddest chapter, to us, is Chapter 5: The Irish Question. From the practical point of view, there is no cause for sadness: English came and conquered Ireland, pushing out the native Irish Celtic language and taking over, permanently. However, it is very sad from the point of view of the Irish people: not only were they robbed of their native tongue, but, in their turn, they helped the spread of the acquired foreign tongue (=English) throughout the world. What has bothered some people is simply this: why have the Irish not been able to revive, revitalize and reintegrate their own original Celtic Irish, especially since Ireland became independent. We know that such a feat is very difficult, but it is not impossible. Unfortunately, this chapter does not deal with this very intriguing question.

Another very interesting question is, like the heading of the last chapter of the book: the other Englishes. Although still almost 100 percent mutually intelligible, we already have several English languages: British English, Scottish English, Irish English, American English, Canadian English, Australian English, South African English, counting only the most important varieties. They all originated from the British Isles, all are native languages to the majority of the speakers, but they all begin to differ from each other in their pronunciation, in their vocabulary, in their idiomatic usage, even in their spelling. In addition to that, there are several varieties of acquired English: in India, in Pakistan, in Singapore, in Malaysia, in Jamaica. There are also several versions of Pidgin English, and Creolized English. Is this the beginning of the split up, separation of English? From the historical point of view, this is bound to happen, it is only the question of time. After all, only in the Indo-European family of languages we have several precedents for that. Let's look at one of them. At approximately 500 A.D., there was only one Latin language. It is true, it may have already been "split" into some local varieties in the colonial areas, but it was still one language. Now, about 1500 years later, we already have several separate Romance languages: Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, French, Romanian, to mention only the major ones. Thus, our unavoidable prediction has to be: around the year 3500 (A.D.), there will be several separate English languages: British, Canadian/American, Australian, South African, as well as Hinglish (In India), Singlish (in Singapore), and many more. I also believe, the same thing, or very similar, will happen to other colonial languages: Spanish, Portuguese.

If that, above, is true, then what will happen to English as the world's first true international, universal and global language? It is difficult to predict but, in that distant future, English may be replaced by another language set out on its path to

conquer the world. But, at least for several generations to come, the whole earth is the primary playing field for English.

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