

## ***Who was Bill Lee?***

### ***A brief biographical sketch of W.R. Lee OBE, MA, PhD, Hon. FCTL, Hon. FCP***

Twelve years have elapsed since Bill Lee died (5 February 1996) and his biography may not be as well-known now as it used to be. So may his international stature and the recognition he received at home and abroad during his lifetime. A brief biographical sketch of the man who stood at the cradle of ACTDEC seems therefore entirely appropriate.

The son of a village headmaster, William Roland Lee was born at Hillingdon, Middlesex, on 3 April 1911. He graduated in English from University College London in 1933. Here he also obtained certificates in English and French Phonetics, being introduced to these subjects by such well-known scholars as Daniel Jones, Dennis Fry, H. Coustenable, and Lilian Armstrong. It was Jones who told Bill that "in contrast with workers in some other scientific fields, [phoneticians] can keep in view throughout their investigations a definite humanistic object [...] the improvement of the means of oral and written communication between man and man".

After taking his postgraduate teacher's diploma at the University of London, King's College, in 1934, he taught in a variety of primary and secondary schools in the UK until the outbreak of the Second World War. The subjects Bill taught were also various: Arithmetic, English, Geography, History, Physical Education, Singing, and French.

During the war Bill served in the Intelligence Corps at a place shrouded in secrecy: Bletchley Park. Here the most brilliant brains of the nation were trying to find the keys to the German top-secret Enigma cipher machine. With mild humour Bill would recount how it was impressed on everyone working there to keep mum about what was going on at Bletchley ("careless talk costs lives"), whereas their CO made them wear shoulder flashes with 'Intelligence Corps' on them! In his Army days Bill also rode a motorcycle. One day he had a crash, which caused every button to be stripped from his uniform!

After the war Bill served as a lecturer on the staff of Bohumil Trnka's English Department at the Caroline University, Prague. Here he familiarised himself thoroughly with the structuralist and functionalist doctrines of the *Cercle linguistique de Prague*. From Trnka he learned that language teaching should be based on language analysis. It was also in Prague that Bill met his wife Zdena, with whom he wrote *Teach Yourself Czech* (1979), and where he took his PhD in 1950. Bill was also the last Briton out of Czechoslovakia (where he returned later) after the Communist take-over in 1948. He was interviewed on the BBC's European Service because of this.

On his return to the UK Bill became a lecturer in the Division of Language Teaching, University of London Institute of Education, where he worked under Professor Bruce Pattison, who was later to become the first President of IATEFL. During those years Bill also attended the lectures of John Rupert Firth at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. Firth was

the first Professor of General Linguistics in any British university and it was he who told Bill that "without phonetics there can be no morphology of a spoken language, without intonation no syntax" and that "no study of meaning apart from a complete context can be taken seriously". These were Bill's formative years.

In 1963 Bill became an independent consultant, writer, lecturer, teacher trainer, and examiner in the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). He spent a large amount of his time planning, directing, and taking part in numerous training courses, mainly outside the UK, for primary, secondary, and post-secondary teachers of EFL. Advisory work, examinations, and numerous lecture tours took him to all five continents. Bill was also a seasoned conference-goer who, up to the last, gave presentations on both theoretical and practical issues at countless international gatherings: ACTFL, AILA, ATEFL, FIPLV, IATEFL, NELLE, TESOL, to mention only some of the better known.

If I were asked to situate Bill in the history of language teaching I would probably range him among the Reformers for at least three reasons. With Sweet he shared a strong belief in phonetics as the indispensable foundation of all language study, with Jespersen the belief in language education as peace education, and with all of them a profound respect for the individuality of each language and culture.

In 1967 Bill founded IATEFL, called ATEFL at the time. It was his brainchild and, till the very last, the apple of his eye. He was particularly enamoured of the I in its acronym. He remained its Chair until 1984, when he had to hand over to someone younger. It took Bill some time to come to terms with this and the feeling of having been ousted or sidelined rankled for a number of years. But soon he found alternative outlets for his still considerable energy and during the last five years everything was peace and goodwill.

Bill was one of my best friends. I met him for the first time at the first (I)ATEFL conference in London in 1967. Since the early 1970s but especially since 1980 we spent a lot of time together on long train or car journeys to or from conferences, mainly in eastern Europe. This gave us an opportunity to exchange views on a large variety of subjects. I came to know Bill as a very modest man, who cared little about material things. He was a devoted husband, father, and grandfather. And a very loyal friend, always kind and courteous, helpful and hospitable. It was a pleasure to be his guest and to have him as a guest. He was always entertaining, there was never a dull moment! But above all Bill was an idealist who saw in language education a powerful instrument in bridging gaps between individuals and peoples, in building peace. For him this meant removing the root causes of war, poverty, racial discrimination, misunderstanding, division, all the things that disable our one human family. That is the calling to which Bill thought language educators need to respond: to go out into the world and remove the lingual and cultural causes of this disability. This is the ideal Bill stood for, this is the message he has handed down to us.

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